



## Young adult smokers' perceptions of cigarette pack innovation, pack colour and plain packaging

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### ABSTRACT

In jurisdictions where most forms of marketing tobacco are prohibited by law, such as the United Kingdom (UK), the tobacco industry is increasingly turning to innovative packaging to promote their products. Using focus group research we explored perceptions of packaging innovation (including cigarette packs with novel shapes and method of opening), and also plain packaging (all branding removed), among 54 young adult smokers aged 18–35 years, recruited in Glasgow, Scotland. We also examined smokers' perceptions of pack and plain pack colour. It was found that packs with novel methods of opening, for instance, like a lighter or book, were considered to have a negligible impact upon brand selection, particularly among males. However, a small, narrow 'perfume' type pack created enormous interest among females and was perceived very favourably, being considered a fashion accessory and indeed one that helped minimise the health risks of smoking. Coloured plain packs (white, green, light blue, red) without a brand name, any brand descriptors or tar or nicotine levels, were identified by almost all smokers as signalling product strength. Consistent with past research the removal of branding from packs reduced the attractiveness and promotional appeal of the pack, with dark brown 'plain' packs perceived as more unappealing than light brown and dark and light grey packs by all groups. Dark brown non-branded packaging for tobacco products would help reduce the promotional appeal of the pack and ensure that pack colour does not provide consumers with false comfort about the health risks of smoking.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The role of cigarette packaging

As the tobacco industry is denied the use of traditional marketing channels in countries with strong marketing restrictions, the role of packaging in promoting tobacco products has become more prominent. Tobacco companies describe this role to be guiding brand navigation, brand differentiation and inter- and intra-brand competition among adult smokers (JTI, 2008). Packaging performs multiple key roles however and does so much more than simply allow smokers to identify, distinguish and select a brand. The pack can be used to promote the product (via design, innovation, price-marking, and green packaging), mislead consumers, reinforce other marketing activities, and undermine health warnings; the multiple functions of packaging are now described in more detail:

*A Designer:* cigarette pack design is used to attract attention, communicate brand identity, offer symbolic meaning to the user and function as an extension of their personality (O'Kell, 2007). Scheffels (2008) demonstrates how young adult smokers use

packaging design to construct their smoker identities. Pack appearance is used to express individual characteristics, such as personal style, but also to reflect status and communicate social identity, such as being a member of a friendship group or wider community (Scheffels, 2008).

*An Innovator:* creative packaging, such as sliding packs that open horizontally or slim 'perfume' type packs, are being increasingly used to generate consumer interest in markets where other promotional channels have been restricted or prohibited. These types of packs have boosted sales in Russia and the UK (Euromonitor International, 2008; Moodie and Hastings, 2010) and tobacco companies often attribute these successes explicitly to the novel packaging (Moodie and Hastings, 2010).

*A Value communicator:* the pack can be used to communicate value through price-marking (Moodie and Hastings, 2011) which, according to tobacco industry marketing documents, smokers respond to (M&C Saatchi, 1998). Price may be responsible for increased sales but the packaging is the vehicle which communicates this price.

*A Corporate Marketer:* the pack provides a suitable platform to present a company's green credentials, which helps to portray them as responsible corporate citizens. For example, a Du Maurier pack in Canada shows the socially responsible side of Imperial Tobacco, who inform via the pack that 'we have replaced our

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aluminium foil with paper. It keeps the product just as fresh and is now kinder to the environment. Small steps make the difference'.

**A Misleader:** brand descriptors such as Light, Mild and Smooth mislead consumers about the relative harms of smoking (Hammond et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2009). Even when such descriptors are banned, for instance, in New Zealand, tobacco companies use replacement terms such as 'subtle' or 'mellow' (Peace et al., 2009). Even in the absence of such descriptors the marketing literature demonstrates that pack colour alone can affect perceptions of taste and healthiness (Sara, 1990; Hawkes, 2010). This is the result of 'sensation transference', a term coined by marketer Louis Cheskin in the 1930s (Recker and Kathman, 2001), where consumers fail to distinguish between the product and the package but instead transfer feelings about the package to the product itself. Tobacco industry documents reveal that the use of pack colour to communicate reduced harm has been researched extensively, with lighter colours and hues typically used to signify 'healthier' cigarettes (Philip Morris, 1990; The Research Business, 1996; Wakefield et al., 2002).

**A Linker:** packaging is often used to link to, and reinforce, other marketing efforts, such as sponsorship, direct marketing and direct mail (Philip Morris, 1990). Even in countries such as Canada where other forms of marketing are largely banned, packaging can still be used to advertise new brands (Non-Smokers Rights Association, 2009).

