

AD WATCH

Laying the groundwork for using loopholes in tobacco advertising "bans"

Legislation restricting the advertising of cigarettes and tobacco products has got cigarette marketers thinking hard. Reluctant to lose any advertising revenue, the challenge for agency staff is to creatively exploit every loophole and omission that can be identified in tobacco advertising legislation – which is sometimes hurried, compromised, and incomplete.

The advertisements in figures 1 and 2 have been featured in the *Far Eastern Economic Review** over recent months – perhaps in anticipation of comprehensive legislation throughout Asia, which in its wording, could prohibit the display of actual cigarettes, or people smoking.

With the words "Benson & Hedges ... turn to gold" there is little doubt regarding the subject matter of the advertisements. With enough exposure, the abstract depiction of the cigarette packet (centre) would stand alone as a clear identification of a B&H pack. Compare

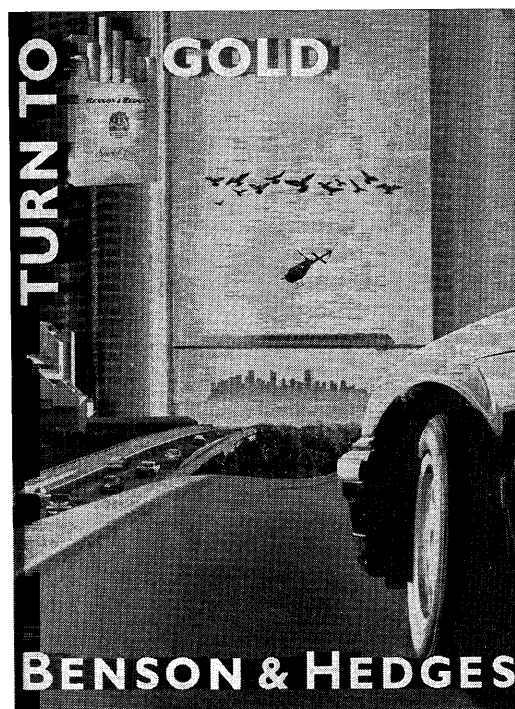


Figure 1

* The *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Asia Pacific edition) is produced weekly, and has a circulation of 60 333 and a readership of 301 665. Its editorial headquarters is in Hong Kong. The publication is aimed at "opinion leaders in business and government".

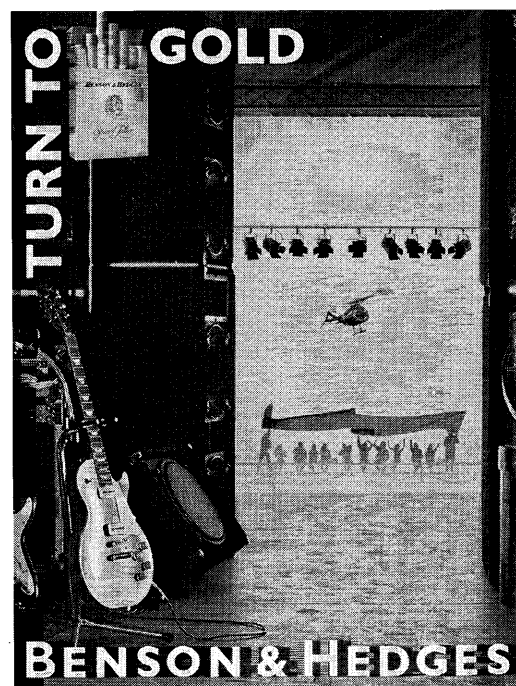


Figure 2

the centre imagery with the actual pack shown in the upper left corner: the birds and lights are the brand name, the helicopter is the logo, the monorail and the banner are equivalent to "Special Filter" (all three are red in the colour version), and the background in both the actual and abstract packs is gold.

The absence of cigarettes, people smoking, or even a brand name means that these advertisements could fall within the rules of poorly constructed legislation, regardless of the intention of such legislation to prohibit the promotion of cigarettes and smoking in the print and broadcast media.

