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## **Tobacco Market Transformation in Hungary**

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**Abstract:** Smoking has emerged as a longstanding global concern, with a significant number of individuals within our immediate and bariatric circles becoming addicted to this detrimental habit. The gravity of the issue is reflected in the staggering statistics, as smoking claims the lives of more than six million people worldwide annually, earning its notorious title as the leading cause of preventable death according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Despite strict regulations and restrictions on smoking imposed by many countries to combat the escalating health risks, smoking habits persist as a major problem, particularly among young people. In the 1960s, smoking was widely accepted in society, and smoking rates remained high across nations. However, the tides began to turn with the growing awareness of the dire health risks associated with smoking. Health professionals and policymakers took active measures against smoking, contributing to a decline in its prevalence. Nevertheless, the extent of change in smoking habits varies significantly from country to country. The intricate web of factors influencing smoking habits encompasses social and economic elements, stress and mental health considerations, as well as the alluring temptations surrounding tobacco products. Raising awareness about the devastating health impacts of smoking and taking relentless action against this harmful habit are pivotal in reducing smoking rates globally. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and psychological aspects that underpin smoking behavior to implement effective strategies tailored to specific regions and demographics. To combat the persistent smoking epidemic, comprehensive and integrated efforts are required, ranging from targeted public health campaigns to comprehensive tobacco control policies. Empowering individuals with knowledge about the hazards of smoking and equipping them with effective cessation resources can be transformative in curbing the addiction. Equally vital is fostering a supportive environment that promotes mental well-being and addresses stressors, offering healthier alternatives to cope with challenges. In conclusion, the fight against smoking demands unwavering commitment from policymakers, health professionals, and society at large. By understanding the complex drivers behind smoking habits and adopting a multifaceted approach, we can endeavor to save lives, promote healthier communities, and ultimately work towards a smoke-free future for generations to come.

**Keywords:** Smoking, Tobacco market, Consumers

### **Introduction**

Smoking remains a global predicament, claiming the lives of approximately six million people worldwide each year. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies smoking as the foremost preventable cause of death on a global scale. To address the escalating health risks, numerous countries have implemented stringent regulations and restrictions on smoking. However, smoking habits persist as a significant problem, especially among young individuals. In the 1960s, smoking was widely accepted across various societal strata, and smoking rates remained high in almost every country. However, a shift occurred with the increasing awareness of the grave health risks associated with smoking, accompanied by proactive measures taken by health professionals and decision-makers to combat smoking, resulting in a decline in prevalence. Nevertheless, the changes in smoking habits vary from country to country.

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The underlying drivers of smoking habits encompass a complex interplay of social and economic factors, stress and mental well-being considerations, as well as alluring temptations associated with tobacco products. Understanding these multifaceted aspects is vital in formulating comprehensive strategies to tackle smoking effectively.

To combat the persistent smoking epidemic, concerted efforts are required at the global, national, and community levels. Targeted public health campaigns can play a crucial role in raising awareness about the devastating health impacts of smoking, particularly targeting vulnerable populations such as youth and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Equipping individuals with accurate and compelling information about the dangers of smoking is pivotal in fostering informed decision-making regarding their health and well-being. Moreover, comprehensive tobacco control policies must be implemented to create a supportive environment that empowers smokers to quit and deters potential new smokers from starting. This includes imposing higher taxes on tobacco products, enforcing smoke-free public spaces, restricting tobacco advertising and marketing, and providing access to cessation support services. Additionally, integrating tobacco education into school curricula and engaging community leaders can aid in reinforcing anti-smoking messages and promoting healthy behaviors.

It is equally important to address the stressors and mental health issues that may lead individuals to resort to smoking as a coping mechanism. Implementing mental health support programs and stress reduction initiatives in workplaces and educational institutions can contribute to healthier coping mechanisms and reduce reliance on smoking.