**A Distractor:** packaging not only allows tobacco companies to enhance the promotional offering by showcasing design and innovation, which often sets a new standard among consumer products, but in doing so they distract from health warnings.

Tobacco packaging, then, is a multifunctional tool that can promote, deceive and mislead, but even then this fails to do justice to the power of packaging. Tobacco industry marketing documents from the 1990s have gone as far as to equate the pack with the brand; 'Benson and Hedges Filter is defined first and foremost by the GOLD PACK, which quintessentially is the brand' (Colquhoun Associates, 1998). This highlights the importance that tobacco marketers attach to packaging, given that for marketers branding is everything; it allows companies to heighten consumer awareness and develop consumer loyalties and brand extensions (Pren-dergast and Marr, 1995), with the pack capable of this in isolation.

### 1.2. Plain (non-branded) tobacco packaging

A possible regulatory option to prevent tobacco packaging being used to attract and mislead consumers is plain packaging (Freeman et al., 2008), which involves, at least within the wider marketing literature, the removal of branding from packaging (Robinson et al., 2007). A review of the literature shows that research has consistently found plain packaging to be less attractive than branded packaging and less likely to mislead consumers in respect to product strength, with health warnings on plain packs more salient (Moodie et al., 2009).

### 1.3. Study aims

We know, then, that branded tobacco packaging is a key marketing tool, and that removing this branding significantly reduces the power of the pack. However, there remain a number of gaps in the packaging/plain packaging literature. First, no research has explored adult smokers' perceptions of recent pack innovations, e.g., packs that slide open or open like books or are shaped like perfume packs. Similarly, no research has explored smokers' perceptions of plain packs that vary by shape or method of opening; therefore failing to capture recent packaging trends. Indeed, few packaging studies even use real cigarette packs or plain packs, with most relying on pictures or images on computer screens (Hammond, 2008). Second,

although lighter cigarette pack colours are perceived by consumers to have lower levels of tar and less of a health risk (Hammond and Parkinson, 2009; Hammond et al., 2009), it is unclear whether this is the result of pack colour alone or partly or wholly due to the brand names or pack descriptors that appear on these packs; for the latter it has been firmly established that pack descriptors confuse and mislead consumers (Wilson et al., 2009). Third, although the literature suggests that brown and grey are appropriate colours for plain packaging (Hammond, 2008; Gallopel-Morvan et al., 2010), there is an absence of research exploring smokers' perceptions of different shades of brown and grey.

Given the aforementioned gaps in the literature, we extend existing research by exploring smokers' perceptions of pack innovation, plain packaging, and pack and plain pack colour.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Design and sample

The study comprised eight focus groups with 54 young adult smokers, aged 18–35 years. To gain insight into smokers' perceptions of packaging, whether branded or plain, and allow them to feel and handle cigarette packs, as they would normally do, focus group research was considered the most appropriate study design. We used young adult smokers because in the UK they have high levels of smoking prevalence (NHS Information Centre, 2009), and tobacco industry marketing documents reveal 18–35 year olds to be a key target group because of the importance they attach to brand image (Leading Edge, 1997; M&C Saatchi, 1998). All participants were recruited in January 2010 in one lower income and one higher income area of Glasgow (Scotland) by trained market researchers. Each group had six or seven participants and was segmented by gender, age (18–24, 25–35), social grade (ABC1, C2DE) and heaviness of smoking (light/moderate smokers and heavy smokers), see Table 1. We defined light/moderate smokers as those who smoke less than 20 cigarettes a day and heavy smokers as those who smoke more than 20 cigarettes a day (ONS, 2011).

### 2.2. Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Focus groups were held in a hotel function room or community hall and were moderated by one or both the authors. A semi-structured approach was employed to allow the same topics to be discussed across groups whilst permitting a degree of flexibility, and allowing issues to be explored in greater depth (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999). Participants provided consent prior to arrival and at the start of the group were informed about confidentiality, the right to withdraw and the right not to respond to any question (Brown and Moodie, in press).

Each focus group began with general questions to elicit information about smoking behaviour, brand smoked and general

**Table 1**

Sample composition of focus groups; number, gender, age, social grade and heaviness of smoking.

Group	Number	Gender	Age	Social grade	Heaviness of smoking
1	6	Male	18–24	ABC1	Light/moderate smoker
2	7	Female	18–24	C2DE	Light/moderate smoker
3	7	Male	25–34	C2DE	Light/moderate smoker
4	7	Female	25–34	ABC1	Light/moderate smoker
5	6	Male	18–24	C2DE	Heavy smoker
6	7	Female	18–24	ABC1	Heavy smoker
7	7	Male	25–34	ABC1	Heavy smoker
8	7	Female	25–34	C2DE	Heavy smoker

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