This series of advertisements demonstrates the ingenuity of the advertising people who created them. (They have been attributed to the advertising agency, BSB Dorland.) The advertisements also point out the care that governments need to take in the formulation and wording of tobacco advertising legislation if it is to be watertight.

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“Below the belt” cigarette advertising

Consider the river and canyon chosen for the advertisement in figure 1 to represent Marlboro Country. What do you see? Beyond the obvious, what does it portray or symbolise? Look again. Some people focus on the most illuminated parts, others on the darker portions, and others look at both and their relationship. All see scenery and the rock walls, whereas others see the river, and probably fewer yet see the minuscule trees, horses, and cowboys. Some see sexual symbolism in the dominant and central canyon and river pattern, but some do not – at least until it is pointed out to them. Some do not, even then.

Is this an idiom for the addicted?

At the most blatant level, the advertisement presents the pure and pristine scenery that is an invariant characteristic of Marlboro Country, as it is for other brands. This scenery is predominately sun-basked rock walls. The copy, however, calls our attention to the river and timelessness in saying: “Where time stands still and rivers run forever.” In referencing the dynamic ever-flowing river, this timelessness is made far more suggestive of immortality than death.

Or is this an ad for the id?

Look again at the river and “crotch canyon” central to this image. Oddly shaped for a river isn’t it? Its resemblance to a penis and vagina suggests these questions and considerations. Why is the river illuminated by back light reflecting off the water? Where does this light come from? Why is this light angle different from the front lighting of the bright sunlight?

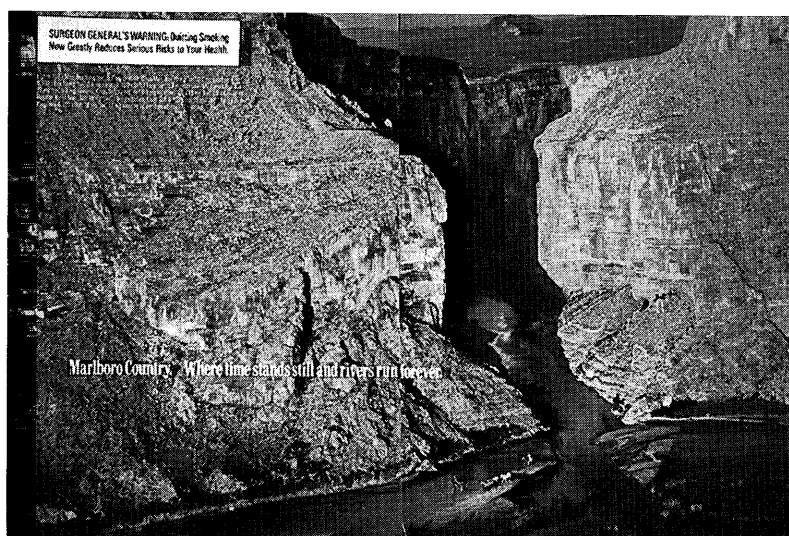


Figure 1 Marlboro “crotch canyon”.

Why are the sun’s shadow angles apparently different in forming “crotch canyon” than they seem to be on the rock walls to the right? Why is the river the right proportions to replicate a penis? What is the natural phenomenon that forms the glans, the head of a circumcised penis, in exactly the right place? Why does the river disappear from view?

Did the Marlboro Men get lucky?

Why would Marlboro advertising managers choose this scene from among the thousands of options? What about this scene makes it appealing to them, and to viewers? Could the Philip Morris Marlboro executives, their advertising agents, their art directors, and their photographers all be oblivious of this symbolism? Could they have been so lucky to have come upon this scene by chance? To what extent was this image transformed and edited while digitised, taking full advantage of modern technologies for image manipulation?