Recognizing the power of peer influence, engaging youth in anti-smoking campaigns and encouraging them to be advocates for a smoke-free lifestyle can bring about positive social change. Encouraging smoke-free environments within families and social circles can reinforce the message that smoking is not the norm and foster supportive environments for quitting. Additionally, leveraging advancements in technology and social media platforms can amplify anti-smoking messages and reach larger audiences. Utilizing multimedia campaigns, mobile apps, and online support groups can provide accessible resources to those seeking to quit smoking.

In conclusion, tackling the global smoking epidemic requires a multifaceted approach involving policy interventions, public health campaigns, education, mental health support, and community engagement. By prioritizing prevention and cessation efforts, fostering supportive environments, and empowering individuals with knowledge and resources, we can work together to reduce smoking rates and ultimately improve global health outcomes. It is essential for governments, public health organizations, and civil society to collaborate in an unwavering commitment to create a smoke-free world for current and future generations.

## **Literature Review**

On May 20, 2020, the European Union implemented a ban on menthol cigarettes to prevent young people from becoming addicted to smoking. This legislation is part of the EU's Tobacco Products Directive, which was adopted in 2014. Flavored cigarettes and other tobacco products had already been banned in 2016, but products with a market share greater than 3%, such as menthol cigarettes, were granted an extension. As part of the directive, 65% of tobacco product packaging must now bear health warnings, and member states can also require all tobacco products to be sold in identical plain packaging. (Csiszárík-Kocsír & Garai-Fodor, 2018; (Garai-Fodor, 2022;Garai-Fodor & Popovics, et al., 2022).

The ban on menthol cigarettes came as a significant step forward in curbing smoking prevalence, especially among the youth. Menthol-flavored cigarettes were particularly appealing to young individuals due to their milder taste and cooling effect, which made them more palatable and easier to start smoking. By removing these flavored cigarettes from the market, the European Union aimed to reduce the attractiveness of smoking for young people and discourage them from starting this addictive habit. (Pervez et al., 2022;Tick, 2023).

According to data from the European Commission, 26% of the EU population smokes, with the 15-24 age group accounting for 29%. Smoking remains a major public health concern in the region, as it is responsible for a substantial number of premature deaths. (Csapó et al.,2018) The burden of smoking-related diseases and healthcare costs places significant strain on healthcare systems across EU member states. Therefore, implementing measures to reduce smoking prevalence and protect public health is of utmost importance.(Garai-Fodor & Szemere, et al., 2022).

Hungary has been at the forefront of adopting strict tobacco control regulations within the European Union. Notably, Hungary was among the first EU countries to completely ban nicotine-flavored e-cigarettes. While the ban on flavored electronic cigarettes is not yet universal across Europe, Hungary's proactive approach reflects its commitment to safeguarding public health and preventing young people from developing nicotine addiction through e-cigarette use. (Garai-Fodor et al., 2023).

Finland also had a similar ban in place, but it allowed the sale of tobacco-flavored e-cigarettes to continue. (Viktor et al., 2020) The differing approaches among EU member states highlight the complexity of regulating new tobacco and nicotine products. Striking the right balance between harm reduction for current smokers and preventing the initiation of smoking among non-smokers, especially young individuals, is a challenging task for policymakers. (Szeghegyi & Viktor, 2022).

In addition to the ban on flavored e-cigarettes, Hungary previously adopted regulations much stricter than those in Europe when it banned the sale of all flavored "capsule" cigarettes in May 2017. These capsule cigarettes were products with a flavored liquid-filled capsule embedded in the cigarette filter, which allowed smokers to crush the capsule and release the flavor into the smoke when desired. The ban on such products aimed to eliminate the allure of flavored cigarettes and make smoking less appealing to potential smokers. (Viktor & Szeghegyi, 2022).

The Hungarian government's commitment to stringent tobacco control measures has been supported by scientific research. Studies conducted in Hungary and other countries have shown that flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes and flavored e-cigarettes, are attractive to young people and may encourage experimentation and initiation of smoking. By banning these products, Hungary aims to disrupt this process and reduce the likelihood of young individuals starting smoking. (Foldi, 2015a, 2015b).

