



Appealing flavors

If the government is serious about particularly curbing teenage smoking and vaping — or the use of electronic cigarettes or electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) — then it should start regulating the efforts of cigarette and vape producers to introduce more flavors and make their products more appealing to the younger market.

It is bad enough that a recent observational study by the Institute for Global Tobacco Control (IGTC) found “that tobacco and nicotine product sale and advertising persist within proximity of schools in the Philippines, despite regulations prohibiting sales, displays, advertisements, and promotions of tobacco products within 100 meters.”

But another study by IGTC published recently also found that countries like the Philippines and Vietnam also lacked laws to regulate the use of different “flavors” in the production and sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products. Of course, the concern is that the use of flavors, perhaps to make nicotine delivery more palatable, is also making tobacco products more youth-friendly.

“Tobacco product flavors can increase product appeal, adoles-

STATIC MARVIN TORT

cent initiation and experimentation, and difficulty quitting. Flavored tobacco products are not restricted in Vietnam or the Philippines despite the high smoking prevalence among those 15 years of age and older (24% and 23%, respectively). There are no published reports to our knowledge on the levels of flavor chemicals in the cigarettes sold in these two countries,” noted a journal article published in *Nicotine and Tobacco Research*.

The article was written by scientific experts from IGTC, which was formed in 1998 as part of the Department of Health, Behavior and Society at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland. IGTC is a partner in the Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use and a Collaborating Center of the World Health Organization. Its mission is to prevent death and disease from tobacco products by generating evidence to support tobacco interventions.

In December 2022 to January 2023, IGTC monitored the local

sale and marketing of cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and heated tobacco products (HTP) at over 6,000 retailers within 200 meters of 353 schools in nine cities and regions. And, it found that “2,070 cigarette, 43 e-cigarette, and 33 HTP retail locations were observed within 100 meters of the majority of schools,” in violation of Philippine law.

In a newer study published in *Nicotine and Tobacco Research* in August, IGTC experts also noted that “a range of flavored cigarette products are being offered by tobacco companies in Vietnam and the Philippines, presumably to maximize cigarette sales. Regulation of flavor chemicals should [thus] be considered in these two countries.”

They added that “Article 9 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), ratified by both Vietnam and the Philippines, states that ‘there is no justification for permitting the use of ingredients, such as flavoring agents, which help make tobacco products attractive’... Analyses found that cigarettes purchased in Vietnam and the Philippines contained menthol and other flavor chemicals. Tobacco companies are offering multiple flavor chemical profiles

and nominally nonflavored versions in these countries.”

At this point, the Philippines already finds it difficult to strictly and effectively enforce regulations on advertising, promotion, and sale of cigarettes and tobacco and vaping products. And while it can work to further limit youth access to tobacco products and alternatives, this effort should include regulation on the introduction of flavors. The IGTC study noted that tobacco products sold in the Philippines had three main flavor groupings: menthol, non-flavored, and menthol plus other flavor chemicals (OFCs).

As noted by Lauren Czaplicki, a scientist at IGTC and co-author of the study, “Flavored tobacco products are a culprit in extending the tobacco epidemic, making cigarettes appealing to consumers — including young people... By banning and removing flavored tobacco products from the market, countries can successfully counter the tobacco industry’s sugar-coated, predatory marketing tactics.”

The IGTC study found that many cigarette brands sold in Vietnam and the Philippines contained menthol and OFCs. And this is concerning since “menthol makes cigarettes more palatable and can

suppress respiratory symptoms; the tobacco industry intentionally manipulates the level of menthol in cigarettes brand variants to appeal to different consumers; and, individuals who regularly smoke menthol may prefer variants with higher menthol levels. Furthermore, those who smoke menthol have a lower likelihood of quitting despite making more quit attempts.”

Chemical analysis by experts from IGTC also showed the “presence of OFCs in brand variants purchased in both countries, either alone or, more commonly, in combination with menthol. Oftentimes, OFCs and menthol were found in flavor capsules or flavor threads... Flavor capsules and threads are being used to appeal to new consumers.”

“Evidence indicates that flavor chemicals, including fruit flavors, menthol and clove, and flavor capsule cigarettes, are appealing to young people. Filipino young adults even liken flavor capsule cigarettes to candy. The present study indicates that flavor chemicals and flavor delivery technology are readily available for sale in Vietnam and the Philippines, suggesting a comprehensive flavored tobacco ban that includes all flavors present in any compo-

nent part of a cigarette or tobacco product is required in both countries,” IGTC added.

