

A STUDY ON YOUTH SMOKING

Plain Packaging, Health Warnings, Event Marketing and Price Reductions

KEY FINDINGS

A joint research project by:

University of Toronto
University of Illinois at Chicago
York University
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BACKGROUND

Today, we are releasing findings from a collaborative Canadian-American study about tobacco use among youth. This study provides evidence in support of a 3-point policy plan to reduce youth smoking: *plain packaging, a return to higher prices for tobacco products, and effective restrictions on sales to minors.*

Tobacco products cannot be easily differentiated based on physical differences -- it's difficult for people to discriminate between brands in blind taste tests. However, as Roy Ronald Brown of Imperial Tobacco Ltd. said, "*put it in a package, and put a name on it, then it has a lot of product characteristics*". Promotion is key in encouraging purchase of particular brands of an undifferentiated product like tobacco. Promotion increases awareness of the product and associates the product with images, activities and events that are appealing and desirable.

Restrictions on the promotion of tobacco products are much more stringent in Canada than in the US. In Canada, tobacco advertising is prohibited on radio, television, billboards, magazines and newspapers. In the US, advertising on broadcast media is prohibited; however direct advertising on billboards and in the print media is not. In the US, tobacco companies spend \$4 billion annually on advertising and promotion of cigarettes. In Canada, tobacco companies promote their products through the sponsorship of sporting and cultural events. Through the formation of shell companies (e.g., du Maurier Ltd., Player's Ltd., Matinee Fashion Foundation Ltd.), tobacco companies are able to advertise events that they sponsor, using names, colours, logos and font styles that are similar to those on cigarette packages.

This study examines the extent to which these tactics have resulted in event advertising that is mistaken for cigarette advertising by youth. It examines plain cigarette packaging as a strategy to break the link between such ads and the cigarette brand. This study also provides an opportunity to examine two related issues: the impact of plain packaging on recall of health warning information, and the impact of changes in price on youth smoking.

Plain cigarette packages are light brown or white packages with black printing only. No colour, trademarks or unique print fonts are used. Plain packs include only the brand name (in standard font), risk warnings, and product contents information.

This paper reports on the impact of the following on youth awareness, attitudes and intentions:

- ' sponsorship activities of tobacco companies
- ' health warnings
- ' plain packaging
- ' reduced prices

METHOD

Design

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in this study. Because the results and conclusions drawn from one method support the results and conclusions from the other, overall confidence in findings is greatly enhanced.

Focus Group Discussions

A total of 339 people participated in 52 focus group interviews. Forty group discussions were conducted in Barrie, Kitchener, Peterborough, Ottawa, Sudbury and Toronto, and 12 were held in Chicago. Youth who participated ranged in age from 12 to 17. These group interviews investigated brand imagery, attributes of smokers of plain-packaged and regularly-packaged cigarettes, recall of health warning information on plain and regular packages, perceived impact of plain packaging on smoking behaviour of youth, and students' awareness of the sponsorship of events by tobacco companies, when shown posters of the events with the words on the posters altered to make them unintelligible.

Classroom Survey

A total of 2,132 students participated in 71 classroom surveys conducted in various locations across Ontario, and 10 classroom surveys in Chicago, Illinois. Results from the Ontario component of 1,559 youth are generalizable to the Ontario population of Grade 7 and 9 students. Results are accurate to within 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The questionnaire measured students' awareness of the sponsorship of events by tobacco companies, when shown posters of the events with the words on the posters altered to make them unintelligible. It also measured attitudes toward regular and plain packages, expectations about the impact of plain packaging on smoking, attitudes and behaviours relating to smoking, perceptions of the believability and seriousness of health warnings on cigarette packages, and estimated impacts of the February 1994 price reduction on youth smoking. Data were collected between November 7, 1994 and January 16, 1995.

Students in Grades 7 and 9 (most of whom are age 12 to 14) were selected for the survey because they are most likely to be influenced by cigarette packaging. It is in this age range that many are contemplating smoking, or experimenting. This is also the age at which youth are most actively seeking personal identities, and are often very image-conscious.

A PROFILE OF STUDENT SMOKERS

How many youth smoke?

