Original Investigation

Young Adults’ Interpretations of Tobacco Brands: Implications for Tobacco Control

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Abstract

Introduction: Marketers have long recognized the power and importance of branding, which creates aspirational attributes that increase products’ attractiveness. Although brand imagery has traditionally been communicated via mass media, packaging’s importance in promoting desirable brand–attribute associations has increased. Knowledge of how groups prone to smoking experimentation interpret tobacco branding would inform the debate over plain packaging currently occurring in many countries.

Methods: We conducted 12 group discussions and four in-depth interviews with 66 young adult smokers and nonsmokers of varying ethnicities from two larger New Zealand cities and one provincial city. Participants evaluated 10 familiar and unfamiliar tobacco brands using brand personality attributes and discussed the associations they had made.

Results: Participants ascribed very different images to different brands when exposed to the packaging alone, regardless of whether they had seen or heard of the brands before. Perceptual mapping of brands and image attributes highlighted how brand positions varied from older, more traditional, and male oriented to younger, feminine, and “cool.”

Conclusions: Our findings emphasize the continuing importance of tobacco branding as a promotion tool, even when communicated only by packaging. The ease with which packaging alone enabled young people to identify brand attributes and the desirable associations these connoted illustrate how tobacco packaging functions as advertising. The results support measures such as plain packaging of tobacco products to reduce exposure to these overt behavioral cues.

Introduction

In line with Article 13 of the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) (WHO, 2003, 2008), many countries have restricted tobacco advertising and sponsorship. However, tobacco companies continue to use packaging as an advertising medium and rely on brand imagery to communicate desirable attributes (Scheffels, 2008; Slade, 1997).

Tobacco packaging is not removed and discarded when the product is bought but functions as a container until the product has been consumed. It thus has the potential to reach smokers and nonsmokers alike on multiple occasions in point-of-sale displays, litter, and when used by smokers (Wakefield, Germain, and Durkin, 2008). Although elements of packaging, such as health warnings, are regulated, tobacco packages continue to communicate brand attributes, support brand positioning, reinforce brand livery, facilitate brand recognition, and foster purchase behavior (Wakefield and Letcher, 2002).

Pollay (2000) noted the importance of tobacco brand imagery to young smokers, whom he argued gained and communicated a sense of identity from the brands they consume. He described tobacco as a “badge product” that provides “a living testimonial endorsement of the user on behalf of that brand and product” and enables users to access and employ “some of the identity and personality of the brand image”. His reasoning highlights the important dual role tobacco products fulfill: they are at once reflexive, allowing smokers to construct their self-identity and expressive, assisting smokers to communicate the identity they have created to others (Dewhirst and Davis, 2005; Hastings, MacFadyen, MacKintosh, and Lowry, 1998). Familiar brands both facilitate peer approval and enable individuals to express their personal taste (Eadie, Hastings, Stead, and MacKintosh, 1999), and consumers display them to facilitate, develop, and demonstrate social group membership (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002).

Document analyses confirm the importance of branding to tobacco companies and reveal the careful research undertaken into package designs, particularly the imagery and logos featured (Chapman and Carter, 2003; Cummings, Morley, Horan,
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Steger, and Leavell, 2002). A Rothmans Benson and Hedges document stated: “In the cigarette category brand image is everything. The brand of cigarettes a person smokes is their identity. Cigarettes tell others who they are as a person.” (RBH-003911, 1996, cited in Pollay, 2000). Knowledge that product packaging skillfully communicates brand values has reinforced calls for the introduction of plain packaging that would remove logos and colors and require standard font style, pack size, and construction (Freeman, Chapman, and Rimmer, 2008; Germain, Wakefield, and Durkin, 2010; Wakefield et al., 2008). However, the tobacco industry has consistently opposed public health measures that would reduce this unregulated marketing (Philip Morris, 2010). Furthermore, policy makers require evidence that such interventions would be effective and proportionate to avoid the risk of litigation (Hoek et al., 2010).

