Effects of the *truth FinishIt* brand on tobacco outcomes

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Since 2000, the *truth* campaign has grown as a social marketing brand. Back then, *truth* employed branding to compete directly with the tobacco industry. In 2014, the launch of *truth FinishIt* reflected changes in the brand's strategy, the tobacco control environment, and youth/young adult behavior.

Building on a previous validation study, the current study examined brand equity in *truth FinishIt*, as measured by validated multi-dimensional scales, and tobacco related attitudes, beliefs, and behavior based on two waves of the Truth Longitudinal Cohort data from 2015 and 2016. A fixed effects logistic regression was used to estimate the change in brand equity between panel survey waves 3 and 4 on past 30-day smoking among ever and current smokers. Additional models determined the effects of brand equity predicting tobacco attitudes/use at follow up among the full sample. All analyses controlled for demographic factors.

A one-point increase in the brand equity scale between the two waves was associated with a 66% greater chance of not smoking among ever smokers (OR 1.66, CI 1.11–2.48, $p < 0.05$) and an 80% greater chance of not smoking among current smokers (OR 1.80, CI 1.05–3.10, $p < 0.05$). Higher overall *truth* brand equity at wave 3 predicted less smoking at wave 4 and more positive anti-tobacco attitudes. Being male, younger, and non-white predicted some of the tobacco related attitudes.

Future research should examine long-term effects of brand equity on tobacco use and how tobacco control can optimize the use of branding in campaigns.

1. Introduction

While teen smoking of combustible cigarettes has declined over nearly two decades (Johnston et al., 2017), it remains at unacceptable levels. Tobacco use continues to be the single leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004) As much as $170 billion is spent per year on direct tobacco-related medical care for adults (Xu et al., 2015). In 2015, 32% of students in grades 9–12 had tried cigarette smoking (even one or two puffs) (Kann et al., 2016). Even worse, based on data from the National Youth Tobacco Surveys, in 2015, it was estimated that 4.7 million middle and high school students were current users of any tobacco product, including the > 2.3 million who used two or more tobacco products (Singh et al., 2016). If the rate of youth smoking continues at the current rate, it is projected that 5.6 million Americans younger than 18 years of age will die prematurely

from a smoking-related illness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). As a result, major tobacco control organizations call for interventions to eliminate teen and young adult cigarette use.

Since launching in 2000, the *truth* campaign has grown both as a public health initiative to reduce and eventually eliminate tobacco use (Farrelly et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2009; Farrelly et al., 2009), and as a social marketing brand (Schane et al., 2009). The original *truth* campaign used a "countermarketing" strategy (i.e., marketing in opposition to the tobacco industry to promote the outcome of avoiding use) and created a youth brand designed to represent an appealing alternative lifestyle to smoking, and promoted the benefits of being tobacco free (Evans et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2009). During this early period, *truth* employed branding to compete directly with tobacco products by exposing the lies and deception of the tobacco industry (Farrelly et al., 2005).

In 2015, *truth*'s sponsor, the American Legacy Foundation, was renamed *Truth Initiative* (http://truthinitiative.org/) in order to better

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Table 1
Descriptive statistics among retention sample who participated in TLC wave 3 & wave 4 (n = 8331).

Brand equity scale	Individual brand equity items	Wave 3	Wave 4
	How much do you agree or disagree with the following?	% agree/strongly agree (A/SA)	% A/SA
Brand loyalty	I'd like to help truth end smoking in my generation	42.8	40.1
	I'd defend truth on social media if someone were putting it down	36.9	35.9
	I'd follow truth on social media	33.4	30.0
	I would be part of a movement to end smoking.	48.2	44.1
Leadership/popularity	Truth is helping my generation end smoking.	56.2	59.3
	Truth is for people like me	37.5	38.5
Brand personality	How much do you agree or disagree with the following? Truth is….		
	Inspired	72.6	73.0
	Powerful	67.5	67.8
	In control of their own decisions	77.4	78.1
	Independent	72.4	73.8
	Honest	75.9	77.4
	Innovative	66.1	66.4
	People that follow truth are just like me	25.4	27.9
	People that follow truth are like the friends I hang out with	26.4	28.8
Brand awareness	When you think of truth, you think…?		
	Fewer and fewer young people today smoke cigarettes	55.9	59.4
	Tobacco companies lie	71.1	71.8
	The tobacco industry tries to get young people to smoke other products like hookah	54.8	60.3
	Tobacco company ads are a joke	51.1	53.8
Tobacco attitude/use outcomes	ATS Index	3.6 SD = 0.6	3.6 SD = 0.6
	Friends would react negatively if you smoked cigarettes	73.2	74.0
	Definitely/Probably not take offered cigarette from best friend	88.7	88.8
	(Yes) Intention to smoke cigarettes OR cigars in the next year	16.2	16.2
	If smoker, want to completely stop smoking cigarettes	64.2	64.4
	Didn't smoke in last 30 days among ever smokers	66.3	67.5
Demographics	Race (% white)	66.7	
	Gender (% male)	44.8	
	Age at baseline (mean, SD)	18.1, SD = 2.1	

