



## Original article

## The Effect of Cigarette Branding and Plain Packaging on Female Youth in the United Kingdom

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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Cigarette packaging is the most prominent form of tobacco marketing remaining in countries such as the United Kingdom. The current study examined perceptions of cigarette packaging among female youth and the potential impact of “plain” cigarette packaging regulations.

**Methods:** A national sample of 947 16- to 19-year-old female subjects in the United Kingdom completed an online survey. Participants were randomized to view 10 cigarette packs designed according to one of four experimental conditions: fully branded female packs, the same packs without descriptor words, the same packs without brand imagery or descriptors (“plain” packs), and branded non-female brands. Participants rated packs on measures of appeal and health risk, positive smoker image, and completed a behavioral pack selection task.

**Results:** Plain packs were rated as the least appealing and worse tasting compared with all other conditions. Plain packs were also associated with fewer false beliefs about health risks compared with branded packs. Removing brand descriptors from packs significantly reduced measures of appeal and taste, particularly for brands with flavor descriptors, such as cherry and vanilla. Plain packs were significantly less likely to be associated with positive images, such as glamour, sophistication, and slimness. Most importantly, respondents were significantly less likely to accept a pack of cigarettes when offered only plain versus branded packs ( $p = .026$ ).

**Conclusions:** Marketing in the form of pack branding remains a potent tool for increasing the appeal of tobacco products to young women. The findings provide empirical support for plain cigarette packaging regulations in Australia to be implemented in 2012.

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IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION

The current study indicates that package branding promotes the appeal of tobacco products to young women at the critical age during which smoking initiation occurs. The findings provide additional support for Australia's plain packaging legislation, as well as the U.K. Department of Health's ongoing consultation on plain packaging of cigarettes [24].

Tobacco industry analysts have recently referred to women as the “sleeping giant of the tobacco market” (p. 29) [1]. Globally, an estimated 250 million women currently smoke. However, prevalence is projected to increase in the coming decades, primarily driven by increases in low- and middle-income countries [2].

In the United Kingdom, tobacco use among women increased dramatically after World War II and peaked at 44% in 1970 [3].

Currently, 20% of women in the United Kingdom smoke, including 31% of 20–24 year olds [4]. The smoking-related disease burden among U.K. women continues to increase, given the lag between smoking onset and the onset of many smoking-related diseases.

Young women and youth are an important target group for tobacco industry marketing [5]. In countries with comprehensive restrictions on advertising such as the United Kingdom, packaging is the most prominent form of marketing. In the United Kingdom, 11–16 year olds report high levels of awareness of tobacco marketing within retail outlets [6], a characteristic that has been associated with greater brand awareness and susceptibility to smoking [7], similar to findings in other jurisdictions [8].

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Although female-oriented packaging has been on the market for decades, there has been a recent proliferation of overtly female brands on the European market [5]. Brands and packaging can create positive lifestyle associations with fashion, sophistication, empowerment, femininity, wealth, freedom, and even weight reduction [5]. For example, “slim” brands marketed in tall narrow packs with names such as Vogue capitalize on associations with the fashion industry and slimness. The package also highlights product characteristics, including appealing flavors and design features characteristic of ostensibly “lower tar” or “light” brands marketed to young women.

Previous research has shown that packaging is associated with false health beliefs [9]. Brands labeled as “smooth” and those with lighter colors are perceived as less harmful than “regular” brands or those with darker colors [10]. Pack color and branding are particularly important with respect to establishing brand appeal among youth [11–16]. At least one study has shown that pack branding increases beliefs that smoking helps people control their appetite, an important predictor of smoking among young women [15].

In December 2012, Australia will become the first country in the world to prohibit brand logos and imagery from appearing on cigarette packages. Under the so-called “plain packaging” regulations, packs would display the brand name in a regulated font style and size, printed against a dark olive brown background [17]. The pack size and shape would also be standardized, as would the appearance and color of cigarette sticks themselves. Health warnings and tax stamps would remain on packages as required by the government.