Is Marlboro machismo a rebut to Genital Joe’s Camel karma

Perhaps the Marlboro Man is displaying himself this nakedly in response to the challenge of Joe Camel (figure 2), the direct competitor to Marlboro who has lately been so successful, particularly in gaining the attention of the young who are the future of the industry.

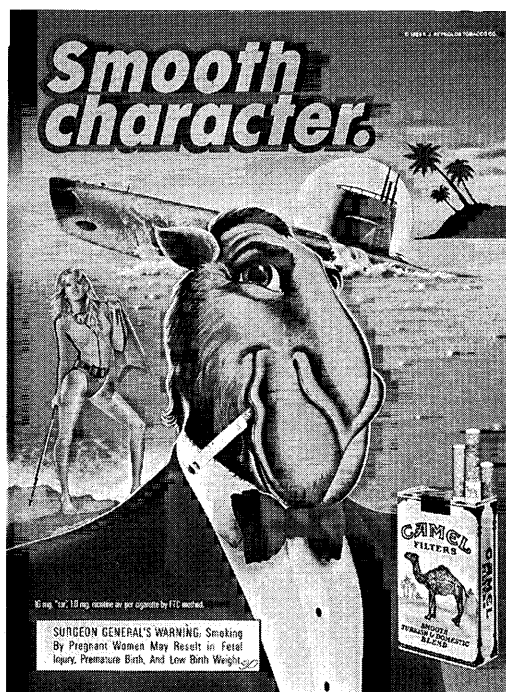


Figure 2 “Genital Joe” Camel.

I once asked a lecture audience what this advertisement character was all about and a confident and unembarrassed, prepubescent girl blurted out: "I know. I know. It's a boy's private parts!" This insight echoed an *Advertising Age* columnist's observation that the cartoon camel had been transmogrified so that its "features strikingly resemble certain major body parts".¹ Indeed, this is a camel with a surprisingly well-hung nose and pendulous jowls mimicking male genitalia. A real camel's face, in contrast, has a far less prominent nose, and predominately flabby lips, consistent with its reputation for drooling and spitting. Perhaps such a "lippy" image did not appeal to young men as much as this more phallic rendering. Surely RJ Reynolds researched this "Genital Joe" image for its evocativeness at some time. It certainly gets a response among many of the adolescents I encounter, leading to whispers, giggles, and word-of-mouth discussion among them.

This rendering also has several odd features that are thematically consistent with an appeal to adolescent interests in sexuality. Why does this tuxedo wearer have scraggly facial (scrotal) hair? Why is this facial (scrotal) hair still sparse, unlike adults'? Why is the submarine so unrealistically angularly erect in the background? Why are the palm trees similarly slanted? And, of course, what's the humanoid blond bimbo doing in this scene at all?

The early indications of the success of the cartoon camel led to the sincerest form of competitive compliment: close imitation. Brown & Williamson developed and tested a campaign centred on a cartoon penguin for the Kool brand (figure 3). A penguin had long served as a trade character for Kools, but was now dramatically transmogrified to be given "the biceps of Hulk Hogen, a Vanilla Ice hairdo, Spike Lee high top sneakers, and a Bart Simpson attitude".² The penguin selected to fight it out with Genital Joe Camel also had a surprisingly well-hung beak, leading the advertising trade to dub this competition a "war of the spokes-genitals".³

Is this new?

These are hardly the first, or even the most blatant uses of sexual symbolism in cigarette advertising. Lucky Strikes for years used a slogan: "So round. So firm. So fully packed."

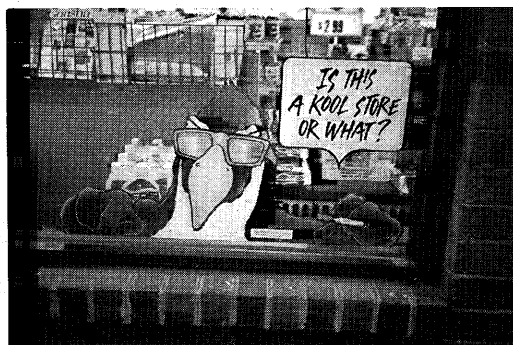


Figure 3 Willy the Penguin, "spokes-genital" for Kool cigarettes.



