

Reducing Smoking Culture in Indonesian Communication Practices: An Intercultural Communication Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: Smoking culture in Indonesia is a sociocultural phenomenon shaped by communication practices, social norms, masculinity, and communal values. Although previous studies have mainly focused on biomedical and policy aspects, limited attention has been given to how communication contributes to the normalization of smoking behavior. This study aimed to analyze the role of communication in sustaining smoking culture and to identify communication-based strategies for cultural change.

Method: This study used a qualitative descriptive design with a systematic literature review approach. Articles published between 2019 and 2025 were collected from Google Scholar, Scopus, and SINTA databases using relevant keywords related to smoking culture and health communication. Data were analyzed thematically to identify dominant communication patterns associated with smoking behavior.

Result: The findings show that smoking normalization is reinforced through cigarette-sharing practices, peer interactions, positive language framing, and representations of masculinity. These communication patterns position smoking as a symbol of social acceptance and cultural identity. Several communication-based interventions were also identified, including digital health literacy, family-centered campaigns, smoke-free public space promotion, and the reconstruction of smoking-related social symbols.

Conclusion: Smoking culture persists because communication continuously reproduces social acceptance and collective identity surrounding smoking behavior. The findings highlight the importance of symbolic interaction in shaping health behavior and suggest that culturally sensitive communication strategies are needed to reduce smoking normalization and strengthen tobacco control efforts in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Smoking in Indonesia exhibits distinctive characteristics, as it is not only associated with nicotine consumption as a health behavior but is also deeply embedded in the social value system and cultural practices of society. Unlike many other public health behaviors that are primarily understood through biomedical perspectives, smoking in Indonesia operates within a broader sociocultural framework where meaning is continuously constructed through everyday interaction. This habit can be traced back to earlier times, when smoking was practiced in very simple forms, such as hand-rolled leaves, pipe smoking, or even chewing. Over time, these practices gradually became normalized within social interactions and evolved into a social culture adopted across various segments of society. At that time, smoking behavior had not yet involved tobacco, as tobacco was introduced to Indonesia in the 16th century through trade routes. It later developed into distinctive forms such as kretek, a mixture of tobacco and cloves that is hand-rolled, which further strengthened its cultural identity in Indonesian society.

In addition to its material evolution, cigarettes have historically played an important role in social and cultural life. They have been used in traditional rituals, offered to guests as a sign of respect, and functioned as a medium for strengthening social relationships in everyday interactions. Compared to modern cigarettes, which are mass-produced and contain various additives, traditional forms of smoking were more closely associated with local values and communal practices. To this day, smoking remains embedded in social communication practices in Indonesian society and is difficult to eliminate. According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey, smoking prevalence among adult males in Indonesia remains very high compared to many other countries in Southeast Asia. As is well known, smoking is one of the main risk factors for non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, lung cancer, and chronic respiratory disorders, and its impact is not only experienced by active smokers but also by passive smokers exposed to cigarette smoke (Gani, 2026). Meanwhile, the Indonesian Health Survey shows that smoking prevalence among youth remains relatively stagnant and tends to increase in certain age groups, indicating the strong influence of socio-cultural factors in sustaining smoking behavior across generations (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022; World Health Organization, 2021).

One of the key factors that makes smoking difficult to eliminate is its strong embeddedness within social interaction systems in Indonesia. Smoking is not merely an individual activity but functions as a communicative practice embedded in daily social life. In many contexts, cigarettes operate as symbolic objects that facilitate interaction, reduce social distance, and construct interpersonal closeness. The practice of offering cigarettes is often interpreted as a form of hospitality, solidarity, and a conversational entry point, particularly among men. In informal settings such as gatherings with friends, workplaces, community activities, and leisure spaces, cigarettes are frequently present as a medium that strengthens social relationships and fosters a sense of togetherness. Their presence acts as a “social tool” that helps ease communication situations and reinforce interpersonal bonds. In certain environments, prevailing social norms tend to tolerate or indirectly encourage smoking behavior as part of group identity. Smoking becomes a normalized component of interaction rituals, where participation in smoking is sometimes implicitly associated with acceptance into a group. Although individuals are increasingly aware of the health risks associated with smoking, such as respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, many continue to maintain the habit. This indicates that smoking behavior is not entirely based on rational health considerations. Instead, social pressure, symbolic belonging, and the need for group acceptance often become more dominant factors. In some situations, refusing an offered cigarette may be interpreted as rejecting social intimacy or failing to acknowledge group solidarity. As a result, individuals may experience social discomfort or exclusion if they do not participate in such practices. This phenomenon reflects a tension between health awareness and social norms, in