align the organization with its campaign and its mission to speak, seek, and spread the truth about tobacco. In these more recent years, the *truth* brand has substantially evolved, and now employs product promotions (e.g., with Vans shoes, http://www.vans.com/article_detail/vans-truth.html), has a major social media voice and a renewed focus on the current youth and young adult generation – the 'Millennials' – with the goal of "Finishing Tobacco" (Schane et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2016). The campaign has taken a full spectrum marketing approach (i.e., using a strategy that encompasses each dimension of the marketing mix - place, price, product, and promotion) to ultimately eliminate adolescent and young adult smoking (Evans et al., 2016).

In 2014, the latest version of the branded campaign launched *truth FinishIt* at the MTV Video Music Awards, urging 15- to 21-year olds (compared to 12–17 in the original campaign) to use their social influence to become the generation that finishes the tobacco epidemic. The emergence of *FinishIt*, and changes in the *truth* social marketing strategy, address shifts in the tobacco control environment. Smoking rates have declined overall among youth, especially among youth under 15. Estimates are that < 6% of youth regularly smoke (Johnston et al., 2017). However, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control, age of initiation has increased over time with 99% of initiation occurring by age 27 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). This shift in initiation may be a result of the tobacco industry targeting young adults more directly, particularly through digital marketing through social media and on mobile devices (i.e., use of Facebook ads based on recent online search related to tobacco products). These new tobacco industry marketing priorities may also be related to why some adolescents and young adults become "social smokers" (i.e., only smoke at parties or with friends) (Schane et al., 2009). The *FinishIt* campaign responded to this new marketing environment by expanding its target age range and by applying social media approaches to counter-marketing (Evans et al., 2016). *FinishIt* continues to employ branding to compete directly with these tobacco industry tactics.

Brands work as mental representations, or schema, for how

consumers perceive products or services, and whether they should invest or continue to invest in those products or services (Allen et al., 2009). In other words, brands create identities with which consumers decide to associate or not (Evans et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2015). For example, a branded health campaign can determine behavioral choice by building consumer relationships through the dissemination of branded messages that highlight the value of identifying with certain behaviors such as eating healthy, staying physically active, or quitting smoking (Evans et al., 2005). Like commercial brands, health brands such as *FinishIt* can be measured by the "brand equity" construct, a multi-dimensional scale that measures associations with the brand (i.e., beliefs about the brand, its qualities, and benefits for the individual) (Basu and Wang, 2009; Evans, 2016). Research on the early *truth* campaign produced results demonstrating the effects of brand equity on adolescent smoking behavior (Allen et al., 2009). Brand equity in *truth* mediated the effects of campaign exposure (measured by confirmed recall of campaign ads) through specific targeted attitudes about tobacco industry manipulation and a desire to remain independent of tobacco from advertising on adolescent smoking uptake. In other words, the mechanism of change in observed reductions in youth smoking was *truth* brand equity (i.e., positive mental representations of *truth*) – youth with higher brand equity were less likely to progress to established smoking (Allen et al., 2009).

Recently, this work has been extended to the new *FinishIt* campaign. Evans et al. (2016) conducted a design and feasibility study to develop a *FinishIt* brand equity scale that reflected the consumer characteristics and values of an older target audience of 15–21-year-old adolescents and young adults. The development of the updated brand equity scale included three major components: 1) Content analyze *FinishIt* mass media ads; 2) Assess *FinishIt*'s social media and follower's perceptions of its digital brand identity; 3) Develop and feasibility test the new *FinishIt* brand equity scale using data from an existing Truth Initiative media tracking study (Evans et al., 2016).

Once the scale was developed, it was added to the Truth Longitudinal