Figure 4 With Pall Mall's "big tip", "you make out better at both ends".



Figure 5 Newport couples are "alive with pleasure", apparently due to the size of the man's "pencil".

So free and easy on the draw." This was snickered at by the youth of the 1940s who heard a *double entendre* reference to a woman as well as a cigarette. American Tobacco advertised Pall Mall for a while by showing not one, but two models draped on an oversized roadster sports car, one on the front and one on the rear (figure 4). The headline punned that brand smokers would "make out better at both ends", where "make out" is an American teenager's idiom for sexual engagement. Their Lucky Strike more recently featured sultry looking models inviting viewers to "Light my Lucky", parodying the American expression of "light my fire", meaning inviting sexual arousal.

Other recent advertisements by Lorillard have shown Newport couples "Alive with pleasure", apparently due to the enormous size of the man's "pencil" (figure 5), or a woman blowing a saxophone being held by a man (figure 6). Newport advertisements over the years have featured a kind of horseplay among intimate couples, and for a while these featured erupting hoses and fountains. RJ Reynolds once ran a Salem advertisement showing the neck of a champagne bottle being caressed by a feminine hand and erupting (figure 7). Benson & Hedges recently showed a model gazing fondly at an ashtray from a distance of a few scant inches, an inexplicable behaviour except that the ashtray was a small male figurine, reclining on its back, with the cigarette emerging from the figurine's groin (figure 8).

Because tobacco products are both addictive



Figure 6 A woman blows her man's sax.



Figure 7 A caressing hand and an eruption.

and deadly, cigarette advertising has long emphasised vitality. Typically this has been done by "pictures of health," either healthy young adults engaged in vigorous behaviours and/or scenes dominated by a pure outdoor environment. Alternatively, some brands convey filter effectiveness to imply relative healthiness but carefully stop just short of the unwarranted explicit verbal claims of safety. Brands that are successful with the young in North America typically feature imagery of independence, appealing to the adolescent need for autonomy and self-reliance.⁴

The Marlboro cowboy of mythical proportions epitomises this tactic of providing "imagery of independence". In addition to being consistently outdoors in pristine natural environments, the Marlboro Man is usually alone and is always subject to no authority whatsoever. In contrast with reality, this cowboy experiences no foreman, no parents, no older brothers, no bullies, no outlaws – not even the archetypal sheriff so commonplace in the US West of folklore, television, and movies.

Does Marlboro's "crotch canyon" appeal to men or women?

What's relatively new in the Marlboro "crotch canyon" advertisement (figure 1) is the nearly total suppression of the man from Marlboro Country, making him faceless, with the most prominent symbolic remnant of his definitive part, his penis. Perhaps Philip Morris knows or assumes that modern "new women" like their Marlboro Men symbolically potent but faceless, for this "crotch canyon" advertisement appeared in *New Woman*.⁵ Had it appeared in a men's magazine with an explicit

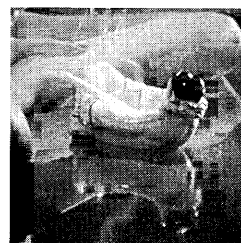


Figure 8 A Benson & Hedges model gazes fondly at her small male figurine (ashtray) (bottom), from whom (top) a "cigarette" emerges.

sexual context, the sexual symbolism would probably have been far more salient, more readily noted and brought to consciousness, and hence far less subtle in its symbolism. If too blatant, symbolic advertisements risk precipitating conscious cognitions and viewers' ridicule and reaction. The need for subtlety also occurs in advertising appeals to gay and lesbian target audiences, lest more conservative consumers be alienated.⁶

Is this subliminal advertising?

