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'I smoke because it makes beer taste better': insights from the 'I smoke because...' project and exhibition

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ABSTRACT

The Polish anti-smoking artistic installation 'Pałę, bo...' (I smoke because...) invited smokers to anonymously share the reasons for why they smoke. It had three editions. It first appeared in September 2016 at the 'City of Stars' festival in Żyrardów. In May of 2017, the project travelled to Wrocław, where it inaugurated the World No Tobacco Day conference entitled 'Lung cancer can be prevented. Smoking is curable' organized by the Health Promotion Foundation (Nadarzyn), the Medical University of Wrocław and the Lower Silesia Center of Oncology. The exhibition remained there, at the Medical Science Information Center, for two months, before being transferred to its final destination at the Lower Silesia Center of Oncology in July 2017. In total, nearly 200 responses were collected.

KEY WORDS: cigarette smokers, smokers, artistic installation, reasons for smoking.

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GENESIS OF THE IDEA

I have never smoked cigarettes. Furthermore, I grew up in a family where no one smoked, and cigarette smoke always bothered me. At all stages of my professional life I tried to fight for clean air around me. In the 1970s, at the Industrial Institute of Machine Building in Warsaw (mathematics was my first profession), I shared a room with several colleagues. I managed to introduce a custom that indoor smoking must be confined to the stairwell. Initially I had to remind others repeatedly not to smoke, until the day the director of the institute entered our room with a cigarette. I told him firmly, 'No cigarettes here'. He immediately, obediently extinguished his cigarette and apologized.

The second stage of my personal fight against tobacco smoke took place at the National Philharmonic, where from 1989 to 2006 I sang in the choir. In the Philharmonic building, the designated area for smokers was a section of the hallway near the artists' entrance. The choristers, after a few hours of uninterrupted singing, with hot throats and in a need to rest their lungs, had to pass directly through the smokers' zone. Although

I chaired the Artistic Council of the orchestra at the time, my arguments that this arrangement harmed the singers had no effect on its management. Then I pointed out that world-famous artists, including foreigners, entered this most important musical institution in Poland through the same cloud of smoke. That made the difference, and the director's decision was immediate. On the same day, the smoking section was moved to the opposite side of the building.

The third stage of my battle against tobacco addiction was inspired by cigarette boxes collected by my husband, also a non-smoker. All had printed slogans to get smokers to reflect on their health. These warnings were also known in Poland, but the packets were from other countries, including the United Kingdom, Portugal, Greece, Russia, Japan, and even Indonesia. I asked myself why, if a cigarette box yells loudly, 'Fumarmata', 'Kurienieubiwajet', 'Smoking seriously harms you and others around you', 'Rauchen in der Schwangerschaftschadetihrem Kind' etc., it does not cause an immediate and decisive negative human reaction? Maybe these slogans should be more provocative, on the verge of



FIG. 1. Exhibition of the 'I smoke because...' installation in the Wrocław Medical Science Information Centre

ridicule and absurdity, rather than serious and scientific (for example, 'I smoke not to feel the stench around me', 'I smoke because I like to blow smoke rings', or 'I smoke, because it broadens my horizons'). From these reflections stemmed the idea of an installation consisting of large (70 cm × 100 cm) cigarette boxes with black frames containing irreverent, silly captions (Fig. 1). The threat of smoking was represented by disgusting bugs walking around half-meter cigarettes and the packets.

THE ARTISTIC INSTALLATION

Figure 1 depicts the art installation used for this project. It consisted of colourful, eye-catching boxes resembling cigarette packets, each of them bearing a caption beginning with 'Pałę, bo...' (I smoke because...). Passers-by were invited to complete the phrase by writing their anonymous answers on pieces of paper and putting them inside an urn or pasting them onto the installation.

ŻYRARDÓW – THE IDEA BROUGHT FIRST RESULTS

I installed the exhibit in a former weaving mill in Żyrardów [1] and received a variety of responses. Some observers questioned why I did not fight smoking directly, and instead justified the existence of addiction in a childish manner. In their opinion, slogans such as 'I smoke because I'm a tough guy' could promote smoking, especially if read by young people. My response was that current warning labels rarely changed the behaviour of a smoker. I wanted to provoke people to think, 'Why am I smoking?'