Assessing these arguments requires an exploration of tobacco brand imagery, how this is interpreted, and whether it communicates brand values. Marketers have long recognized the power and importance of branding, which functions by associating products with desirable emotional, aspirational, and psychological attributes (Aaker, 1997; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001). For many decades, practitioners and researchers have agreed that consumers purchase products as much for their connotations or symbolic values as for their functional properties (Levy, 1959).

This emphasis on consumers’ interpretation, construction, and use of brands explains how brands may elicit varied connotations to which consumers aspire (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998). However, while consumers form uniquely personal interpretations of brands, brands also possess common core attributes created by marketing activities and designed to appeal to particular groups (Kapferer, 1992).

Brand association theory and evidence documenting consumers’ repertoire behavior suggest that tobacco brands, which have few if any functional differences, will use symbolic meanings to create points of differentiation (Nord and Peter, 1980). Evidence that tobacco brand associations communicate personality attributes that differ markedly would strengthen calls for plain packaging, particularly if some attributes had a strong youth orientation.

This paper reports on research that examined the brand differentiation achieved through tobacco packaging alone, a topic that has received little attention in tobacco control literature. We first examine young people’s interpretation of the personality attributes communicated by tobacco branding and explore whether they differentiate tobacco brands according to the images these evoke and, if so, the dimensions along which they separate brands. We explore reactions from both smokers and nonsmokers to analyze the tobacco industry’s argument that plain packaging would neither promote smoking cessation nor deter initiation.

## Methods

### Design

The study examined whether young adult smokers and non-smokers associate tobacco brands with distinctive brand “personalities.” Existing brand personality dimensions were identified in relevant literature and refined via preliminary pretesting and expert review (Aaker, 1997). The research was reviewed and approved by the University’s Human Ethics Committee (09/165), and consultation was undertaken with an iwi (indigenous peoples) advisory committee.

## Sample

As part of a larger study into tobacco branding, 12 group discussions and four in-depth interviews were conducted with 66 participants aged between 18 and 24 years of age. Respondents were recruited via recruitment posters, direct approaches, and whanauungatanga (kin relationship) and Pasifika networks to promote diversity in perspectives and responses. The discussion moderators were of New Zealand European, Māori, and Tokelauan ethnicity, and the lead facilitator for each group shared participants’ ethnic background. The discussions were conducted in three New Zealand cities (Wellington, Dunedin, and Whanganui) and included smokers and nonsmokers of primarily New Zealand European (Dunedin), Māori (Whanganui), and Pasifika (Wellington) ethnicities. Participants were sought from all socioeconomic strata to maximize diversity and promote debate but were allocated to groups according to their gender and smoking status. All participants were offered gift vouchers (phone cards, book tokens, retailer vouchers, or grocery vouchers) to recognize their assistance.

### Procedure and Discussion Protocol

The focus group discussions followed a common protocol, which included a general discussion about smoking prior to more specific consideration of tobacco brands. At the end of the discussion, participants completed a short questionnaire that collected details of their demographic characteristics and, if applicable, smoking behaviors. The overall discussions took between 35 and 65 min and, with participants’ permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

During the discussions, participants reviewed two cards containing images of 10 cigarette brands: Holiday, Basic, Camel, Merit, Salem, Port Royal, Kool, Winston, Longbeach, and Doral (Supplementary file 1 contains a copy of the images used). Three of these brands—Holiday, Longbeach, and Port Royal—are available in New Zealand and represent brands with high (Holiday) and low (Longbeach) penetration among young adult smokers (Laugesen, 2007). Aside from Camel, which some participants may have heard of but would not have seen locally as the variant tested, participants are unlikely to have encountered the remaining seven brands, which were U.S. tobacco brands with varied penetration levels in markets outside New Zealand. This mixture of familiar and unfamiliar brands provided insights into the influence brand knowledge (and potential usage) had on participants’ brand perceptions.