- ' Almost half (47%) of Ontario Grade 7 and 9 students report having had “at least one puff of a cigarette”. Forty percent of these report that they had their first puff at 10 years of age or younger.
- ' One quarter (23%) of Chicago youth in Grades 7 and 9 reported smoking cigarettes in the last year.
- ' Eight percent of Grade 7s in Ontario smoke, but most (7%) do not smoke daily. Twenty-eight percent of Grade 9s in Ontario smoke: 9% smoke daily and 19% smoke less than daily.
- ' Grade 9s in Ontario are as likely as adults to smoke (28%) although they are less likely than adults to smoke *on a daily basis*.

What brands do they smoke?

- ' Eighty-eight percent of smokers in Grades 7 and 9 in Ontario smoke either du Maurier (64%) or Player’s (24%) cigarettes.
- ' In the United States, the most popular brand among Whites is Marlboro (71%), and among African-Americans is Newport (61%).

Where do they get their cigarettes?

- ' Despite the provisions of Ontario’s November 1994 *Tobacco Control Act*, which makes it illegal for those under 19 years of age to purchase cigarettes, 30% of light smokers and 59% of daily smokers in our sample of underage Ontario youth mostly buy their cigarettes at a store.

SPONSORSHIP ACTIVITIES OF TOBACCO COMPANIES

Do youth misinterpret advertising of tobacco-company sponsored events as advertising for tobacco products?

... YES

Ontario students were shown posters advertising the du Maurier Jazz Festival and Player's racing. The words were replaced by nonsense letters to render them unreadable while preserving the font style. Students were asked to write down "what you think this poster is about". Fifty-three percent mentioned that the Player's racing poster was about cigarettes and only 4% recognized it as being about Player's racing (Figure 1). Twelve percent indicated that the du Maurier Jazz Festival poster was about cigarettes and only 2% recognized it as an advertisement for a jazz festival (Figure 1).

Do youth associate the sponsorship activities with images, activities and events that are appealing and desirable?

... YES

Comments by Ontario youth demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the messages being portrayed by these sponsorship ads.

About the du Maurier Jazz Festival ad, they had this to say:

"Jazz is smooth and mellow, and du Maurier wants people to believe that its smokes are smooth and mellow".

"If you are into music, you are into smoking".

"People who smoke and like the festival will try du Maurier, since they support the festival".

About the Player's racing ad, they had this to say:

"You don't think about cancer; driving is more exciting".

"Race car drivers are tough" (a characteristic teen boys want to emulate).

"Kids idolize car racers and kids will want to be like car racers and smoke"

It is clear that Player's has chosen an event whose image has positive connotations for youth.

HEALTH WARNINGS

Are youth aware of health warnings?

... **YES**

- ' Students were asked to list everything they could remember about a cigarette package after they had viewed it for about one minute. In Ontario, 83% mentioned the health warning. It was recalled more frequently than even the brand name, which was mentioned by 77% of students.

- ' There are marked differences between Ontario and Chicago. Among those in the Chicago sample, the health warning was mentioned only 6% of the time compared to 83% of the time in the Ontario sample (Figure 2). The warnings on Canadian cigarette packages are much more prominent than those on American packages. These data show that *while Canadian warnings have been effective at getting the attention of young smokers, the American warnings have not.*

- ' In Ontario, twice as many students reported that it was easier to see the health warning on the plain package (51%) than on the regular package (29%). The remainder (20%) said it made no difference.

- ' In Ontario, actual recall of the health warning was improved by plain packaging, but only for regular smokers. More daily smokers (82%) remembered the health warning when it was shown on a plain package than when it was shown on a regular package (62%)¹. For the Chicago sample, memory of the warning was no different when it was presented on a plain package or on a regular package.

- ' Believability of the health warning is enhanced by plain packaging. While 53% of Grade 7 and 9 students in Ontario said the plain package makes the health warning look more serious, only 19% said the regular package makes it look more serious.

¹ We expect, however, that this effect might be temporary. Smokers are very familiar with regular packages and therefore do not pay as much attention to the details of the package. The same habituation might occur if all cigarettes were in plain packages.

PLAIN PACKAGING

Does plain cigarette packaging project less positive imagery than regular packaging?

