

SMOKING AS A SYMBOL OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FEMALE SMOKERS SELF-CONCEPT

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Abstract: Smoking is a common habit in Indonesia, often linked to masculinity and social status. However, societal norms deeply rooted in patriarchy impose stricter moral standards on women, leading to the stigmatization of female smokers. This study investigates how these societal norms influence the self-concept of female smokers in Semarang City. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study involved four participants—female smokers aged 19–25 years who smoke at least four cigarettes daily and are aware of the stigma associated with smoking. Data were gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings reveal that for these women, smoking is not merely a habit but a symbolic act of resistance against gender norms that restrict their freedom and identity. While the participants shared common experiences of stigma, their responses also highlighted diverse perspectives on navigating societal expectations. However, these findings are limited to the specific cultural context of Semarang and may not represent other regions. This study underscores the complexity of female smokers' experiences in patriarchal societies and highlights unique factors that frame smoking as resistance. Future research could further explore how such acts of defiance manifest in different cultural settings or contribute to policy discussions addressing gender stigma.

Keywords: self-concept, resistance, female smokers, gender construction, patriarchal

Introduction

Smoking is a common cultural practice in Indonesia, often linked to masculinity and social status. Cigarettes are frequently used as a social currency, symbolizing power and camaraderie, especially among men. This association reinforces societal norms that portray smoking as an inherently masculine activity (Rohmah et al., 2023). However, women who smoke are subjected to harsher societal scrutiny, with their actions interpreted as defiance against expected gender roles (David et al., 2024). These reactions are deeply rooted in Indonesia's patriarchal framework, which imposes strict moral codes on women and dictates their behaviors in both public and private spheres (Rosemary & Werder, 2024).

In patriarchal societies, the behaviors of women are closely monitored and regulated to maintain traditional gender hierarchies (Solomon, 2020). Smoking, an act culturally aligned with men, becomes a symbol of rebellion when performed by women (Keane, 2020). Female smokers are often labeled as immoral, reckless, or deviant, reducing their actions to moral failings rather than personal choices (Antin et al., 2017a; David et al., 2024). This stigmatization not only restricts women's freedom but also perpetuates their marginalization within a gender-biased social structure.

Despite these challenges, some women use smoking as a deliberate act of defiance. It becomes a tool to challenge gendered expectations, assert independence, and reclaim autonomy over their identities.

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For these women, smoking is not merely a personal habit but a form of resistance that allows them to navigate and contest the constraints of patriarchal norms (Rosemary & Werder, 2024). This resistance, however, is not universal; it is shaped by individual experiences and the specific sociocultural context in which these women live (Triandafilidis et al., 2017).

While previous studies have extensively documented the negative labeling of female smokers, there is a lack of research exploring how these women perceive themselves and their actions (Antin et al., 2017b; Triandafilidis et al., 2017). The intersection of smoking with self-concept and identity formation in the face of societal judgment remains underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the lived experiences of female smokers in Semarang City, focusing on how they use smoking as a means of self-expression and resistance. By employing a phenomenological approach, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the nuanced ways in which women navigate their identities in a patriarchal society.

The context of Semarang City offers a unique lens through which to explore this phenomenon. As a mid-sized urban area with a mix of traditional and modern influences, Semarang reflects the tensions between entrenched cultural norms and evolving social dynamics. Female smokers in this setting encounter a distinctive interplay of judgment, stigma, and acceptance, making their experiences particularly valuable for understanding the broader implications of gendered behavior in Indonesia.

By delving into the experiences of female smokers, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on gender, identity, and resistance within patriarchal societies. It highlights how everyday actions, such as smoking, can serve as subtle yet significant forms of rebellion against societal constraints. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when analyzing acts of resistance, paving the way for future research and discourse on gender and agency in Indonesia and beyond.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of female smokers in Semarang City, focusing on how smoking relates to their self-concept and resistance to gender norms. A phenomenological method is particularly apt for examining subjective experiences and uncovering the meanings participants attach to their behaviors within a sociocultural context (Dodgson, 2023). The study involved four female smokers aged 19 to 25 years, selected through purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria: active smokers consuming at least four cigarettes daily and demonstrating awareness of societal labels and stereotypes surrounding female smoking. These criteria ensured the recruitment of participants who could provide meaningful insights into the research questions. Informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality throughout the study.

Data were gathered using three primary methods. Semi-structured interviews served as the main instrument for data collection, with an interview guide designed to explore themes such as personal identity, experiences of societal judgment, and smoking as an act of resistance. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their stories freely, with additional probing for in-depth insights (Simpson A & McDowell, 2019). Observational data provided further context by capturing participants' non-verbal cues, social interactions, and behaviors during interviews or in casual settings

(Mirhosseini, 2020). Supplementary documentation, such as participants' reflections or visual records of their smoking-related practices, enriched the analysis and ensured a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

The collected data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method designed to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Rajasinghe et al., 2024). The process began with verbatim transcription of interviews to ensure accuracy, followed by systematic coding to identify recurring themes and patterns (La Kahija, 2018). Themes were then interpreted to uncover deeper meanings, linking them to the participants' socio-cultural contexts and individual self-concepts. IPA facilitated nuanced interpretations, retaining the uniqueness of each participant's narrative while identifying shared experiences and overarching themes. Triangulation of data collected through different methods enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings. This rigorous approach provides a robust framework for understanding the interplay between smoking, gender norms, and self-concept among female smokers in a patriarchal society.