New Zealand has not allowed tobacco advertising or sponsorship since 1990 and is currently developing legislation that would remove tobacco retail displays. Tobacco products sold in New Zealand have a 30% front-of-pack health warning; however, we did not insert warning imagery onto the test brands as we wanted participants to focus on the brand imagery. Earlier work in which we explored pictorial warnings found smokers claimed to have grown accustomed to these warnings; thus, we believe omitting these is unlikely to have altered their responses to the brand stimuli.
As well as the brand images, the cards shown to participants contained 22 words selected to correspond to various brand personality dimensions and used to assess product positioning in markets and that had featured in earlier tobacco branding studies (Aaker, 1997; Wakefield et al., 2008). The list compiled from these sources was pretested with a small sample of smokers and peer reviewed by tobacco control researchers to ensure it was both comprehensive and relevant. Respondents considered each brand and circled as many or as few of the words listed to describe the brands; they could also add adjectives they thought appropriate if these did not appear on the original list. After completing this task, respondents then discussed the adjectives they had selected to describe each brand. Figure 1 contains examples of the brand stimuli, and a full copy of the protocol and stimulus material is available from the corresponding author.

Our mixed methods approach follows Steckler, McLeroy, Goodman, Bird, and McCormick (1992, p. 5), who suggested qualitative and quantitative methods could be used in parallel, with the results from each analyzed independently and used to cross-validate the overall findings.

Analysis
The brand–attribute associations were analyzed using SPSS (v. 17), and a perceptual map that displayed the 10 brands and the personality dimensions tested was created by plotting the results of a stepwise discriminant analysis (Hooley, 1980). Analysis of the open discussion used thematic analysis to identify dominant patterns within participants’ comments on each brand (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The discussion facilitators independently reviewed the transcripts and coded idea elements that they then grouped into themes relevant to each brand. We use participants’ own words to illustrate these themes.

Results

Sample Characteristics
The 66 participants were aged between 16 and 25 years (mean age 20.2 years); 49 were females and 37 males. The ethnic profile of the sample included New Zealand European (43%), Māori (37%), Pasifika (28%), Asian (5%), and other ethnic groups (7%) (as participants could nominate more than one ethnic affiliation, these percentages sum to more than 100%). Nearly three-quarters of the sample had a school-level qualification (72%), 7% had left school without a qualification, and the remaining 21% had earned a qualification after leaving school. Participants’ comments are reported according to their gender (F or M), ethnicity (Māori, M; New Zealand European, NZE; or Pasifika, P), and smoking status (nonsmoker, NS or smoker, S).

Brand–Attribute Associations
We first examined the overall brand–attribute associations respondents made; Table 1 contains these results. To simplify interpretation of the table, only cases where at least a quarter of respondents associated a descriptor with a particular brand are shown. To provide an overall perspective, the mean number of associations made with each brand is also included; columns shaded gray represent brands currently available in New Zealand. Discussions with participants confirmed that virtually none had seen or heard of the unfamiliar brands (aside from Camel, as noted earlier).

Comparing the mean number of attributes associated with the high- and low-penetration brands revealed that familiarity had little to do with brand image; respondents made consistent brand–attribute associations regardless of the brands’ familiarity. Table 1 shows three clear patterns in the associations, with (a) Merit, Port Royal, and Winston; (b) Longbeach and Holiday, and (c) Salem, Camel No. 9, and Kool, sharing several common attributes.

Half the participants used the free-association opportunity to provide additional descriptions of the brands. For example, they described Holiday as “popular,” “fun,” “carefree,” or “sum mery”; Merit as “professional” or “classy”; Camel as “exotic”; Salem as “modern”; Winston as “classy”; and Basic as “boring.” These adjectives were largely synonymous with those provided and highlight the ease with which participants distinguished between the brands on the basis of their pack imagery and brand names.

To quantify patterns evident in Table 1 and examine the relationship between the personality attributes and each of the brands tested, we conducted a stepwise discriminant analysis, with the 10 brands as the dependent variables and the 22 personality attributes as the independent variables. Using discriminant analysis as a form of multidimensional scaling in this way required the data to be reorganized so the brands became the “cases,” with 66 cases for each brand giving a sample size of n = 660. Nine of the personality attributes were significant discriminators among the brands and the first two discriminant functions explained 69% of the total variance in the discriminating variables (37% and 32%, respectively). Box’s M was highly significant, indicating that the assumption of equality of covariance matrices was violated; however, given the large sample size, this problem is not regarded as serious. The proportion of cases correctly classified was 32.6%, well above the chance criterion for groups of equal size of 10%.