Evidence to date indicates that young women perceive “plain” packs as less attractive and engaging [15,16]. Plain packaging may also reduce false beliefs about the relative risk of cigarette brands and enhance the effectiveness of health warnings by increasing their noticeability, recall, and believability [11,18,19].

The current study examined perceptions of cigarette packaging among young women in the United Kingdom. The study sought to examine the impact of plain packaging on (1) perceptions of appeal, taste, tar delivery, and health; (2) positive smoker traits or characteristics; and (3) a behavioral measure of whether respondents would accept a pack offer.

## Methods

### Participants and recruitment

Participants consisted of 947 young women between the ages of 16 and 19 years, including both smokers and nonsmokers. Participants were recruited from a consumer panel with a reach of more than 300,000 individuals through Global Market Insight, Inc. (Bellevue, WA; <http://www.gmi-mr.com/global-panel/>). E-mail invitations were sent to parents or guardians, who then gave consent for their child to complete the survey. Invitations did not indicate the nature or purpose of the study. Participants were provided with remuneration of approximately \$2. This study received full clearance from the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo.

### Protocol

A between-group experiment was conducted in which participants were randomized to one of four experimental conditions.

Within each condition, participants viewed 10 cigarette packages presented one at a time in random order. Packs within each condition were designed to display characteristics of the experimental condition: (1) “standard” fully branded female-oriented packages; (2) female-oriented packages with brand imagery and colors, but without descriptors (i.e., “slims”); (3) female-oriented packages without brand imagery and descriptors (i.e., “plain” packages); and (4) popular U.K. brands of “regular” or non-female-oriented packages (Figure 1). Participants were asked to rate each pack on four brand ratings and seven “smoker trait” questions (described later in the text). Packs were displayed on the screen while participants answered each question, and participants could view the packs for as long as they wished before answering.

**Selection of packages.** The 10 “female-oriented” brands were selected based on previous research [15]. Brands were purposefully selected to examine the descriptors superslims, menthol, frost, silver, pink, purple, blue, cherry, vanilla, and arome, as well as “traditional” female color schemes, such as pink and white (Figure 1). Female-oriented packaging was modified according to the experimental condition, as shown in Figure 1. Condition 4 included leading varieties of non-female-oriented “male” packages as a control condition.

### Measures

**Sociodemographic variables and moderators.** Education level, income, and ethnicity were assessed using previously validated measures [20]. Education was categorized as “low” (primary school or some secondary school), “medium” (completed secondary school), or “high” (some university and higher). Smokers were defined as respondents who reported smoking daily, weekly, or monthly. Nonsmokers were defined as respondents who reported smoking less than monthly or not at all. Age was recoded into two categories: older than the legal age for purchasing cigarettes (18–19 years old) and younger than the legal age for purchasing cigarettes (16–17 years old). Ethnicity was measured as “white,” “Asian/Asian British,” “black/black British,” “Chinese,” “mixed,” and “other,” and recoded as “white” versus “other” for the analyses. An index of smoking and weight control beliefs (Cronbach  $\alpha = .74$ ) was calculated from three measures: (1) “Smoking helps people stay slim,” (2) “Quitting smoking causes weight gain,” and (3) “Smoking helps people control their appetites,” using a 5-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

**Brand ratings.** Participants were asked to rate each package on four measures: (1) brand appeal (“How appealing is this brand of cigarettes compared to other brands on the market?”); (2) brand taste (“How do you think these cigarettes would taste, compared to other brands?”); (3) tar delivery (“How much tar do you think these cigarettes would have compared to other brands?”); and (4) health risks (“Compared to other cigarette brands on the market, would these cigarettes be ... less/more harmful”). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = “A lot more appealing” to 5 = “A lot less appealing”) and subsequently coded as either a 1 (“a little”/“a lot more appealing”) or 0 (“a little”/“a lot less appealing” and “no difference”). An overall index rating was created for each of the four measures, by summing scores across the 10 packages to yield a score between 0 and 10.

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