Despite its currency in popular culture, subliminal advertising has been the subject of little formal research. As technology continues to simplify the processes of image "morphing" and manipulation, however, this may change.⁷ Academic research has been limited in part not only because of the inherent difficulties of researching the topic but also because the most prominent allegations were not totally convincing for several reasons: (a) they typically referred to air-brushed implants in backgrounds and other non-central locations in images; (b) many alleged implants were hard to perceive in proffered examples, even with the author's guidance; (c) some examples were totally literal but not symbolic – for example, the word "sex" in image shadows and textures; (d) no empirical validation was offered; and (e) they lacked corroboration by whistle-blowers.⁸⁻¹⁰

The *limen* is a technical term for the threshold where there is a 50% probability of conscious awareness of the stimulus event. Something is said to communicate subliminally if the stimulus produces a measurable reaction, such as a galvanic skin response or attitude change, without the subject's consciousness of the character of the stimulus. Different people have different threshold sensitivities, and everyone of us has sensitivities that vary, depending on our psychological state, motivations, or contextual expectations. If you are hungry, for example, you will be quicker to see food symbols and suggestions. Technically speaking, then, "crotch canyon" or "Genital Joe" are symbolic communications, but not necessarily subliminal.

If you saw the penis and crotch canyon without prompting, then the sexual symbolism was not subliminal for you, no matter how evocative it was or was not. If you still don't see the sexual symbolism, even with prompting, there seems to be little sexual communication at all. If, on the other hand, you now see the sexual symbolism, but only after it was pointed out, then it is far more likely that the original appeal of this image was in part because of its symbolism.

Does it matter?

On a practical level, only Philip Morris, their advertising agencies, and their research firms know for sure how much this symbolism matters and what it evokes in targeted viewers. Their communications would likely identify the intended effects of this advertisement.

Their pretesting research no doubt identified the ability of this advertisement to attract and hold attention among the type of women it targets, how evocative it is for them, and what affective responses it evokes. It might also have identified how many or few of them have spontaneous consciousness of the sexual symbolism.

Given that there is so much overt sexuality in advertising, and in popular culture more generally, sexuality of a more symbolic or covert form may seem inconsequential. The moral concern about subliminal advertising techniques usually centres on their covert nature. People resent being influenced by "below the belt" tricks by hidden persuaders, as they presume (falsely) that they can fully protect themselves against recognisable explicit and overt influence attempts. As an ethical matter, the covert nature of these techniques is of particular concern in cigarette advertising because the product is so addictive and dangerous. Any advertising that effectively promotes this deadly addiction should be of concern, whether explicit verbal claims, pictures of health, imagery of independence, or this sort of "below the belt" sexual symbolism.

How can they get away with this?

Easily – as a legal matter, the content of US cigarette advertising is subject to almost no vigilant regulation. The US Federal Trade Commission has for some time not acted with timely initiatives against either cigarette advertisements implying safety due to filter effectiveness, or advertisements targeting the young, and was not particularly effective even when it tried to be. In addition, by its nature the law on advertising tends to focus on the words, not the pictures – applying standards of truthfulness to the verbal assertions, but having no parallel criteria to impose on imagery. Given this historic inability to deal with the misleading nature of "pictures of health" (to reassure the concerned) and "image of independence" (to recruit the young), sexual imagery of a more symbolic or subliminal nature is unlikely to be well addressed by lawyers, regulators, and the courts.

Despite its importance in modern media markets, imagery has not been an aspect of advertising for which the courts have shown either much competence or concern. The use of "below the belt" tactics just adds other examples of how the tobacco industry continues to get away with murder in its advertising.

