



## Smoke signals: The decline of brand identity predicts reduced smoking behaviour following the introduction of plain packaging



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### ABSTRACT

This study tests a social identity based mechanism for the effectiveness of plain tobacco packaging legislation, introduced in Australia in December 2012, to reduce cigarette smoking. 178 Australian smokers rated their sense of identification with fellow smokers of their brand, positive brand stereotypes, quitting behaviours and intentions, and smoking intensity, both before and seven months after the policy change. Mediation analyses showed that smokers, especially those who initially identified strongly with their brand, experienced a significant decrease in their brand identity following the introduction of plain packaging and this was associated with lower smoking behaviours and increased intentions to quit. The findings provide the first quantitative evidence that brand identities may help maintain smoking behaviour, and suggest the role of social-psychological processes in the effectiveness of public health policy.

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Tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death globally and kills at least 5 million people each year (Jha & Peto, 2014). We might expect that selling a product that causes death on this scale would be difficult, and yet tobacco companies continue to sell their products with breathtaking success. To better understand how they do this, the introduction of plain tobacco packaging in Australia in 2012 provided an opportunity to test a novel, social identity explanation for the power of tobacco branding.

From 1 December 2012, Australia became the first country in the world to implement plain-packaging legislation, whereby all Australian tobacco products were legally required to be sold with drab-olive packaging as well as larger graphic health warning labels. The policy was implemented with the aim of encouraging smokers to quit and discouraging the uptake of smoking. While evaluations of this world-first policy are ongoing, early indications are that the reform is achieving some success. During the phase-in of the reforms, smokers exposed to plain packaging placed greater urgency on quitting compared to smokers who had not yet purchased any plain pack cigarettes (Wakefield, Hayes, Durkin, & Borland, 2013). The number of calls to a local quit helpline also increased by up to 78% and an above-average call rate was observed for approximately 10 months after the reforms

were introduced (Young et al., 2014). Emerging evidence has tended to support the effectiveness of the plain-packaging legislation in increasing quit intentions and reducing smoking intensity (Durkin et al., 2015; Wakefield et al., 2015).

Experimental and observational simulation studies, comparing regular and mocked-up plain packaged cigarettes, provide evidence for a number of mechanisms to help explain these early impacts (for a review, see Stead et al., 2013). Specifically, plain packaging may reduce false beliefs that certain brands are less harmful and may, as a function of reduced distraction, make health warning labels more salient and so encourage established smokers to quit out of concern for their health (Brennan et al., 2015; Yong et al., 2015). There is also consistent evidence that plain packaging reduces pack, product and user appeal, although some researchers argue that this is only likely to deter smoking uptake (especially among youth) and weakly addicted smokers from continuing (Pechey, Spiegelhalter, & Marteau, 2013).

While these mechanisms related to cognitive processing are no doubt important, they may understate the symbolic power of brand identities and brand stereotypes in maintaining smoking behaviour. Such symbolic power has been observed in several qualitative studies of tobacco branding (Fry, Grogan, Gough, & Conner, 2008; Hoek et al., 2012; Scheffels, 2008). For instance, an experimental simulation study of socially disadvantaged established adult smokers found that plain packaging significantly reduced the appeal of a value-for-money cigarette brand, but made no difference to the appeal of a premium brand (Guillaumier, Bonevski, Paul, Durkin, & D'Este, 2014). The authors

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speculated that plain packaging may have stronger effects if the brand is personally relevant to the smoker, but could not confirm this because they did not conceptualise or measure personal relevance. Finally, tobacco industry documents show that companies develop explicit marketing strategies that seek to maintain and grow sales by creating meaningful identities through tobacco brands (Fellows & Rubin, 2006).

From a social psychological perspective, this use of cigarette branding reflects the industry's grasp of the identity processes that explain much of our consumer behaviour (Oyserman, 2009). According to the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) a person's self-concept is informed by their psychological group memberships (e.g., I am Australian, I am a scientist, I am a Manchester United fan). Moreover, people are likely to identify with a social category when that category reflects positively on the self. For example, a smoker who identifies as a 'Winboro Man' does not just regularly purchase Winboro tobacco, but also derives a positive sense of who he is by belonging to that social category.

Tobacco brand identities may now be more important than ever in maintaining smoking. In the past, the category "smoker" was viewed quite favourably (Klein, 1995). However many countries, including Australia, have since enacted 'denormalisation' policies (e.g. graphic anti-smoking advertisements) aimed at publicly stigmatising smokers (Chapman & Freeman, 2008). Smokers are now viewed by many as unhealthy (Kim & Shanahan, 2003), unattractive (Chapman, Wakefield, & Durkin, 2004), and even dirty (Farrimond & Joffe, 2006). One of a number of possible responses to such devaluation (Jetten, Schmitt, Branscombe, Garza, & Mewse, 2011) is for smokers to identify not (just) as a smoker, but as a smoker of a particular brand (Hoek et al., 2012; Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). Doing so deflects the negative connotations of the superordinate category (dirty etc.) and may help to define the self with more positive content (e.g. 'Winboro Woman' can be sassy, independent and minty fresh).