... YES

- ' When shown posters with cigarettes in regular packages and in plain packages, 64% of Ontario students and 68% of Chicago students said they liked the regular package better, while only 8% of Ontario and Chicago students said they liked the plain package better.
- ' Fully 86% of Ontario students said the plain package was *more boring*; 78% said it was *uglier*. Sixty-four percent said *cool kids* would smoke cigarettes from the regular package; only 5% said *cool kids* would smoke cigarettes from the plain package (Figure 3).
- ' Students understood that the product was the same in both styles of packaging, but were nevertheless susceptible to the more positive imagery projected by the regular packaging.
- ' When asked to describe people who would smoke cigarettes packaged in regular packaging, focus group participants used words with positive connotations: *fun, popular, cool, with it, good-looking*. When asked to describe people who would smoke cigarettes packaged in plain packaging, the words most often used had distinctly negative connotations: *wimpy, boring, buys the cheapest, geeky*.

Do youth report that plain cigarette packaging would reduce youth smoking?

... YES

- ' Ontario students were asked what impact they thought plain cigarette packaging would have on youth smoking. One-quarter (25%) said young smokers would smoke less and 71% said it would make no difference (Figure 4). One-third (35%) said young nonsmokers would be less likely to start and 62% said it would make no difference (Figure 5). Comments such as these exemplify the opinion that plain packaging will affect youth smoking:
“*It will mostly affect teens (because) they want to be cool and look mature*”
“*The tradition is broken; it implies cigarettes are not the same*”
“*People will smoke less because plain packaging won’t catch your eye; it is not as nice, not as flashy, therefore people will be less interested*”
“*The red package makes a statement: I am sophisticated. The plain one doesn’t*”.
- ' Chicago students were shown the same cigarettes in a plain package, regular package and novel package (new, appealing design), and asked which they would like to take home. Most chose the regular package (80%), 17% chose the novel package and only 3% chose the plain package. (The students were not actually given the cigarettes). Clearly, plain packages hold very little appeal to youth.

REDUCED TAXES

Has the price decrease for cigarettes had an impact on youth smoking? ... YES, A REPORTED INCREASE

- ' In an attempt to reduce smuggling of cigarettes into Canada, the federal government, on February 9, 1994, decreased taxes on cigarettes. The province of Ontario decreased provincial cigarette taxes shortly thereafter. The effect of these tax cuts was to reduce the price of a package of cigarettes by almost half. Health groups, pointing to economic studies on the importance of price to consumption-- especially for young, price-sensitive teens-- predicted increased smoking among youth.

- ' In the Ontario survey, Grade 7 and 9 students who smoked were asked if the price cut caused them to smoke more, smoke less, or if it made no difference to the amount they smoked. Fully one third (34%) said they smoked more as a result of the lower cost (Figure 6); only 3% said they smoked less.

- ' These results confirm those from the Waterloo Smoking Project, who surveyed over 4,000 Grade 10 students in southwestern Ontario in the spring of 1994. This survey asked "Compared to January 1994, do you smoke more or less now than you did then?". One-half of smokers who smoked at least weekly reported smoking more since the tax cuts, one-third reported smoking about the same, and 14% reported smoking less.

- ' The results of these two independent surveys do not support those reported by Health Canada's Survey on Smoking in Canada, which tracked the impact of the tax cuts and the various initiatives under the federal government's Tobacco Demand Reduction Strategy. Health Canada surveyed 11,119 Canadians aged 15 and over in the spring of 1994, again in the summer, a third time in the fall of 1994, and a fourth time in February, 1995. These surveys showed the prevalence of smoking among young people to be *unchanged* from May 1994 to February 1995. ***The federal government would like to conclude from this survey that the price cut had no effect on youth smoking. However, it cannot do so for three important reasons.***
 - The national survey sampled those 15 and over, providing no information for 12-14 year olds.
 - The first survey in the series was not a good baseline measure of pre-price-reduced smoking rates, as it occurred two to four months *after* the price cut. Smoking probably increased before the survey began.
 - Only 59% of the original sample responded to all four surveys, calling into the question the representativeness of the sample. It is likely that there has been selective attrition of smokers, and particularly young smokers, as these groups are less likely to agree to respond to a telephone survey about smoking.