Table 2 shows the canonical discriminate function coefficients for the nine significant personality attributes on the first and second discriminate functions and the values of the group centroids of the 10 brands on these two functions. Figure 2 shows a plot of the group centroids for the 10 brands and the vectors for the significant personality attributes. The relationship between each brand and each attribute can be determined by drawing a perpendicular line between the brand centroid and the attribute vector (or an extension of it).
Young adults’ interpretations of tobacco brands

Although participants had no prior experience with most of the brands they reviewed, they nevertheless distinguished between these on the basis of the brands’ names and packaging including color, insignia, and imagery and ascribed very different attributes to them. To explore the basis of these perceptions, we analyzed participants’ qualitative comments and the themes evident in relation to specific brands.

Figure 2 shows the 10 brands divided into four main groups positioned along an older, masculine-younger, feminine continuum (Dimension 1), and an aspirational continuum ranging from budget to cool (Dimension 2). Camel, Kool, and, to a lesser extent, Salem are characterized as “feminine, young, and cool”; by contrast, Port Royal, Merit, and Winston are positioned as “tough, masculine and traditional.” Predictably, Basic is perceived as a “plain, budget” brand, while Holiday is strongly associated with the attribute “relaxing,” demonstrating how a brand name alone can create desirable connotations. Longbeach and Doral (representing a familiar and unfamiliar brand) are positioned close to the origin of the two dimensions; their images are a mixture of conflicting attributes, indicating that respondents drew varying implications about these brands.

Table 1. Tobacco Brand–Attribute Associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Merit, %</th>
<th>Salem, %</th>
<th>Longbeach, %</th>
<th>Basic, %</th>
<th>Port Royal, %</th>
<th>Camel No.9, %</th>
<th>Kool, %</th>
<th>Winston, %</th>
<th>Holiday, %</th>
<th>Doral, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mature</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well off</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trendy</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophisticated</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Popular</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attractive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentle</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean no. associations</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. “Exciting” and “For leaders” are not shown because no brands were associated with these terms by at least 25% of respondents.

Table 2. Discriminant Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Function 1</th>
<th>Function 2</th>
<th>Functions at group centroids</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>0.542</td>
<td>0.909</td>
<td>Holiday 0.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough</td>
<td>−0.977</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>Basic 0.865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>−0.783</td>
<td>−0.085</td>
<td>Camel 0.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>0.412</td>
<td>1.102</td>
<td>Merit −0.873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>−0.995</td>
<td>−0.425</td>
<td>Salem 0.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>0.939</td>
<td>−1.142</td>
<td>Port Royal −1.212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>0.622</td>
<td>0.839</td>
<td>Kool 0.646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxing</td>
<td>0.590</td>
<td>−0.126</td>
<td>Winston −0.773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>−0.792</td>
<td>Longbeach 0.232</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although participants had no prior experience with most of the brands they reviewed, they nevertheless distinguished between these on the basis of the brands’ names and packaging including color, insignia, and imagery and ascribed very different attributes to them. To explore the basis of these perceptions, we analyzed participants’ qualitative comments and the themes evident in relation to specific brands.
Brand Analysis

Participants saw Camel as strongly feminine because of the pack colors:

P1: ‘cause out of all those packets, if I wanted one, like the coolest, I’d like that one.

P2: Yeah, me too.

P1: ‘Cause it’s pink.

P2: And it looks like—yeah. It’s like girly. (F, M, S)

However, this brand also connoted mystery and sophistication, and participants’ comments revealed its carefully constructed ambiguity, which enabled it to appear simultaneously “girly” and edgy. Camel appealed to young women by promising allure, popularity, and a pathway to coolness: “just those ‘girly’ and edgy. Camel appealed to young women by promising allure, popularity, and a pathway to coolness: “just those words and just the pink—pink not necessarily meaning girly, but it’s like hey, stylish look at me, different. And just very little detail . . . it makes you think it’s kind of mysterious” (M, NZE, NS).

This ambiguity extended to smokers’ status; the pack appealed because it projected positive attributes while disguising their engagement in a socially unsanctioned behavior.