However, it is essential to monitor the impact of these regulations over time and evaluate their effectiveness in achieving the desired public health outcomes. Research studies can provide valuable insights into smoking behavior patterns, smoking prevalence among different age groups, and the overall success of tobacco control measures. (Szeghegyi & Viktor, 2022) By analyzing the data and adapting strategies accordingly, policymakers can continue to improve tobacco control efforts and protect the health of their populations. (Loblin et al., 2017).

The success of tobacco control measures not only depends on legislation but also on public awareness campaigns and access to smoking cessation support. Educating the public about the harmful effects of smoking, including the risks associated with flavored tobacco products and e-cigarettes, is crucial in deterring potential smokers and encouraging current smokers to quit. Additionally, providing effective smoking cessation resources, such as counseling, behavioral therapies, and pharmacological treatments, can assist individuals in overcoming nicotine addiction and making successful quit attempts. (Goboly & Foldi, 2022).

Furthermore, in the ever-evolving landscape of tobacco and nicotine products, continuous monitoring and research are necessary to keep pace with emerging trends. As new products enter the market, their potential impact on smoking prevalence and public health must be carefully examined. This proactive approach allows regulators to adapt their strategies and ensure that tobacco control policies remain effective and relevant. (Cooper et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the ban on menthol cigarettes in the European Union and the strict tobacco control measures adopted by Hungary demonstrate the commitment to protect public health and reduce smoking prevalence. (Gupta, 2021) By removing flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes and nicotine-flavored e-cigarettes, from the market, the EU and Hungary aim to make smoking less appealing to young people and discourage them from starting this harmful habit. Continuous research, evaluation of tobacco control measures, and public awareness campaigns are vital in achieving long-term success in combating smoking and its detrimental health effects. (Viktor & Garai-Fodor, 2023) (Viktor & Reicher, 2020) With collaborative efforts from governments, healthcare professionals, and the public, a tobacco-free future can be envisioned, promoting healthier lives and well-being for all. (Wang et al., 2021).

### **The Emergence of Heated Tobacco Technology**

However, following these bans, Philip Morris introduced its product called "IQOS" to the tobacco market in Hungary. This product can achieve a similar effect on young people as flavored cigarettes did in the past. (Csiszárík-Kocsir & Garai-Fodor, 2018) (Garai-Fodor, 2022) (Csiszárík-Kocsir et al., 2013) (Csiszárík-

Kocsir – Medve, 2014) The main difference is that these products do not involve combustion during consumption, significantly reducing health risks. Nevertheless, using IQOS is still not entirely safe, as it requires inhaling aerosol, which may contain harmful substances.(Garai-Fodor et al., 2023) (Garai-Fodor, Szemere et al., 2022) Moreover, switching to IQOS does not guarantee complete cessation of smoking, as the device still contains nicotine. Before the introduction of IQOS, the majority of smokers used traditional cigarettes, but since its emergence, many have switched to this alternative tobacco consumption method. However, the introduction of IQOS has not significantly reduced smoking habits but rather presented an alternative for those seeking a healthier smoking option.(Garai-Fodor et al., 2022).

Subsequently, several companies introduced similar products to the market, such as British American Tobacco's "Glo." These products evoke similar effects in consumers as previous flavored cigarettes, especially since they allow the use of flavored tobacco inserts. Due to these trends, the European Union is now considering a ban on flavored tobacco inserts for heated tobacco technology products as well. If such a ban is enacted, the use of nicotine pouches could become more prominent in Hungary's tobacco market. It is worth noting that nicotine pouches are different from snus, as the latter contains tobacco, whereas nicotine pouches do not. Currently, snus is not allowed to be sold in Hungary. (O'Brien et al.,2021; Garai-Fodor & Csiszárík-Kocsir, 2018;Saáry et al., 2021; Varga &Csiszárík-Kocsir, 2015).

