

Tobacco ads in the new 'Webtoon' media

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Dear Editors,

Strong tobacco-control policies and regulations have led the tobacco industry to look for new tactics for marketing and promotion of their brands. Recently, in the Republic of Korea, tobacco tax increased up to 80%¹ and smoking was banned in all indoor places in 2015². In addition, pictorial health warnings had been displayed on all cigarette packages from late 2016³. These tobacco control policies have successfully created an anti-tobacco atmosphere in the country. However, to overcome this situation, the tobacco industry has found a unique place for tobacco marketing, a place where a lot of youths and young adults frequent.

'Webtoon' is a new term introduced and used in Korea to describe web-based comics (cartoons) that are published on the internet. The largest internet search engines in Korea, DAUM and NAVER have provided webtoon services since 2003 and 2004, respectively⁴. Webtoons have become widely popular in Korea and the Webtoon market has been exploited rapidly and reached USD 58 million in 2016 (KRW 1,000 = USD 1); and the industry predicts that the market will grow to USD 88 million in 2020⁵. According to the official report on Webtoon, which was released in 2015 by the Korea Creative Content Agency, the total number of Webtoon subscribers in the top 5 Webtoon websites were 95 million, which is almost twice the Korean population. Among them, 36.2% visited the Webtoon websites every day and 38.6% read more than 2 Webtoon series per week⁶. A different source found that almost 8 million people read mobile-based Webtoons and more than 60% were in their teens and 20s⁷.

Due to their rapid growth and the popularity among the teens and 20s, Webtoons have been targeted as the new marketing place by the tobacco industry. For example, a Webtoon had a story about a man who returned to college after his military service. Concerned about his future after graduation, there is a scene of the man smoking and showing a cigarette brand of a Korean tobacco company. The cigarette brand was drawn in detail to be promoted and marketed in the Webtoon. College students smoking in non-smoking areas are shown, in conflict with the many smoke-free universities nationwide. It is important to de-normalize smoking, however, the Webtoon gives a message that smoking in universities is common behaviour.

Although webtoons are new media, there are no regulations, such as age restrictions depending on topic and content. The Webtoon providers have their own voluntary self-regulated codes⁵. This can be a loophole for the tobacco industry. They can easily market and promote their brands to target youths and young adults and try to manipulate tobacco-control policies through Webtoons. It is urgent to develop appropriate regulations for Webtoons to protect youths and young adults from tobacco marketing.

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Figure 1. A caption from the Webtoon scene where Mr. Woo who returned to college after his military service is worried about his future saying "Recently, I see darkness when I think of my future." The picture of the detailed cigarette package Mr. Woo is holding is a popular cigarette brand of KT&G, a major tobacco company in Korea, 'THIS PLUS' as seen on Figure 3 (the real image of the brand). The figure, on your left, is available from <http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=626907&no=8&weekday=wed>.



Figure 2. Mr. Woo is smoking in the middle of male and female smokers in a non-smoking area.

The figure is available from <http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=626907&no=8&weekday=wed>.



Figure 3. KT&G's popular brand, 'This Plus' (the real image of the brand). The figure is available from http://www.jjmall.net/?folder=shop&page=view&c1=20000&c2=20200&c3=20201&pd_code=10101&PHPSESSID=7a6ce15a9c753ff8c9c0e12bf216c4b6.

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