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Original Research

From directive to practice: are pictorial warnings and plain packaging effective to reduce the tobacco addiction?



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Tobacco packaging represents an important form of promotion of tobacco products and for this reason plain packaging (PP) can be considered an additional tobacco control measure. In Italy the current tobacco packaging is branded with textual warnings. The study investigated the perception of PP with textual warnings (PPTWs) and pictorial warnings (PPPWs) in Italy.

Study design: Cross-sectional.

Methods: The study was conducted on adults who were current, never and former smokers. The participants watched out three types of packages (current packaging, PPTWs and PPPWs) and eight pictorial warnings, and indicated which they considered the most effective ones to motivate smoking cessation or reduction and to prevent the onset.

Results: 1065 subjects were recruited. The PPPWs were considered the most effective in motivating to quit, reduce and prevent the smoking habits (ranged 83.4%–96.1%) in all tobacco users and age groups (≤ 40 / >40 years) ($P < 0.005$). In general PP does not seem to be very effective in quitting for three-quarters of the smokers and 60% declared that they would have still started smoking with PP. The younger group believed less than the older one that PP gives a motivation to quit (29.4% vs 39.1%, $P = 0.002$). The pictures perceived as most effective in communicating the smoking effects were lung cancer and gangrene (about one-third of the sample).

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Conclusions: The textual warnings on tobacco products are a measure of control now outdated. Countries still using them should consider the idea of replace them with pictorial warnings that seem to be more effective. It is also desirable in the near future that these countries introduce the PPPWs.

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Introduction

Tobacco producers packaging is an important tool for developing market strategies and it is basically the only communication channel still available, since in many countries advertising on media and sponsorship of events have been banned.¹ Tobacco industries use packaging to spread the brand and to approach new targets (e.g. young women) and for these reasons packages of tobacco products rise to topic of discussion between tobacco companies and public health authorities.² In order to control tobacco consumption WHO pinpoints the interventions on packaging label as one of the most effective measures to be adopted.³ Packaging may become the most effective tool in communicating health risk related to tobacco smoke and in promoting tobacco free behaviours through interventions targeted to inform the population and to limit the visibility of brands and symbols of tobacco companies.

In addition, the appeal standardization (plain packaging, PP) of tobacco product has contributed to improve the power of these messages. Thus PP might reduce acute (hedonic) craving and is associated with more negative perceptions than branded packaging with less prominent health warnings.^{4–6}

Currently worldwide two main modalities are used to communicate the health warnings on the packages: textual and graphic. Even if the introduction of textual warning in Italy increased awareness of tobacco related diseases in the population, pictorial warnings seem to be more effective in communicating risks.^{7,8}

The introduction of Pictorial Warnings (PWs), in fact, enhances the effect of textual warnings (TWs). Graphic depictions of tobacco-related disease are perceived by youth and adults as the most effective warning theme,^{9,4} in particular for less known health effects such as gangrene, impotence, and stroke.¹⁰

In Italy the current tobacco packages are branded with textual warnings,¹¹ and this research focuses on the possibility to change the packaging look: plain packaging with health pictorial warnings (PPPWs) and plain packaging with textual warnings (PPTWs).

This study represents the conclusion, with an expanded sample size ($N = 1065$), of a project started in 2011 to fill a gap in the national research on this topic.

Aims of this research are to confirm the findings of the pilot study¹² thus evaluating:

- the perceived effectiveness of PPPWs in comparison with PPTWs for the outcomes assessed (avoid smoking start, motivate to quit and reduce tobacco consumption);
- the level of perceived effectiveness of PP without pictograms in preventing start smoking, motivating to quit and reducing consumption;

- the impact of demographic characteristics and of smoking habits on packaging label's perception;
- the perceived effectiveness of eight different pictograms in communicating the smoking-related health problems.

Methods

Study design and setting

The study design is cross-sectional. The STROBE guidelines were followed to conduct the research and to present the results.¹³

This study was carried out in 2012–2013 in eight Italian cities (Rome, Carrara, Cassino, Palermo, Siena, Salerno, Turin, Varese). Participants aged over 18 years were recruited on a voluntary basis. All participants were asked to complete a face-to-face interview by using a questionnaire, validated in a pilot study.¹² The interviews were conducted in waiting rooms of different clinics in the hospitals of the cities involved and university spaces (gardens, cafeterias, classrooms, etc.).

Questionnaire

Data on sociodemographic variables (age, gender, marital status, residence, educational level and occupation) were collected.

Smoking status was measured by asking whether participants had ever smoked. Participants were grouped into three categories; never smokers, current smokers and former smokers.

Smokers were defined as those who had smoked at least 100 cigarettes in their lifetime, and those who had smoked at least one cigarette per day at the time of the survey. Former smokers were defined as individuals who had quit smoking at least one month prior to the survey and those who had smoked at least one cigarette per day, prior to quitting. Those who did not meet the above criteria were categorized as never smokers.¹⁴

Participants were interviewed on their opinion on the impact of packaging look on smoking behaviours.

An image with three different types of packaging (Fig. 1) was shown to the participants and three questions were asked in order to measure the most effective images in convincing not to start smoking, to quit, and to reduce the consumption.

In addition, opinions on the possible impact of the plain package on smoking prevention and motivation to quit were asked:

- May help to prevent smoking start?
- May help to quit smoking?

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