P1: It’s sort of obviously more directed at the girls . . . just the black, it’s very simple, very sleek, which is quite sort of younger focused . . . and it’s also not as obviously cigarettes.

I: Is that important?

P1: I think for some people, for professional, young professional people, potentially.

I: Why is it important?

P1: I think because a lot of people don’t necessarily want others to know that they smoke. (F, NZE, NS)

Furthermore, the brand had a fluidity that enabled it to benefit from favorable associations with other nontobacco brands, particularly Chanel No. 5, a high-status brand that conferred considerable cachet on the Camel pack: “I think Camel number 9, well I think Chanel number 5 [M, NZE, NS] and I think it’s girly because it’s like Camel No. 9 like Chanel No. 9 and the whole perfume thing. And . . . that pink and black I think is quite attractive to girls because it’s a bit feminine, bit of, like, black darkness” (F, NZE, S). Participants thought this association made the brand “trendier” and “almost a little bit upper-class, like the whole Chanel No. 5 thing, and now it’s going number 9” (F, NZE, NS).

While Camel epitomized a mysterious femininity, Merit generated very different connotations. Its predominantly white pack and coat of arms were regarded as mature and very masculine imagery:

P1: Never have seen that before. They look like rich people’s smokes.

I: Tell me why you think that.

P1: The horse and the lion and the crown . . . Yeah, older people. (F, M, NS)

Irrespective of their smoking status, gender, or ethnicity, participants consistently interpreted the coat of arms and subtle metallic covering as demonstrating status and success.

P1: . . . oh, the mature and traditional idea I got from like the kind of coat of arms.

I: And what does that say?

P1: Well, in the coat of arms there’s that kind of old-fashioned idea now, and like it’s got like that king thing . . . And the whole idea of silver, I just imagine it’s trying to give the image of it’s like, more expensive anyway, and, it’s more designed for those people who can—oh, the mature, more mature person. . . .

P2: If I were to start smoking . . . and I had no idea what they tasted like, it’d probably be that one, just because like, I’m a bit of a snob so I—I like my things good, but at the same time, y’know, I don’t want to look like an old man, so—that would be—that would be my brand. (M, NZE, NS)

Merit’s imagery evoked some archetypal connotations that participants translated into a modern context:

P1: Mature people . . . I had these little things in my head . . . you know, like those English Lords for some reason.

Merit and education. Like a business man. (F, S)

Participants defined Merit as an aspirational brand that spoke of success and social status, and they differentiated this from Kool, which they saw as communicating quite different values, designed to appeal to teens and underage smokers. They attributed this perception to the spelling of Kool, which reminded them of when they themselves were younger:

P1: I got young, just ‘cause of the name. Like, it’s spelled with a K so it’s—how you spell it when you’re young . . .

Just for me associated it with being 14 again. (F, NZE, S)

However, as well as the immediate connotations arising from the brand name, participants saw Kool as a brand that recognized young people’s need for popularity and their desire to belong to a social group:

P1: Young, popular, like, cool, um, attractive.

I: And what made you think of those words? What was it about that image that made you think of young and popular and attractive?

P1: ‘Cause they’re trying to call the smoke cool . . . and make it for young people to look cool. Because it doesn’t really look like it’s for people much older. (M, P, NS)

P1: Yeah, I just—the cool bit, I think, is trying to get to—to those young kids that want to be cool, or want to be popular. I think it’s—it’s a status sort of thing. (F, NZE, NS)
Unlike Camel and Merit, which had distinct gender appeals, Kool was androgynous and its name, colors, and imagery appealed to an age group rather than a gender.

P1: Um, the double-Os make me think of like, um, kind of like, designer brands, sort of like Chanel or something like that, that young people quite—wear. Um, the colouring, light blue. It’s quite trendy. But I think it’s both—probably more feminine than masculine, but I think—boys would smoke it too. (F, NZE, NZ)

Discussion

Because branding promotes products’ symbolic value, it represents a powerful means of communicating aspirational attributes that individuals may use to develop their self-concept and identify the social groups to which they belong (Scheffels, 2008). As brands hold particular appeal to young adults seeking to define themselves independently, attractive imagery facilitates smoking experimentation (Pollay, 2000). Young people recognize in brands traits they would like to have, thus consuming those brands enables them to access desirable characteristics (Hafez and Ling, 2005). Calls to introduce plain packaging have refocused attention on tobacco branding and its ongoing role in promoting smoking in the face of marketing restrictions (Freeman et al., 2008).