which individual behavior is shaped by the complex interaction between personal knowledge and collective expectations.

Previous studies have shown that smoking in Indonesia cannot be understood solely as a public health issue, but must also be seen as part of broader social communication practices. Within the context of symbolic interaction, cigarettes function as media through which meanings, values, and social identities are constructed and negotiated. Putra et al. (2021) emphasize that symbols and social actions are used as media to transmit cultural values and identity in interpersonal interaction. In this sense, smoking is not only an act of consumption but also a communicative act embedded in social exchanges. From an intercultural communication perspective, meaning is often conveyed implicitly through shared practices rather than explicit verbal communication. In collectivistic societies, symbolic actions play an important role in expressing acceptance, closeness, and solidarity without the need for direct articulation (Kholisa, 2023).

Furthermore, Prasetyo (2021) highlights that in various social interaction spaces—particularly informal and masculine environments—cigarettes function as a “social adhesive” that signifies togetherness, loyalty, and group belonging. These studies collectively indicate that smoking practices are deeply embedded in communicative and cultural systems. However, despite these contributions, most existing studies still tend to emphasize smoking from biomedical, behavioral, or regulatory perspectives. As a result, smoking is often framed as a health risk behavior or a policy issue, while the communicative processes through which smoking culture is reproduced in everyday interaction remain underexplored. In particular, there is limited attention to how everyday communication practices, symbolic interaction, and discourse patterns contribute to the normalization and sustainability of smoking culture in Indonesian society. This gap is significant because it suggests that current smoking control strategies may not fully address the communicative and cultural dimensions that sustain smoking behavior. While health campaigns and regulatory frameworks have been widely implemented, smoking prevalence remains high, indicating that deeper sociocultural mechanisms continue to operate within everyday communication practices. Therefore, smoking culture should be understood not only as an individual behavioral issue but also as a socially constructed phenomenon that is continuously reproduced through communication.

Based on this gap, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on communication practices as cultural mechanisms that sustain and normalize smoking behavior in Indonesian society. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize biomedical, economic, or policy-oriented approaches, this study highlights the role of symbolic interaction and everyday communication in shaping smoking culture. By positioning communication as a central analytical lens, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how smoking is socially constructed and maintained through interactional practices. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how communication practices reproduce smoking culture in Indonesia and to identify communicative strategies that may contribute to transforming smoking-related social norms. Through a sociocultural health communication perspective, this study seeks to provide both theoretical contributions to the development of communication studies and practical implications for designing culturally sensitive interventions aimed at reducing smoking normalization in Indonesian society.

METHOD

To gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of smoking culture within social and communication contexts, this study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a scoping literature review. The scoping review approach is selected because it enables the study to map, identify, and synthesize a broad range of literature without limiting the analysis to a specific research design. Moleong (2021) defines a descriptive qualitative approach as a method aimed at understanding phenomena experienced by research subjects—such as behavior, perceptions, motivations, or actions—in a holistic manner. This approach emphasizes the interpretation of

meaning and the social context underlying smoking behavior in society. The literature review is conducted to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant scholarly sources in order to construct a comprehensive conceptual understanding of smoking culture within social and communication contexts. The literature sources in this study are obtained from several academic databases, namely Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, and SINTA. The search process is conducted using a combination of keywords such as “smoking culture,” “cigarette consumption behavior,” “social communication and smoking,” “rokok dalam budaya sosial,” “health campaign and smoking behavior,” and “digital media and smoking normalization.” The selection of literature is guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria consist of peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, written in English or Indonesian, and focusing on smoking culture within social, cultural, or communication contexts, including empirical studies and review articles. The exclusion criteria include non-academic sources, duplicate publications, articles not related to social or communication dimensions, and studies without full-text access.

