



Does the hand that controls the cigarette packet rule the smoker? Findings from ethnographic interviews with smokers in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA



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ABSTRACT

Throughout the twentieth century, packaging was a carefully cultivated element of the appeal of the cigarette. However, the tobacco industry's control over cigarette packaging has been steadily eroded through legislation that aims to rebrand the packet from a desirable to a dangerous commodity—epitomized in Australia's introduction of plain packaging in 2012. Evident in both the enactment of cigarette packaging legislation and industry efforts to overturn it is the assumption that packets *do* things—i.e. that they have a critical role to play in either promoting or discouraging the habit. Drawing on 175 ethnographic interviews conducted with people smoking in public spaces in Vancouver, Canada; Canberra, Australia; Liverpool, England; and San Francisco, USA, we produce a 'thick description' of smokers' engagements with cigarette packets. We illustrate that despite the very different types of cigarette packaging legislation in place in the four countries, there are marked similarities in the ways smokers engage with their packets. In particular, they are not treated as a purely visual sign; instead, a primary means through which one's own cigarette packet is apprehended is by touch rather than by sight. Smokers perceive cigarette packets largely through the operations of their hands—through their 'handiness'. Thus, our study findings problematize the assumption that how smokers engage with packets when asked to do so on a purely intellectual or aesthetic level reflects how they engage with packets as they are enfolded into their everyday lives.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Branding cigarette packets

The cigarette packet has long been a cultivated element of its allure—from the gleaming case of Benson and Hedges' premium 'Gold' brand to the rugged masculine appeal of Marlboros and the feminine refinement of Virginia Slims. Clearly evident in accounts about the industry and industry accounts themselves is the power—the 'charisma'—of branding (Pottage, 2013). The marketing 'guru' Louis Cheskin, responsible for the iconic Marlboro Man,

labeled this effect "sensation transference", which occurs when "the auratic effects of the branded package are translated into innate qualities of the product" (cited in Pottage, 2013, p. 544). Thus, as the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library attests, the cigarette packet formed an intensive (and fetishized) focus of industry research throughout the twentieth century (Hastings et al., 2008).

The tobacco industry maintained complete control over cigarette packaging until 1965, when the USA Federal Cigarette Labeling Act required cigarette cartons and packets to carry the textual warning "Caution: Cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health". Following the US lead, in subsequent decades many other countries introduced requirements that cigarette packets carry warning labels. However, a decisive shift occurred in 2001, when Canada became the first country in the world to introduce graphic (text- and picture-based) warning labels on cigarette packets.

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Although the legislation was ostensibly designed to inform smokers about the health effects of smoking, its purpose was clearly *persuasive* as well as *informational*. In other words, Health Canada explicitly recognized the potential of graphic warning labels to market the concept of reducing tobacco consumption, as well as promulgating factual information about the health effects of smoking (Health Canada, 2000).

In conjunction with an array of other countries, Australia followed suit in implementing graphic warning labels in 2006 and the UK in 2008. However, such efforts subsequently stalled in the USA, after the Food and Drug Administration announced its intended graphic warning labels in 2011. A legal challenge by the tobacco industry was mounted, centering on precisely the issue of the ‘informational’ versus ‘advertising’ dimensions of the proposed labels, and was instrumental to the ruling in its favor. According to the presiding District Judge, Richard Leon: “It is abundantly clear from viewing these images that the emotional response they were crafted to induce is calculated to provoke the viewer to quit, or never to start smoking—an objective wholly apart from disseminating purely factual and uncontroversial information” (Reinberg, 2012). Although the Court of Appeals has since overturned the ruling, the legislation is currently in limbo.

The notion that packets could be enrolled into the service of an anti-tobacco agenda in much the same way that they had previously served a pro-tobacco one was repeated—and dramatically extended—in Australia’s implementation of world-first ‘plain’ packaging in December 2012. The assumption underpinning this legislation is that unbranded cigarette packets reduce the appeal of smoking, increase the salience of health warnings and correct misperceptions about the harms of tobacco use, thereby decreasing the number of young people who start smoking and increasing the number of people who quit (Dennis, 2013; McKeganey and Russell, 2015). However, as Chapman and Freeman (2014, p. xiii) observe, “there is nothing plain about Australia’s plain packs”, which are now dominated by hard-hitting anti-smoking appeals that take up 90% of the front of the packet and 75% of the back. This feature figured centrally in the (unsuccessful) complaint mounted by the tobacco industry in its submissions to the Australian High Court challenging the legality of the legislation. In the court case, the packet was described as “occupied” and “conscripted” to serve the Commonwealth government’s purposes, thereby effectively overriding the industry’s proprietary rights (Pottage, 2013, p. 521). Although the tobacco industry is pursuing various legal routes to dismantle the legislation, its lack of success has spurred other countries into considering plain packaging and the UK government has since announced its intention to implement similar legislation, which is due to go into effect in May 2016.