To combat the persistent issue of smoking among young people and to protect public health, governments and regulatory bodies must remain vigilant in adopting comprehensive tobacco control measures. This includes not only addressing flavored tobacco products but also continuously assessing emerging tobacco technologies and their potential impact on smoking prevalence. By implementing evidence-based strategies, public health campaigns, and regulatory actions, we can make significant strides in reducing tobacco use and creating a healthier environment for our future generations. In addition to banning flavored tobacco products, it is crucial to invest in public awareness campaigns that educate individuals, especially young people, about the dangers of tobacco use and the various alternatives available. These campaigns should focus on highlighting the health risks associated with smoking and using tobacco products, including heated tobacco devices and nicotine pouches. By promoting a better understanding of the potential risks, we can empower individuals to make informed decisions about their health and well-being. Furthermore, it is essential to provide accessible and effective smoking cessation programs and resources to support those who wish to quit smoking altogether. While alternatives like IQOS may be seen as a step towards harm reduction, the ultimate goal should be to encourage smokers to quit entirely and lead healthier lives. This can be achieved through counseling, behavioral therapies, and pharmacological treatments that have proven to be successful in helping individuals overcome nicotine addiction. Moreover, governments should collaborate with healthcare professionals and organizations to conduct research on the long-term effects of heated tobacco technology and nicotine pouches. Understanding the potential health risks associated with these products is critical in shaping effective tobacco control policies and regulations.

To ensure the success of these measures, enforcement and compliance monitoring are essential. Strict regulations should be put in place to prevent the marketing and sale of tobacco products to minors, and penalties should be imposed on those who violate these regulations. Retailers should be actively engaged in promoting responsible sales practices and verifying the age of customers before selling tobacco or alternative products (White et al., 2021).

In conclusion, while the introduction of heated tobacco technology products like IQOS has provided an alternative for smokers seeking a potentially less harmful option, it does not eliminate the risks associated with tobacco use. Governments and regulatory bodies must remain proactive in implementing comprehensive tobacco control measures that address not only flavored tobacco products but also emerging tobacco technologies. By investing in public awareness campaigns, smoking cessation programs, and research, we can work towards reducing smoking prevalence and protecting the health of our communities, especially the younger generations. It is a collective responsibility to create a tobacco-free future and prioritize the well-being of our society. (Bandi ez al., 2021).

## **Methods**

Our interviewees, a group of 18 people, have been working for the company since 2007 as distributors in the old system, delivering tobacco products everywhere. The interview consisted of 28 questions and was conducted over a period of 3 months. Approximately 6 years ago, they transitioned to become territorial representatives when the National Tobacco Shop Supplier (ODBE) was established, and at that time, they became territorial

marketing representatives at JTI (Japan Tobacco International). Their responsibilities include informing tobacco shop owners about legal changes or new products, encouraging the ordering of these new products, and managing the tobacco shops in their area. They also negotiate contracts with those tobacco shops that they see potential in and ensure the fulfillment of the contract terms. Through these contracts, they provide secondary placements of the company's products in illuminated displays, aiming to ensure loyalty to JTI. JTI is currently the 3rd largest tobacco company in the world and holds the 3rd place among tobacco companies in Hungary as well. They are leaders in tobacco sales, but their products sell the most in the market, indicating their market leadership in tobacco sales.

During the interview, we discussed the impact of regulations introduced in the tobacco industry over the years to promote smoking cessation. One significant regulation was the introduction of health warnings on tobacco products in the early 2000s, followed by the inclusion of various deterrent images. Over the years, customers initially expressed resistance to these new features, but later, they became accustomed to them. Tobacco shops even allow customers to switch images if they dislike a particular one. It was observed worldwide that the stress levels in a country influence the success of smoking cessation; countries with better living standards and a calmer environment tend to have higher success rates in smoking cessation. However, the most significant impact on smoking cessation seems to be the increase in tobacco prices. Thus, the tobacco market is anticipating the effects of further price increases on consumers, as it may result in reduced tobacco consumption or a shift towards the black market.

