How do young adult women smokers perceive dissuasive cigarette sticks?

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Introduction

Smoking rates are disproportionately high among young adult women, whom the tobacco industry has targeted with specific brands that link smoking to glamour, sophistication, independence and slimness. (1-4)

Pictorial health warnings and plain packaging reduce smoking's cachet. The evidence suggests plain packaging will decrease smoking experimentation.

However, as tobacco packages become restricted spaces, the industry's attention may turn to sticks, which already use shape, colour and imagery to promote specific attributes.

As many countries consider mandating plain packaging, it is timely to consider whether plain sticks should be introduced as a complementary measure.

Results

Although participants said they did not usually regard stick appearance as important, they strongly preferred slim white sticks when shown different stimuli.

Resolving the dissonance

Slim, white sticks evoked positive connotations of glamour, slimness, and elegance, and enabled participants to distance themselves from the negative connotations of smoking.

"If I saw someone smoking a cigarette like that I’d think automatically that they were, like sort of, upper class because like, on movies and stuff always the upper class people smoked long thin cigarettes, so it’s like if I saw someone smoking a long thin cigarette I’d automatically think of that person."

Participants felt ambivalent about smoking; they depended on nicotine but felt anxious about the impression they created. ‘Clean’, slim, white cigarettes helped them identify with an image that distanced them from negative smoker stereotypes.

"Perhaps cause it’s more of pure – I don’t know – perhaps more of a pure look compared to the traditional one. I think most people who smoke probably want to live in an illusion that it’s not that as bad for you as everyone knows it is. "-

Attractive attributes, linked to more expensive brands, transformed cigarettes into social accessories that smokers used to reduce dissonance, maintain their self-image, and gain wider social acceptance.

"...so it sort of felt like I was being cheap – so I thought if I bought more expensive cigarettes that I wouldn’t feel so bad about – feel so cheap about smoking”.

Dismantling the façade

Participants reacted strongly against dissuasive sticks, particularly those featuring green filter tips, which they associated with “slime”, “scum”, “vomit” and “poo”.

Dissuasive colours removed the façade smokers constructed to sanitise their behaviour.

"It’s not going to be like ‘oh, I’ll smoke more expensive cigarettes cause it looks nicer’, it’s not going to be like that, cause no one’s going to be able to tell the difference."

Furthermore, it exposed their behaviour and left them open to judgment:

"It would be a lot more obvious what you were doing …. I guess it would draw more attention that you don’t probably want, so I probably wouldn’t be as inclined to do it in a public place."

Forced resignation

Participants thought dissuasive sticks would deter social smokers:

“If I saw someone smoking these and I was just a social smoker, then it’d probably remind me how dirty it was and maybe I would have been able to stop a lot earlier …. I wish they had brought it in. No, they would have made me stop.”

However, although participants felt addicted smokers would dislike this measure, they thought addiction would promote a resigned acceptance.

Discussion

Connotations created by white, slim cigarette sticks help young women deal with the negative stereotypes of smokers. Dissuasively coloured cigarette sticks removed the positive symbolic attributes created by white colours and slim shapes, and replaced these with connotations that evoked health problems and death.

Removing one of smoking’s social accoutrements increased participants’ self-consciousness about smoking, particularly in public. Participants believed dissuasively coloured sticks would deter smoking experimentation and reduce social smoking prevalence. However, they felt addicted smokers’ need for nicotine would override the disquiet all smokers would experience on seeing the coloured sticks.

While in-depth qualitative studies elicit rich, deep data, the themes identified now require assessment in an experimental study that estimates their likely effect on both experimentation and cessation.

Conclusion

Removing the ‘clean’, socially acceptable colours currently used on cigarette sticks and replacing these with dissuasive colours would further denormalise smoking.

This measure could also reduce smoking experimentation and thus merits further attention as a potential complement to plain packaging.

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References


Questions

1. How do young adult women smokers perceive regular and dissuasively coloured cigarette sticks?
2. What effects could dissuasive sticks have on smoking initiation and cessation?

Methods & Materials

Procedure: In-depth interviews exploring participants’ smoking initiation, brand preferences, favoured brand attributes, and perceptions of dissuasively coloured sticks, which were presented as stimuli.

Sample: Fourteen young adult female smokers aged 18 to 24 years who responded to community and social media advertisements. The sample comprised seven social smokers and seven daily smokers.

Analysis: Transcripts were reviewed using thematic analysis to identify idea elements and preliminary themes. (e) The first two authors then tested and discussed the themes, and re-checked these against the transcripts. We followed an iterative process where initial coding and theme development were reviewed and refined, and the final categories achieved by consensus.