Data analysis in this study uses reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2022). The analysis begins with data familiarization through repeated reading of all selected literature, followed by initial coding to identify meaningful data segments. Next, initial themes are generated, reviewed, and refined to ensure consistency and relevance. After that, themes are defined and named clearly, and the final report is produced based on these themes. This study uses a constructivist-interpretive approach, which views social reality as being constructed through communication and social practices. To ensure trustworthiness, this study applies source triangulation, audit trail documentation, peer debriefing, and thick description. In addition, the findings are supported by a literature synthesis table that summarizes each selected study, including author and year, research method, context, key findings, and relevance to the identified themes.

Tabel 1. Literature Synthesis Table

No.	Author (Year)	Title	Research Method	Context / Country	Key Findings	Relevance to Themes
1	Agaku, I. T. et al. (2018)	Cigarette smoking trends among adults globally	Cross-sectional survey	Global (WHO countries)	Smoking remains socially accepted in many countries; culture and norms influence initiation and continuation.	Normalization of smoking in society, social acceptance
2	Nargis, N. et al. (2020)	Social influence and peer effects on smoking behavior	Quantitative (Regression)	Indonesia	Peers and close social environment significantly affect smoking behavior among adolescents.	Peer and environmental influence
3	Dwi, A. & Nurudin (2021)	Representasi rokok dalam iklan dan media massa	Content analysis	Indonesia	Rokok masih sering direpresentasikan secara positif dalam media dan membentuk persepsi.	Media representation of smoking
4	Hao, J. et al. (2019)	Digital media and smoking normalization	Qualitative (Interviews)	China	Social media platforms contribute to normalization through influencers, memes, and user content.	Role of digital communication
5	Yuliastuti (2022)	Kampanye kesehatan dan perubahan perilaku merokok	Qualitative (Case study)	Indonesia	Health campaigns can change attitudes, but cultural norms remain a strong barrier.	Health campaign and social norm transformation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study indicate that smoking behavior in Indonesian social life constitutes a complex social phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a simple health-related explanation. Individuals attach diverse and subjective meanings to smoking, ranging from habitual behavior to symbolic social practice, depending on their cultural and relational contexts. Smoking is therefore not only an act of consumption but is also embedded within broader cultural, economic, and structural conditions that shape its persistence and normalization in everyday life. This complexity is reinforced by the interaction between individual agency and structural environments, including peer networks, cultural traditions, and social expectations, which together create a self-sustaining cycle of normalization within communication practices.

Historically, smoking practices are known to have developed among Native American communities before being introduced to Europe by explorers and subsequently spread globally, including to Indonesia in the 16th century through European traders, particularly the Dutch. In its early introduction, smoking was associated with elite consumption and colonial administrative circles, functioning as a luxury commodity that symbolized status and exclusivity. Over time, however, smoking gradually expanded across different social classes and became embedded in everyday social practices. During the colonial period, tobacco production was developed through plantation systems and labor structures, which contributed significantly to the widespread availability of cigarettes in local markets. In this process, cigarettes also underwent a localization process that resulted in the emergence of kretek, a distinctive Indonesian cigarette made from a mixture of tobacco and cloves, producing a unique aroma and sensory experience. Kretek has since evolved not only as a consumer product but also as a cultural identity marker that distinguishes Indonesian smoking culture from other global traditions.

The findings further show that smoking practices are deeply embedded in cultural and customary traditions across Indonesia, where they function as part of communication systems within social rituals. In Madura, cigarettes are used in wedding invitation practices, particularly in rural communities such as Pinang Village, where they function not only as a medium of invitation but also as a reflection of social stratification. The type and quality of cigarettes given to guests are often adjusted according to their social status, implicitly signaling expectations of reciprocity and contribution during the event. In Batak Angkola traditional ceremonies, cigarettes are placed in containers during deliberation processes such as *marpege-pege* or family negotiations, symbolizing respect, openness, and recognition of social roles among participants. Meanwhile, in Central Java, particularly in Temanggung, the Sembogo tradition involves blowing cigarette smoke onto the bride's face during traditional bridal makeup (*paes ageng*), which is believed to "open the aura" of the bride and carries spiritual as well as cultural meaning. Across these diverse contexts, cigarettes function not merely as material objects but as cultural communication artifacts that are deeply embedded in ritual life and collective tradition.