Regarding the future of the tobacco market, the introduction of heated tobacco technology may attract consumers due to its lower cost and the communication by some companies that it poses lower health risks compared to traditional cigarettes. The JTI representative believes that heated tobacco technology is the future, but it will require generational changes to establish a significant presence in the market. The current generation of smokers may not switch to heated tobacco products, and the shift towards these products will likely be driven by younger consumers. Currently, heated tobacco technology accounts for approximately 25% of the Hungarian cigarette market, a significant portion considering it has been present for only about 3 years, and the trend indicates that it will continue to grow. However, the market may diverge in the future, with some consumers opting for heated tobacco technology and others choosing cheaper products due to the price increases. The continuous tightening of advertising regulations has significantly restricted tobacco advertising over the years. Hostesses used to promote cigarettes, and various branded gifts were given as prizes in games. However, these forms of advertising are now forbidden. The current regulation allows the use of navigation cards for advertising until the end of 2022, where only new messages or new products can be communicated without mentioning any brands. The introduction of unit packaging in the future may open up more advertising opportunities for reduced-risk products as they can use colors freely to stand out on store shelves.

The tobacco law has been successful in reducing the direct service of tobacco products to individuals under 18 due to strict controls. It is much harder for young people to access tobacco products compared to the past when they were readily available in stores and pubs. However, determined individuals under 18 can still acquire tobacco products from acquaintances, but the level of control has reduced their chances of success. In recent years, there have been significant excise tax increases on tobacco products, and the prices have risen drastically. Despite these increases, the demand for cheaper, lower category cigarettes has been growing. Consumers are becoming more price-sensitive and are switching from premium to lower-priced cigarettes due to economic factors. The price difference between premium and lower category cigarettes has significantly widened, and the demand for cigars and rolling tobacco has also increased. Looking into the future, economic conditions may lead to declines in the legal trade market as people prioritize spending. The legal trade market may face challenges from the black market due to the price increases. Additionally, the demand for lower-priced tobacco products and reduced-risk products may continue to grow due to the increased costs of traditional cigarettes. JTI is also looking into the possibility of introducing heated tobacco products to the market, although the current political situation and regulatory changes in the European Union could influence the timing of its release.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation in the tobacco market in Hungary has started in a positive direction, and the successful shift towards a healthier lifestyle in society can be observed. People are increasingly inclined towards healthier alternatives, transitioning to less harmful forms of tobacco consumption. The sales of traditional tobacco products, such as tobacco-filled products and conventional cigarettes, are expected to continuously decline over the years, and this trend will be further promoted by the growing popularity of heated tobacco technology and nicotine pouches. Several factors contribute to this transition. One significant determining factor is the

extraordinary increase in prices, which has made heated tobacco products more affordable compared to traditional cigarettes. For economic reasons, people are more likely to turn to cost-effective alternatives. The introduction of unit packaging regulations for tobacco products does not apply to heated tobacco technology products, allowing them to retain their original colorful packaging and even be displayed in illuminated showcases. This provides a significant advantage for traditional cigarettes and tobacco products, enhancing their visibility in stores and potentially increasing their popularity. Health considerations also play a role in this transition. The lower odor and reduced health risks associated with heated tobacco technology make these products more appealing to consumers. Additionally, the return of flavored tobacco products holds great attraction for consumers and is expected to drive substantial growth in this market segment. Despite the price increases, the transformation in the tobacco market does not deter those seeking alternatives due to the harmful effects of smoking. Heated tobacco technology and nicotine pouches make quitting smoking more attractive and enable consumers to opt for a healthier lifestyle. Throughout this process, it is crucial that society becomes increasingly aware of the health risks involved and becomes willing to change their habits. The transformation in the tobacco market and the promotion of healthier alternatives encourage people to actively consider quitting smoking and choosing less harmful alternatives. The transformation of the tobacco market in Hungary is moving in a positive direction, offering hope that health issues related to smoking can be reduced. The increasing popularity of heated tobacco technology and nicotine pouches can aid in mitigating the harmful effects of smoking and lead people towards healthier lifestyles. Society's growing awareness and environmentally conscious approach play a crucial role in this transition.

## **Scientific Ethics Declaration**

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

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