I thought that seeing large worms crawling around cigarette packaging could help elicit emotional responses in writing, revealing observers' personal motives for reaching for cigarettes. One of the boxes was equipped with adhesive paper and pencils for this purpose. After two weeks, I discovered that the more than 100 pieces of paper I had provided had been used up, and people had started to write down their answers on scraps of paper, and even paste them on the urn provided to collect the notes.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard claimed that all addictions stemmed from boredom and a lack of meaning in life, but none of the respondents in Żyrardów wrote this. During the viewing, I spotted a few people submitting written responses, so I engaged them in conversation. Most were surprised that someone had presented such a simple question, one they had not thought about before. Perhaps they had also been trying not to think about their reasons for smoking. My banal examples in the black frames, such as 'I smoke because I am an adult', were not treated as a joke, but rather as a provocation, or as a 'voice of conscience'. Perhaps viewers of the exhibition increased their self-knowledge about the underlying reasons of their smoking? They were completely free to ignore this installation, just as they do with the information in the 'real' black frames of warning labels on cigarette packets. However, many of them chose instead to engage and respond. I think they voted for health, for themselves and for others. Maybe for the first time, they asked themselves this difficult question, and even if their answers were carefree, the moment of reflection remained.

I analysed the written responses to the exhibit and concluded that the question was not simple and obvious at all. Many people knew that smoking cigarettes was harmful, but tried to ignore this fact. They often dodged the question, answering: 'I smoke because I like it'. They did not want to admit being in the clutches of addiction, or that they lacked the willpower to stop. Instead, many tried to provide rational justification, for example, 'A break for a cigarette is my only opportunity at work to rest'. One thing was absolutely clear: warnings such as 'Smoking kills' printed in black frames are ignored by smokers.

RESPONSES IN STATISTICS

The largest group (over 30%) were absurd or playful answers, with dark or carefree humour. This reflects an cynical attitude to the phenomenon of smoking, for example, 'I smoke to die'; 'I smoke because I am a patriot'; 'I smoke because I'm from (the city of) Żyrardów'; 'I smoke because I'm going to kindergarten'; 'I smoke because I care about my health'; 'I smoke because I do not have cannabis' etc. The most dramatic response was: 'I smoke because 15 days ago my parents died in an accident – they had cigarettes in their suitcases'.

In second place (16%) were evasive answers, of the type 'I smoke because I like it', sometimes with additional justifications. For example, someone wrote: 'Djarums are too tasty not to smoke them' and another added: 'Because I can and I like and I want a Gitane, it's good'. Also: 'I smoke because I like to be dizzy'.

A third group (10%) were answers by brave people who, as the reason for smoking, admitted addiction. Some gave quite intimate confessions, for example, 'I'm addicted since the age of 14 and I want to be cool. I want to be cool, no one will forbid me'. Someone else wrote only 'I must' and another, 'I am too weak to stop smoking'.

A further 9% of respondents wrote that they had quit smoking. For example, 'I smoke because... I do not smoke'. Still another explained, 'I smoked because I was an adult, but at the age of 17, this passed'.

Six percent use the word 'stupidity'. 'I smoke because I'm stupid' or 'I reek a fool so I smoke'. Honesty emanates from: 'I'm still too stupid to stop smoking'.

Individual people gave rational reasons, e.g.: 'Because it reduces my stress'. One explained: 'Getting out to smoking is the moment of stress relief at work, and after work it's a habit'. Another person writes: 'In gastronomy it is a break in work for a few minutes'. Some responses, such as 'Smoking gives me a sense of security', are difficult to categorize. Three people replied that there was actually no reason why they smoked. Three others were defiant: 'Because my parents forbid smoking'. Three repeated a line on one of the boxes in the exhibition, for example: 'I like to blow smoke rings'. Three proudly declared: 'I smoke because I can, because I can afford it'. Three entries cannot be read or contain only a drawing,

e.g. a leaf (maybe hemp). Two people complained that they had been persuaded to smoke by someone else.