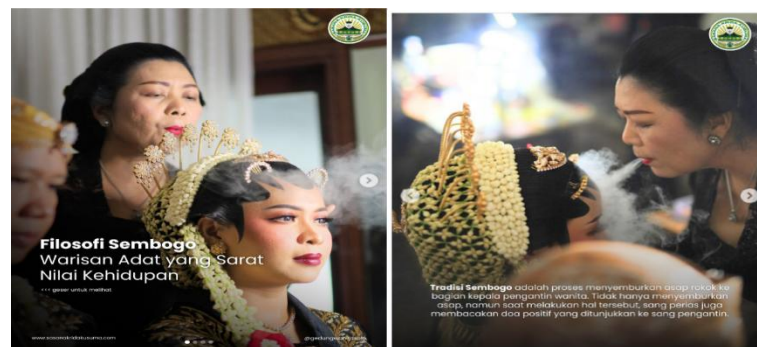


Figure: The Sembogo tradition in Javanese customary practice (Source: Instagram account @gedungwanitasolo)

A further interpretation of these findings suggests that cigarettes operate simultaneously as symbolic and pragmatic communication tools. On one hand, they function as carriers of implicit social messages related to status, hierarchy, hospitality, and relational expectations. On the other hand, they serve as mediators of interaction that facilitate communication flow, reduce social distance, and reinforce group cohesion in informal settings. Smoking activities such as sharing cigarettes or smoking in groups are repeatedly performed in structured social patterns, indicating that smoking practices have undergone a process of culturalization and institutionalization within everyday communication systems.

The findings also indicate that smoking behavior is strongly influenced by peer group dynamics, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Social narratives such as “gathering feels incomplete without smoking” or “socializing is more relaxed while smoking” function as subtle yet powerful forms of social pressure that encourage conformity. In this context, smoking decisions are not purely individual choices but are shaped through continuous social negotiation aimed at achieving acceptance, maintaining group belonging, and avoiding social exclusion. However, this form of peer influence is gradually shifting alongside the emergence of health-oriented communities, wellness movements, and changing lifestyle preferences among younger generations.

In addition, smoking practices gain cultural legitimacy through local values that are deeply embedded in everyday life. In several rural Sundanese communities, cigarettes are present in various social activities such as night patrols (*ronda malam*), communal celebrations (*hajatan*), village deliberations, and informal gatherings. Offering cigarettes is interpreted as a gesture of hospitality (*someah*), reflecting openness, warmth, and respect toward others. This demonstrates that smoking is not merely a habitual act but is embedded within local communication ethics and social norms, making it socially meaningful and culturally recognized within community interaction.

Finally, the findings show that contemporary communication culture surrounding smoking is undergoing significant transformation due to digital media development and public health campaigns. Smoke-free regulations, health advertisements, and widely circulated narratives on the dangers of smoking in mass and social media have begun to challenge the long-standing normalization of smoking practices. Digital platforms increasingly expose individuals, particularly younger generations, to alternative discourses such as healthy lifestyles, self-care practices, body awareness, and economic considerations related to smoking behavior. As a result, smoking is increasingly positioned within a contested symbolic space between traditional cultural meanings and emerging global health discourses, where its social legitimacy is continuously negotiated and redefined.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that smoking behavior must be understood as a multidimensional socio-communicative phenomenon that extends beyond individual health behavior or personal choice. From an intercultural communication perspective, smoking practices are embedded within culturally constructed systems of meaning that are continuously negotiated, reproduced, and transformed through everyday social interaction. As emphasized by Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2017), cultural symbols do not possess fixed meanings but are interpreted differently depending on social and cultural contexts. This study extends that argument by showing that the meaning of cigarettes is not only context-dependent but also increasingly unstable due to social transformation, modernization, and the influence of digital communication environments.