If not a ban, at least some regulation of flavors should be considered, as the Philippines is falling behind its goal of a 30% reduction in smoking by 2025. IGTC said, adding that “a comprehensive flavor ban that includes all flavors present in all cigarette components, including flavor capsules and threads, is one pathway to reduce cigarette sales and promote smoking cessation in these two countries and the Western Pacific region.”

At this point, the Philippine effort to curb youth smoking is far from comprehensive, despite the increase in excise taxes on cigarettes and tobacco products in recent years. The recent IGTC study talks only about the use of flavors in cigarettes. It will be interesting to wait for a similar study on the use of flavors by vaping products and nicotine delivery systems. ■

MARVIN TORT is a former managing editor of *BusinessWorld*, and a former chairman of the Philippine Press Council
marort@yahoo.com



Feud for thought

By Tony Samson

FEUDS and public disagreements are the stuff of both social and traditional media. Sometimes, the conflict is between regulators and regulated — TV personalities condemned for icing escapades (What is it about icing whether wiped on the face of a waiter serving cake at a birthday party, or publicly sucked from the fingers of a loved one, slowly and on live TV?). They also cover corporate struggles of certain groups for control of a company; walkouts in budget hearings; and celebrity couples in disarray — there is no third person.

Public conflicts provide drama as past histories are shared and the current conflict is traced to some divergence at some point when friends turned to foes. A senior statesman may even get into the fray on a purely non-political discourse of social etiquette.

There is even a self-appointed scold who throws verbal darts at established celebrities (she’s all washed up) just to start the ball rolling and provide click bait on his sites. He is fond of posting his bare-chested photo and describing himself as an influencer, and motivational speaker. How does he motivate? Is that the same as afflicting the comfortable and waiting for their reaction, if any? Is it best to just ignore him altogether?

Are such feuds being fueled by those with some hidden agenda, or merely the creation of media

as simpler to report than inflation rates, the price of rice, and sovereign funds?

“Feudal” reporting is not confined to politics or entertainment. Business journalism has gotten into the feud business too and now no longer discusses price-earnings ratio, market share, innovations, or returns on investments. It is starting to focus on personal animosity within a company, between owner and labor leaders, between titans taking over and being taken over, among stockholder blocks, and between regulatory agencies and the companies they supervise and barriers they impose on doing business in this country.

Specialty media organizations now feature business gossip. These specialize in starting feuds and attacking corporate personalities. Such online medium follows a business model. Yes, it’s about ad revenues. It reaches out to the targets and markets a year’s worth of ad placements in exchange for peace of mind. It’s the old-fashioned Sicilian model for protection. They ask for ads and ensure peace and quiet. For a little more, they can feature the target in a friendly interview. Questions will be submitted ahead of time so there are no surprises. They have a way of marketing placements by little reminders.

It is not surprising that media emphasis on feuds has somehow evolved into an obsession not with issues but personalities.

Coverage based on hostility between persons concentrates on



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looking for villains. The finger-pointing exercise of he-said-she-said gets heated especially with the inevitable exaggerations encouraged by commentators.

In the verbal boxing match, the basic understanding of ideas and issues becomes irrelevant. And because the exchange of accusations becomes ever more

acrimonious, the resolution of a crisis, which all parties concerned should endeavor to promote, becomes difficult. Only the waning interest of the

audience saves the crisis from getting worse.

The feud characterizes public life. Thus, party politics does not even pretend to be about ideas, but about alliances around dominant personalities. The ascent of parties is measured not in the advancement of their ideas but in the level of defections they can attract.

When confronted with a crisis, our first instinct is to fix the blame, rather than look for a solution. The priority when anything goes wrong is to find out who was responsible — who approved this thing and which camp does this villain belong to?

The feudal slant has not graduated beyond the tabloid approach. Feuds do not necessarily stand for differences in opinions and views on price caps, food taxes, and tariffs. They are just clashes of celebrities tearing out each other’s teeth.

Issues anyway seem too daunting to explain in their complexity. What about the intricacies of the educational system? Isn’t it better to focus on walkouts and confidential budgets? Underneath those feuds and verbal exchanges lie real issues of right and wrong. Perhaps national issues need to have faces... so that they can be properly faced. ■

TONY SAMSON is chairman and CEO of TOUCH xda
ar.samson@yahoo.com