I kept all the answers as documentation of the exhibition and evidence of audience interest. Perhaps there was some trace of subconscious discomfort or uncertainty among people visiting Żyrardów during the exhibition, and that's good. Success is achieved in small steps.

I showed the results to the president and founder of the Health Promotion Foundation, Professor Witold Zatoński, who suggested presenting the exhibit during an anti-smoking seminar in Wrocław, on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day (31 May 2017).

WROCLAW – SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

My installation was transported to Wrocław, first to the Center of Medical Information Science, then to the Lower Silesian Center of Oncology. In Żyrardów, it had been part of a festival, with presentations from colleges of painting, music and theatre. Perhaps because of its social, anti-smoking nature, it had stood out from other exhibits there. In Wrocław, however, in the corridor of a large medical library, near conference rooms where there was a professional scientific seminar on cancer resulting from smoking, my installation could make only a small contribution to serious deliberations, a kind of entertainment in the break between lectures and presentations.

In a humorous and ironic way, I encouraged smokers to answer only one question, while at the conference, serious questionnaires were distributed about the subject of smoking with a clear scientific and research goal. Here the questions were difficult and professional, e.g. 'How many chemicals are in tobacco smoke?' or 'Which pharmaceuticals are good for the treatment of addiction?'. The creator of the questionnaires also wanted to know the opinions of those gathered about introducing further restrictions on smoking. The anonymous survey ended with the question: 'Do you smoke tobacco?'

I don't know the results of the formal survey, but I do know what the contents of my urn, shaped like a large box of cigarettes, were after the two exhibitions in Wrocław. The responses here were less varied than those I had gathered in Żyrardów.

There was a certain stubbornness among respondents, with 70% writing, 'I smoke because I like it' with slightly different details.

The tendency toward aggressive and even vulgar treatment of this quasi-survey emerged more strongly. The nervousness or anger of the respondents probably resulted from the location, an oncology center. Patients there, not infrequently in the last stage of life and still secretly smoking, could not accept the mockery of their addiction. 'A very idiotic and weak exhibition, that's why I'm smoking' was one of the most delicate entries. Someone else wrote, 'I think, think and think, I cannot'.

A few responses, however, were clearly submitted by participants of the international seminar entitled 'Smoking is curable' because they were written in foreign languages. One in English was quite factual: 'Because everyone around me smokes, so it became a habit. I will quit soon!!!'. Another wrote, 'I smoke because it's stronger than me'. One conference participant responded in Arabic, so I read this remark with the help of an Arabist, George Yacoub: 'Smoking is a very good thing. It does not harm health. It calms the nerves'.

A few responses came from students (probably from the Medical University) citing the stress-reducing effect of cigarettes.

Several humorous entries probably also came from students: 'I smoke because I don't know what to do with my money', 'I smoke because my mother commanded me to do so', 'I smoke because it's a free country', 'I smoke because it makes beer taste better'. The most absurd and at the same time dramatic submission was 'I smoke because I want to die in pain'.

Two people justified smoking with fear of obesity.

One joked with my ironic slogan: 'I would like to smoke, but I'm not a tough guy'.

CONCLUSIONS

The three exhibitions of the 'I smoke because...' installation, as well as the responses collected from the passers-by, suggested several conclusions:

1. A simple question about people's thoughts on the causes of cigarette smoking turned out to be an effective way of eliciting a range of responses. When I proposed that people write short responses, I was not sure if anyone would oblige. On the other hand, as the author of many exhibits of graphic design, paintings, assemblages and installations, I knew that if the audience was not offered an opportunity to engage – in a competition, questionnaire, play, happening, etc. – my work could go almost unnoticed. This is the fate of most contemporary art filling our galleries.
2. It seems that placing the installation in a hospital space was a mistake. Here, the light, ironic treatment of a serious addiction was treated as an unnecessary provocation. Such an exhibit is better placed in a public space, to reach a diverse population, people of varied social status, rather young, positively-oriented, and subconsciously desiring to maintain their health for as long as possible. This is also suggested by data collected by Professor Zatoński; it is easiest to break an addiction between the ages of 20 and 30 years [2].
3. The last conclusion is that the fight of non-smokers for clean air can be beneficial not only for themselves, but also for those who smoke.

DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflict of interest.

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