1.2. The agency of objects

Evident in both the enactment of cigarette packaging legislation and industry efforts to overturn it is the assumption that packets do things. In the view of mainstream tobacco control, a packet freed from industry branding and refurbished with ‘hard-hitting’ anti-smoking messages discourages purchase. In the event that cigarettes are acquired, the packet reinforces the dangers of smoking for the duration of its life, thereby presumably affecting future purchasing behavior. According to Fong (2001, p. 2), “An individual who smokes one pack per day, for example, is potentially exposed to the health warning 7300 times in a single year”. This view is endorsed by the World Health Organization (2011), which notes: “prominent health warning labels ... provide the most direct health messages to smokers and potentially reach smokers every time they purchase or consume tobacco products” (p. 22–23, emphasis added). As this statement suggests, there is a clear recognition of

the ways in which the traditional ‘power’ of the package to shape how smokers interpret its contents may be *disrupted* and *redirected* to serve the interests of tobacco control rather than the tobacco industry.

Despite the diametrically opposed agendas of these two entities, both groups share the assumption that the branded aesthetics of the cigarette packet (of either danger or desire, depending on who is in charge) shape smokers’ responses to its content. In both scenarios, the packet is deemed to have a degree of *agency*—an agency that is sometimes seen to subsume or override that of the smoker. Thus, if the ‘Modern Constitution’ is based on a conceptual divide between humans and non-humans (Latour, 1993), branding and advertising are areas where it clearly breaks down. As Cronin (2004) observes, the imagined animation of commodities troubles distinctions between the categories of ‘person’ and ‘thing’. For example, in a 2008 commentary on plain packaging, Hastings, Gallopel-Morvan and Rey state: “It is abundantly clear that young people are drawn into smoking by branding and that liveried packs play an *active role* in this process” (p. 361, emphasis added). In such framings, the industry-branded packet becomes a “silent salesman” (Chantler, 2014, p. 4; Chapman and Freeman, 2014, p. 35) that enacts a “poisonous seduction” against “susceptible” minds (Hastings et al., 2008, p. 361), with an unbranded (or rebranded) packet logically seen to reverse these effects.

In this paper we take seriously the idea of the agency of objects, but in ways rather different from such representations of cigarette packaging. As Latour (2005, p. 71) observes,

there is hardly any doubt that kettles ‘boil’ water, knives [sic] ‘cut’ meat, baskets ‘hold’ provisions, hammers ‘hit’ nails on the head, rails ‘keep’ kids from falling, locks ‘close’ rooms against uninvited visitors, soap ‘takes’ the dirt away, schedules ‘list’ class sessions, price tags ‘help’ people calculating, and so on ... This, of course, does not mean that baskets ‘cause’ the fetching of provisions or that hammers ‘impose’ the hitting of the nail.

The highly politicized context of cigarette packaging legislation has clearly been instrumental to such framings, given the need for a clear and compelling policy narrative about the effects of branding. However, there are “many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence” (Latour, 2005, p. 72). Indeed, claims about the efficacy of branding do not unambiguously translate into changes in product sales (Cronin, 2004)—as recent debates about the impact of plain packaging in Australia attest (see McKeganey and Russell, 2015). Following Cronin (2004, p. 63), we would suggest that the truth of such effects is indeterminate “and ultimately less significant than the discursive work to which claims about those effects are put”.

In what follows, we take the view that cigarette packets are both material products and mobile signs, and we are interested in their “complex, protean and only half-appreciated” social lives (Cronin, 2004, pp. 3–4). With this in mind, we attend closely to the *experienced* (as opposed to *assumed*) relationships forged between cigarette smokers and packets based on ethnographic interviews conducted in Vancouver, Canada; Canberra, Australia; Liverpool, England; and San Francisco, USA. In conducting this research, our goal was to try to understand how people engage with cigarette packets in the context of smoking itself in aid of producing a ‘thick(er) description’ (Geertz, 1973) of this phenomenon than has dominated studies of cigarette packaging to date.

2. The study and setting

Between October 2013 and March 2015, we carried out *in situ* interviews with people smoking in public spaces at the four

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