When compared with previous studies (e.g., Setiawan & Hidayat, 2020; Prasetyo, 2021), which emphasize cigarettes as relatively stable cultural symbols of social cohesion and collective identity, the present findings reveal a more dynamic and contested condition. Cigarettes continue

to function as instruments of social bonding in certain cultural and interpersonal contexts; however, their symbolic dominance is no longer absolute or uncontested. The emergence of smoke-free communities, health-oriented social groups, and digital communication spaces indicates a gradual reconfiguration of symbolic systems through which social relationships are constructed and maintained. The findings also support Ting-Toomey and Dorjee's (2019) identity negotiation theory, which explains that individuals adjust their communicative behavior to achieve social acceptance and maintain group belonging. However, this study adds a critical dimension by demonstrating that identity negotiation within smoking culture may involve subtle symbolic coercion. Non-smokers or individuals who refuse to participate in smoking practices may experience marginalization, reduced participation in group interaction, or weakened social inclusion. This indicates that smoking practices operate not only as cultural expressions but also as mechanisms of symbolic regulation that structure interpersonal relations within social groups.

Furthermore, the role of digital media significantly contributes to the transformation of smoking-related communication culture. Unlike traditional face-to-face interactions, where cigarettes function as physical mediators of social bonding, digital communication environments no longer rely on material artifacts to sustain interaction. Social bonding is increasingly constructed through virtual engagement, online communities, and symbolic digital expressions. This supports the argument of Utami and Kurniawan (2023), while extending it by emphasizing that digitalization does not merely shift perceptions of smoking but fundamentally transforms the medium, structure, and form of social interaction itself.

From this perspective, tobacco control efforts cannot be limited to behavioral regulation or health education alone but must also address symbolic reconstruction within communication culture. Cigarettes have long been associated with meanings such as masculinity, solidarity, hospitality, and social belonging (Pratama et al., 2022), which are deeply embedded in everyday interaction. Therefore, effective intervention requires the development of alternative symbolic systems of social interaction, such as hobby-based communities, smoke-free public spaces, wellness-oriented activities, and digital social networks that provide similar forms of belonging without dependence on smoking practices. These alternatives demonstrate that social symbols are socially constructed and can be renegotiated in accordance with changing cultural values and societal expectations.

Theoretically, this study contributes to intercultural communication scholarship by reinforcing the idea that communication is not only a process of meaning exchange but also an arena of symbolic contestation and cultural negotiation. Smoking practices, in this sense, function both as communicative tools and as mechanisms that reproduce social norms, hierarchies, and cultural expectations within everyday life. However, contemporary social and digital dynamics indicate that this symbolic dominance is increasingly challenged and redefined through emerging health discourses, policy interventions, and changing interaction patterns within modern society.

From an intercultural communication perspective, Mulyana, in his classical theory (2014), explains that communication is a process of meaning exchange that is strongly influenced by cultural background, including the values, norms, and symbols upheld by a particular group. Accordingly, smoking behavior can be understood as part of symbolic communication practices that are interpreted differently across social contexts and are often legitimized as a form of social acceptance in interpersonal interactions.

Based on observations and situational analysis of smoking culture in Indonesia, the researcher identifies several factors that explain why smoking habits remain embedded in the social structure of Indonesian society, as illustrated in the following figure



Figure: The relational chain of smoking activities within Indonesian societal culture

The figure illustrates that there are numerous interconnected factors forming a chain that explains why smoking has become embedded within the communication culture of Indonesian society, making it difficult to eliminate outright. However, alongside the development of information technology and changes in societal lifestyles, it is, in fact, possible to break this chain of smoking culture within the social structure of the country. The challenges that arise in this process can serve as important reference points that need to be further developed into practical and beneficial solutions for fostering a healthier communication culture.

