

Research Summary

How does plain packaging work?

1. Hoek, J., Gendall, P., Gifford, H., Pirikahu, G., et al. (2012). [Tobacco branding, plain packaging, pictorial warnings and symbolic consumption](#). *Qualitative Health Research*, 22, 630-639.

What did we do and find?

We conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with young adult smokers and non-smokers to explore how plain cigarette packaging would influence the identities young adults construct using tobacco branding. The sample comprised 86 Maori, Pacific people and NZE. Smokers used tobacco brand imagery to define their social attributes and standing, and their connection with specific groups. Plain cigarette packaging usurped this process by undermining aspirational connotations and exposing tobacco products as toxic. Replacing tobacco branding with larger health warnings diminishes the cachet brand insignia creates, weakens the social benefits brands confer on users, and represents a potentially powerful policy measure.

What does this mean?

Young adults from all ethnicities use tobacco brands to communicate attributes about themselves and infer attributes other smokers possess. Specific brands had particular meanings that smokers valued. Plain packaging removed these attributes and nullified the attractive properties young adults associated with tobacco brands. Non-smokers saw plain packaging as very unattractive and saw this measure as reinforcing their decision not to smoke.

Key Quotes

Plain cigarette packaging presents an unambiguous, uncompromising message about smoking that reinforced non-smokers' negative perceptions of smoking and their disbelief that smokers could willingly consume a product that would compromise their health.

Note: This study used plain white packaging, not the dark green-brown colour subsequently tested and adopted by the Australian government. The effects noted would likely have been even stronger had the green-brown colour been used in the study.

2. Gendall, P., Hoek, J., Edwards, R., McCool, J., (2012). [A cross-sectional analysis of how young adults perceive tobacco brands: Implications for FCTC signatories](#). *BMC Public Health*. DOI: 10.1186/1471-2458-12-796

What did we do and find?

Our 1990 Smokefree Environments Act bans tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. We examined whether tobacco packaging functions as advertising, thus undermining our legislation (and the FCTC, to which NZ is a signatory). As advertising works by communicating attractive and distinctive brand attributes, we explored how young adult smokers and non-smokers interpreted familiar and unfamiliar tobacco brands. We used an on-line survey of 1035 young adults who evaluated eight tobacco brands and indicated how many (or how few) brand personality attributes these communicated.

The findings show that young adults distinguished between brands on the basis of their packaging alone. Respondents associated each brand with specific attributes, and were equally able to interpret familiar and unfamiliar brands. Interestingly, non-smokers made more favourable brand-attribute

associations than smokers, which suggests packaging communicates appealing attributes to non-smokers. We tested a near generic brand – Basic, which participants described as ‘plain’ or ‘budget’. There were no significant gender or ethnicity differences.

What does this mean?

Tobacco packaging uses logos, colours and imagery to create desirable connotations that promote and reinforce smoking. By functioning in the same way as advertising, on-pack branding breaches Article 11 of the FCTC and the 1990 Smokefree Environments Act. The findings refute tobacco companies’ claims that on-pack branding only helps smokers select brands as non-smokers also saw the attributes as forming attractive brand personalities.

Key Quotes

The study found that: *plain packaging would be widely seen as ‘budget’ and ‘plain’ by young adults, the group at greater risk of initiation, and subsequent addiction and harm.*

Given the growing evidence of packaging’s crucial role as a marketing medium, policy makers have few reasons to delay the introduction of plain packaging.

3. Gendall, P., Hoek, J., Edwards, R., Gifford, H., Thomson, G., Pirikahu, G., Pene, G., McCool, J. (2011). [Young adults’ interpretations of tobacco brands: Implications for tobacco control](#). *Nicotine and Tobacco Research*, 13 (10), 911-918. doi: 10.1093/ntr/ntr094

What did we do and find?

We explored the attributes young adults associated with different cigarette packages in a pilot study (comprising group discussions and in-depth interviews with 66 young adult smokers and non-smokers) that tested the methodology used in a later large-scale piece of work. We found young adults easily inferred a brand’s personality from its packaging – this finding suggests packaging functions in the same way as advertising and is thus in breach of the 1990 Smokefree Environments Act and Article 11 of the FCTC.

We developed brand maps to show how respondents positioned different brands; these maps provide a clear visual illustration of how packaging helps construct brand personalities that varied from older, more traditional, and male-oriented to younger, feminine, and “cool.”

The findings illustrate how tobacco branding continues to function as a promotion tool, even when communicated only by packaging. Young adult smokers and non-smokers easily identified brand attributes, which often connoted desirable associations. Evidence that tobacco packaging functions as advertising supports the introduction of plain packaging.

What does this mean?

Packaging functions as advertising and communicates appealing brand attributes to young people. In effect, packaging functions as a marketing medium. Removing this communications channel would not only ensure we meet the obligations imposed by our own statutes, but would ensure we met our international treaty obligations.

Key Quotes

Like all other products, tobacco brands use sophisticated imagery to develop differentiated appeals that resonate with distinct population groups, including adolescent and young adults.

The existence of brands that appeal specifically to younger women and, according to our participants, younger teens highlights the role packaging plays in supporting smoking initiation, promoting addiction, and reinforcing identities to which different groups aspire.