Speaking to this point, there is some evidence that social identification as a 'user' of a particular substance, or with social groups where use of that substance is normative, is a barrier to recovery from addiction (Buckingham, Frings, & Albery, 2013; Dingle, Stark, Cruwys, & Best, 2015). There is also evidence that people can derive a sense of belonging and positive esteem from their social networks of substance users (Dingle, Cruwys & Frings, 2015). However, social identity processes have not been investigated in the context of cigarette brand identity or as a mechanism for the effectiveness of public health policy more generally.

Until the recent Australian policy change, branded packaging was the only avenue left to observe and enact one's brand identity, because all other tobacco advertising has been banned in Australia since 1992. Consequently, plain packaging is likely to further divest a brand of its symbolic meanings and associations (Stead et al., 2013). We would therefore predict that, following the introduction of plain packaging, smokers will identify less with their cigarette brand and will less strongly endorse positive stereotypes about their brand (Hypothesis 1). Further, if positive brand identity helps maintain smoking (Hoek et al., 2012) we would expect that reductions in brand identification will be associated with lower smoking behaviours (Hypothesis 2). These effects should be observed even after controlling for other factors thought to affect the early impacts of plain packaging in the Australian context, such as the larger and potentially more salient health warning labels and smokers' prior addiction levels.

Finally, a social identity perspective would suggest a different impact of plain packaging depending on the level of social identification with the cigarette brand. Specifically, those smokers who highly identify with their cigarette brand, who might typically be less likely to quit, may paradoxically be most affected by the implementation of plain packaging. This is because it is these smokers in particular who would be liable to lose the positive brand identity that is maintaining their smoking behaviour (Hypothesis 3).

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants and design

In the three months prior to the introduction of plain packaging legislation (between 21 September and 14 November 2012), Australians over the age of 18 who smoked branded cigarettes at least daily were invited, via online discussion forums and noticeboards, to complete a 15–20 min online survey about "social factors influencing smoking" in exchange for a AUD\$10 voucher. Following this Wave 1 (W1) survey, participants were sent an email invite to complete a follow-up Wave 2 (W2) survey approximately six months after the introduction of plain packaging (May 2013), in exchange for another \$10 voucher. W1 participants were not eligible if they (1) did not smoke branded cigarettes daily, (2) reported having already purchased plain packaged tobacco or (3) if they quit prior to December 1, 2012. From a final eligible sample at W1 of 261 (112 females), 178 (85 females) responded to the W2 survey. Further sample details are provided in Table 1.

### 1.2. Materials and procedure

In W1, smokers were asked to indicate which brand they smoked most often. At W2, participants who smoked at least a puff during the past week, were reminded of their previously preferred brand (automatically coded to appear in each participant's individual survey) and were asked if they still smoked this brand most often. Participants who indicated that they no longer smoked this brand most often were asked to indicate which brand they now smoked most often.

#### 1.2.1. Positive brand stereotypes

Three items drawn from research on plain packaging (Wakefield, Germain, & Durkin, 2008) were used to assess positive brand stereotypes at W1. Participants rated their level of agreement on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale: "I feel that a typical smoker of (brand) is": "trendy/stylish"; "confident/successful"; and "sophisticated" ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

#### 1.2.2. Brand identification

At W1, participants rated 7 items indicating their identification with their preferred brand on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These items were programmed so that smokers' previously selected brands were automatically incorporated into questionnaire wording. Scale items were based on widely used measures of identification with a social group (Leach et al., 2008; Postmes, Haslam, & Jans, 2012), for example "I feel a bond with other (brand) smokers", "I identify with the group of (brand) smokers", ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). At W2, all participants were asked the same questions.

**Table 1**

Characteristics of W2 responders and non-responders and independent samples *t*-tests (chi-square tests) to assess differential attrition.

	Responded to W2	N	Mean (%)	Std. deviation	<i>p</i>
W1 brand identification	No	83	3.69	1.23	0.37
	Yes	178	3.55	1.16	
W1HSI	No	83	2.07	1.44	0.32
	Yes	178	2.27	1.51	
Age	No	83	28.98	10.18	<0.001
	Yes	178	34.80	12.90	
Index of relative socio-economic disadvantage	No	83	1015.73	127.82	0.18
	Yes	178	1035.31	101.68	
Gender (male)	Yes	83	(67.5)		<0.01
	No	178	(50.6)		
Completed university	Yes	83	(28.9)		0.26
	No	178	(36.0)		
Intend to quit in next 6 months (%)	No	83	(75.0)		0.64
	Yes	178	(72.0)		

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