Results

Smoking as a Symbol of Resistance

Smoking was identified as a profound form of symbolic resistance among the female participants, challenging deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Participants described their smoking behavior as a deliberate act to defy societal expectations that traditionally confine women to submissive roles. This resistance was not expressed through overt activism but through the reclamation of agency in everyday life. By choosing to engage in a behavior stigmatized for women, participants actively confronted stereotypes and asserted their autonomy. This dynamic highlights how seemingly mundane actions can serve as powerful tools of resistance in patriarchal contexts. For example, one participant remarked,

“Smoking makes me feel like I’m taking control of my own life. It’s a way of saying that I won’t let anyone dictate what I should or shouldn’t do as a woman.” (T, female)

By engaging in an activity stigmatized for women, participants actively rejected stereotypes and claimed ownership over their choices.

Assertion of Identity

Smoking also emerged as a medium for asserting individual identity and independence. Participants framed their smoking as a declaration of selfhood, distancing themselves from the restrictive gender roles imposed by societal norms. This act of self-assertion aligned with broader feminist theories, which view everyday practices as avenues for challenging oppression. Through smoking, participants crafted an image of themselves that embraced individuality and rejected societal expectations. This assertion of identity underscores the transformative power of personal choice in reshaping how marginalized individuals view themselves and are perceived by others. Participants viewed the act of smoking as a way to define themselves outside conventional gender roles. One participant noted,

“When I smoke, I feel like I’m showing the world who I really am. It’s not about rebellion for the sake of it but about being true to myself.” (A, female)

This perspective aligns with feminist theories that consider daily practices as avenues for resistance. By choosing to smoke, participants created a self-image that challenged societal expectations and embraced individuality.

Navigating Judgment

Participants encountered significant societal judgment for their smoking behavior but demonstrated remarkable resilience in navigating these challenges. Strategies to mitigate the effects of stigma included smoking in private settings or within supportive social circles. These adaptive mechanisms allowed participants to maintain their autonomy while shielding themselves from public disapproval. Furthermore, the formation of inclusive networks among like-minded peers offered a critical source of emotional validation and solidarity. These networks provided safe spaces where participants could openly express their experiences, reinforcing their determination to resist societal constraints and affirm their choices. One participant shared,

“I’ve learned to ignore the stares and comments. I focus on people who understand me, and that’s enough.” (E, female)

These adaptive mechanisms allowed participants to maintain their sense of autonomy while mitigating the effects of social disapproval.

Discussion

This study sought to answer how societal norms influence the self-concept of female smokers in Semarang City and how these women navigate the stigma associated with smoking. The findings suggest that smoking for these women transcends its conventional understanding as a habit and emerges as a symbolic act of resistance. This aligns with feminist theories emphasizing that everyday actions can serve as subtle forms of resistance (Keane, 2020).

Using James Scott’s concept of “hidden transcripts,” the study frames smoking as a discreet yet potent act of defiance (Massoumi & Morgan, 2024). Scott’s framework highlights how marginalized groups employ everyday practices to resist dominant power structures indirectly (Ooi & King, 2024). For the participants, smoking became a “weapon of the weak”—a personal statement challenging societal expectations without overt confrontation. This symbolic resistance enabled the women to reclaim a sense of agency in a patriarchal context that often seeks to limit their choices.

The act of smoking also reshaped participants’ self-concept, allowing them to assert their independence and reject societal stigmatization (Sorgen et al., 2022). By engaging in this practice, the women reinforced their autonomy and crafted identities aligned with their values and beliefs rather than societal expectations (Martin & Martin, 2024). This dynamic reflects a broader feminist narrative where marginalized individuals repurpose stigmatized behaviors into expressions of self-determination.

Additionally, the study underscores the role of coping mechanisms and community support in navigating the pervasive stigma associated with smoking. Participants highlighted the significance of small, inclusive social groups that provided emotional validation and solidarity. These communities offered safe spaces for self-expression and resistance, bolstering the participants' resilience against external judgment. Such support networks enabled the women to maintain their autonomy and continue their symbolic resistance (Conneely, 2023).

Cultural specificity significantly influenced the participants' experiences. The patriarchal values and moral policing prevalent in Semarang City heightened the challenges faced by female smokers. Despite this, the participants adapted by creating exclusive spaces where they could freely express themselves, reflecting their ability to navigate and resist cultural constraints. This adaptive behavior highlights the intersection of gender, culture, and resistance, demonstrating how local contexts shape acts of defiance. However, this narrative must be approached with nuance. Not all acts of smoking represent resistance, and the potential health risks associated with smoking cannot be overlooked. While recognizing the agency embedded in such behaviors, it is crucial to engage in critical reflection that does not glamorize potentially harmful practices.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that smoking among female smokers in Semarang functions as a nuanced form of resistance against patriarchal control and as a mechanism for asserting identity. However, while smoking may represent autonomy for some, it is also a behavior with significant health implications. Thus, future research should explore alternative expressions of resistance that do not compromise individual well-being. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how marginalized groups resist societal norms and offer valuable insights into the complexities of gender and resistance. Expanding this research to include more diverse participants and cultural contexts could further illuminate how everyday acts function as expressions of selfhood and subversion.

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