CONCLUSIONS

Tobacco companies are successful in creating awareness for their brands among youth, in both the United States and Canada. This is despite a ban on advertising in Canada. Our data indicate that youth misinterpret ads for events sponsored by tobacco companies as cigarette advertising. Less than 5% of young people mentioned the event being advertised by the poster for Player's racing and for the du Maurier Jazz Festival, when the words were rendered unreadable. A significant proportion, however, interpreted the posters as advertisements for cigarettes. Fifty-three percent said the Player's racing poster was about cigarettes, and 12% said the du Maurier Jazz Festival poster was about cigarettes. ***Player's, and to a lesser extent, du Maurier, have successfully circumvented the spirit, if not the letter, of the law banning cigarette advertising.***

Plain cigarette packaging would render ineffective one of the few remaining tools that tobacco companies in Canada use to build an image for their products. It would break the connection young people make between tobacco company-sponsored event advertising and cigarettes, by removing the critical links of colour, unique font style and logo designs that connect the event advertising to a specific brand of cigarette.

The evidence is strong that plain packaging of cigarettes would reduce the positive imagery associated with smoking particular brands for many young people . While 12-15 year olds see no difference between the actual cigarettes in regular or plain packages, they are, nevertheless, susceptible to the image associated with regular packages, saying *cool* kids smoke cigarettes in regular packages, regular packages are more likely to make their peers begin smoking, and they would most like to be seen with regular packages. Plain packages are seen as *boring* and *ugly*, and *wimpy* kids smoke cigarettes in plain packages..

Plain packaging also makes the package look more serious, which may mean the health warning on it is taken more seriously . While recall of the health warning does not appear from our research to be affected by plain packaging² (warnings are prominent and remembered by four out of every five Ontario students in Grade 7 and 9, regardless of whether they are on plain or regular packaging), believability may be enhanced. Comparison of Ontario and US findings clearly shows the importance of placement and size of the warning for increasing recall. Recall of the health warning on American cigarettes was very low (6%), regardless of whether the warning was on a plain or regular package.

² A notable exception was found for daily smokers--recall of the health warning was higher when it was presented on a plain package than when it was presented on a regular package. This may be due to smokers' familiarity with regular packages and the novelty of plain packages to them, causing them to pay more attention to the details of the plain package. We expect this enhanced recall would be temporary.

Findings from the recently released federal study on plain cigarette packaging, *When Packages Can't Speak: Possible Impacts of Plain and Generic Packaging of Tobacco Products*, indicate that plain packaging would likely decrease the number of youth starting smoking and might increase the incidence of smoking cessation among teen and adult smokers. Our study reinforces that conclusion. ***One quarter of Grade 7 and 9 students in our survey said that young smokers would smoke less, and one-third said that young nonsmokers would be less likely to start, if all cigarettes were sold in plain packages .***

Of course, more than product image contributes to decisions to smoke. Rebellion, curiosity, availability, price and peer influences also contribute to decisions to smoke. This study sheds some light on two of these additional factors: price and availability.

One-third of youth reported smoking more after the price of cigarettes was reduced through tax rollbacks. This study and other surveys contradict findings from the Health Canada survey that suggest youth smoking has not increased since the tax rollback. In fact, ***there are several indicators that suggest that the price reduction has led to an increase in smoking among youth.*** The Health Canada survey reported that in February, 1995, 26% of 15-19 year olds smoked. This is substantially higher than earlier national surveys (23% in 1989; 19% in 1990; 16% in 1991)³ . Young people are more price sensitive and less concerned about health effects than older adults and so are more likely to respond to tax cuts. Sales data for tobacco show significant increases since the price change - increases that cannot be accounted for by the drop in contraband sales.

On the issue of availability, our study shows that the majority of daily smokers in Grades 7 and 9 in Ontario still buy their cigarettes from retail outlets. Given that it is rare to find a Grade 7 or 9 student age 19 or older, this suggests that the new *Tobacco Control Act* in Ontario does not impose effective barriers to the purchase of tobacco products by Ontario youth. We look forward to a change in this picture, as enforcement of the *Act* picks up steam, as retailers are charged for selling to minors, and as these charges are publicized.

In summary, this study shows how youth smoking could be reduced with an effective 3-point policy plan: ***plain packaging, a return to higher prices for tobacco products*** , and ***effective restrictions on sales to minors.***

³ These figures are from the following national surveys: National Alcohol and Other Drug Survey, 1989; Health Promotion Survey, 1990; and General Social Survey, 1991.

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FIGURES

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