Cigarettes as a Ritual of Social Communication

Cigarettes function not only as consumable goods but also as instruments of informal social interaction. Practices such as sharing cigarettes, borrowing lighters, and smoking together in conversational circles form recurring interactional patterns that facilitate social bonding. From a communicative perspective, these practices operate as rituals that reduce social distance and reinforce group cohesion. Smoking sessions often create informal spaces where conversation flows more freely, allowing the exchange of ideas, emotions, and experiences in a relaxed atmosphere (Putra et al., 2021; Kholisa, 2023). In this sense, cigarettes act as mediators of interpersonal communication rather than merely personal consumption objects.

Social Influence and Peer Group Dynamics

Beyond their ritual function, smoking behavior is strongly shaped by peer group dynamics, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Social expectations such as “not complete without smoking together” function as subtle normative pressure that encourages conformity. The decision to smoke is therefore often embedded in processes of identity negotiation and the need for social acceptance rather than purely individual preference (Sari, 2019). However, this influence is increasingly challenged by the rise of health-oriented social groups that promote alternative forms of social belonging.

Cultural Embeddedness and Local Legitimization

In certain local contexts, smoking gains cultural legitimacy through everyday social practices. In rural Sundanese communities, for example, cigarettes are present in communal events such as night patrols, celebrations, and village discussions, where offering cigarettes is interpreted as a gesture of hospitality and respect (Setiawan & Hidayat, 2020). This reflects how material objects can acquire symbolic meaning within cultural systems that emphasize harmony and collectivism (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2021). Nevertheless, these meanings are not fixed; they are being

renegotiated alongside increasing health awareness and the emergence of smoke-free social communities (Kusuma & Putri, 2022; WHO, 2021).

Framing and Linguistic Normalization

The normalization of smoking is also reinforced through colloquial language that associates cigarettes with relaxation, coffee culture, and social solidarity. Such everyday framing shapes perception by embedding smoking within familiar and positive social narratives, often making it appear less as a health risk and more as a cultural habit. These informal discourses can be more influential than formal health messages due to their proximity to daily lived experience (Putra et al., 2021).

Health Communication and Symbolic Transformation

Efforts to reduce smoking prevalence increasingly focus on transforming both behavior and meaning. Health campaigns that emphasize emotional narratives—such as family welfare, economic burden, and risks of passive smoking—are more effective than purely informational approaches (Hadi et al., 2022; Nurfadilah & Arisanty, 2021). These strategies aim to reframe smoking not only as a health issue but also as a social responsibility issue within family and community contexts.

Reconstruction of Social Meaning in the Digital Era

Reducing smoking behavior requires shifting its symbolic association with masculinity, solidarity, and social acceptance toward alternative forms of social interaction. Community-based activities such as sports groups and smoke-free social spaces provide new avenues for belonging without reliance on cigarettes (Wulandari & Santoso, 2021). In addition, digital media plays a significant role in reshaping public discourse through counter-narratives, survivor testimonies, and online health communities. This creates new normative pressures that gradually redefine smoking as socially less acceptable. Therefore, tobacco control should be understood as a process of cultural and communicative transformation, not merely individual behavior change (Prabandari et al., 2021; Susanto & Prasetyo, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Smoking in Indonesia should be understood as a socially embedded practice shaped by communication processes, cultural meanings, and everyday symbolic interactions rather than merely an individual health behavior. Cigarettes function as social tools that facilitate affiliation and normalize group belonging, which contributes to the persistence of smoking despite formal health messaging. This study contributes theoretically by emphasizing the role of symbolic communication and social meaning-making in sustaining health-related behaviors, particularly how normalization processes are reproduced through peer interaction and cultural framing. Practically, the findings suggest that smoking reduction efforts should move beyond informational campaigns and instead incorporate alternative forms of social engagement that can replace the affiliative functions of smoking. From a policy perspective, this implies the need for integrated health communication strategies that engage digital media ecosystems to construct counter-narratives and gradually reshape social norms around smoking.

However, this study is limited by its conceptual nature and reliance on existing literature, without direct empirical validation across diverse Indonesian social contexts. Future research is recommended to employ mixed-method or ethnographic approaches to examine how smoking meanings vary across age groups, regions, and digital communities, as well as to assess the effectiveness of specific digital interventions in reshaping smoking-related social norms.

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