Our findings suggest that, irrespective of the stimulus novelty, young adults differentiated easily between brands when exposed to names and pack imagery only. Furthermore, they defined brands’ attributes and likely markets on the basis of packaging alone, and both smokers and nonsmokers mentioned the appeal some packages held for them. Their comments illustrate how branding attracts attention, generates excitement, and fosters experimentation by promoting smoking as a conduit to desirable attributes.

Tobacco branding represents more than an evocative brand name, although these provided clear signals to our participants. Participants’ comments highlight the role imagery, such as a coat of arms of interlinked letters, play in differentiating brands’ appeal. They also relied heavily on color, both to define likely users and intuit brand attributes. Working in unison, each brand’s constituent components combined to communicate a clear image of mystery, success, or popularity that resonated with a specific target group. Their responses align logically with behavior modification theory, which recognizes the importance of discriminative stimuli, such as brand elements, and the role these play in stimulating and rewarding behavior (Foxall, 1986; Nord and Peter, 1980).

These findings are consistent with consumer behavior and brand association theories (Aaker, 1997; Eadie et al., 1999; Dewhirst and Davis, 2005; Keller, 1993). However, they are strikingly at odds with tobacco companies’ claims that plain packaging would not reduce the appeal, attractiveness, or the uptake of smoking (British American Tobacco, 2010; Philip Morris, 2010; Philip Morris International, 2010). Our results also highlight the discrepancy between the tobacco industry’s internal documents, which reveal the importance of brand imagery and packaging (Pollay, 2000), and their public stance, which disputes the effects of branding and likely benefits of plain packaging.

While our findings highlight considerable diversity in participants’ brand–attribute associations, the study has some limitations. First, the sample size for the study was relatively small. Second, the fact that young adults associate brands with specific attributes does not demonstrate that tobacco branding increases the risk of smoking experimentation or uptake or that plain packaging would reduce these behaviors and prompt cessation (though it does logically suggest both).

A large-scale replication study will be needed to address the first limitation and test the findings outlined above. More specifically, such a study would enable analyses by gender, ethnicity, and smoking status and would provide deeper insights into the relationship between individuals’ characteristics and their attribute associations. These findings will be particularly relevant, given concerns over inequities in smoking prevalence and targeting of specific population groups in New Zealand and elsewhere (Hackbarth, Silvestri, and Cosper, 1995; Māori Affairs Committee, 2010). Analyses by smoking susceptibility will enable assessment of whether current smokers and susceptible nonsmokers hold stronger and more defined brand perceptions and whether generic packages exert stronger aversive effects on these groups.

Despite these limitations, our findings make an important contribution to understanding how tobacco branding works. Even in conditions that required rapid processing and limited deliberation, participants made wide-ranging associations between the brand stimuli and descriptive attributes. Our findings illustrate how imagery differentiates tobacco brands by communicating desirable messages that offer value to particular audiences. The results add to the growing evidence supporting plain packaging and other measures, such as the removal of tobacco retail displays, which would also reduce the exposure of tobacco branding. The results question tobacco industry claims that package branding does not function as advertising and reinforce the need for regulators to reexamine whether current policy meets their FCTC obligations.

Conclusions

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. Although this work requires replication and extension, our results support calls to introduce plain packaging of tobacco, which would remove brand imagery and thus eliminate the role of tobacco packaging in promoting and maintaining smoking.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary file 1 can be found online at http://www.ntr.oxfordjournals.org

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Declaration Of Interests

Although we do not consider it a competing interest, for the sake of full transparency, we note that Gendall, Hoek, Thomson, Edwards, Gifford, Pirrikahu, and McCool have undertaken work for health sector agencies working in tobacco control.

References


Young adults’ interpretations of tobacco brands