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- 1 Garfield B. This penguin and ads are far from Kool, folks. *Advertising Age* 1991; Oct 21: 58.
- 2 Tye JB. Willy the Penguin and Joe Camel duke it out for the youth market. *Tobacco Control* 1992; 1: 32-3.
- 3 Lippert B. War of the spokes-genitals. *Adweek's Marketing Week* 1991; 32(Oct 28): 37.
- 4 Pollay RW, Lavack A. The targeting of youth by cigarette marketers: Archival evidence on trial. *Adv Consumer Res* 1993; 20: 266-71.

5 *New Woman* April 1994: 32–3.

6 Goebel K. Lesbians and gays face tobacco targeting. *Tobacco Control* 1994; 3: 65–7.

7 Beatty SE, Hawkins DI. Subliminal stimulation: Some new data and interpretation. *J Advert* 1989; 18: 4–8.

8 Kilbourne WE, Panton S, Ridley D. The effect of sexual

embedding on responses to magazine advertisements. *J Advert* 1985; 14: 48–56.

9 Key WB. *Subliminal seduction*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1976.

10 Key WB. *The clam-plate orgy*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980.

One Woman's View of Pollay's paper on “‘Below the belt’ cigarette advertising”

Before commenting on Professor Pollay's article, “‘Below the belt’ cigarette advertising”, I would like to give some personal and historical grounding to my remarks. I was born in eastern Tennessee, a tobacco-producing state in the US. As a child I recall going on fishing trips near a farm with a huge tobacco-curing barn. I remember wandering through the barn and seeing the sheaves of tobacco hanging to dry. They were aromatic and beautifully coloured in buttery tans and mahogany browns.

I later learned that my tobacco heritage extended even farther back than these childhood recollections. An early colonial ancestor, Captain Thomas Carter, had established a tobacco plantation in Virginia during the mid-1600s. Consisting of 2000 acres (809 hectares) and operated using slave labour, it had produced copious quantities of profitable tobacco, which was shipped across the Atlantic to avid consumers in England.

Tobacco cultivation and slave labour are both societal evils, and it is unfortunate that they did not die out simultaneously. The negative effects of slavery still plague American society, however, and the insidious destruction caused by tobacco consumption is well known to readers of this journal. It is perhaps because tobacco has “always been with us” that its use seems so *natural* to American consumers. Unlike illicit drugs that originate in southeast Asia or South America, tobacco is, literally, home-grown. How much harder this makes it to recognise that tobacco, like cocaine or heroin, is a highly addictive, deadly substance. To many Americans it is a farming crop, not a drug.

Piled atop this agricultural heritage is the even more carefully cultivated image of tobacco – in the form of cigarettes – as a symbol of sexuality. In old Hollywood movies, cigarette smoke drifting from the slightly parted lips of an attractive actress was an invitation to sexual intercourse; smoke blown forcefully from the mouth of a handsome male actor an indication of his bedroom passion. Cigarettes were metaphors of sexuality.

Professor Pollay's insightful analysis of current cigarette advertising presents us with strong evidence that the cultural mythology surrounding cigarettes and sexuality is being continuously refreshed by tobacco advertisers. Our homegrown drug – instead of being recognised as a deadly product – is subtly (and not

so subtly) linked to nature, good health, and sexual potency. Of course, the irony here is that the lovely tobacco plant produces an addictive substance, nicotine, that is antithetical to physical health and sexual potency.¹ Addiction is not passionate or robust, yet the advertising images surrounding tobacco consumption make it appear so.

To combat this misleading semiotic linkage, it is likely that a strenuous “truth-telling” counter campaign will need to be mounted (eg, see figures 1 and 2). Images coupling cigarettes with their real analogues would show smokers arm-in-arm with heroin junkies and crack addicts, not happily riding horses into the sunset or disguised as male genitalia wearing a tuxedo.

Professor Pollay's analysis of eight cigarette advertisements is enlightening, as well, in that it presents a *male* interpretation of their meaning. That is, he examines them from the perspective of a man or male cigarette smoker, and provides several key insights into *why* the sexual display presented in the advertisements is attractive. For example, the Marlboro man persona is that of the rugged individual –

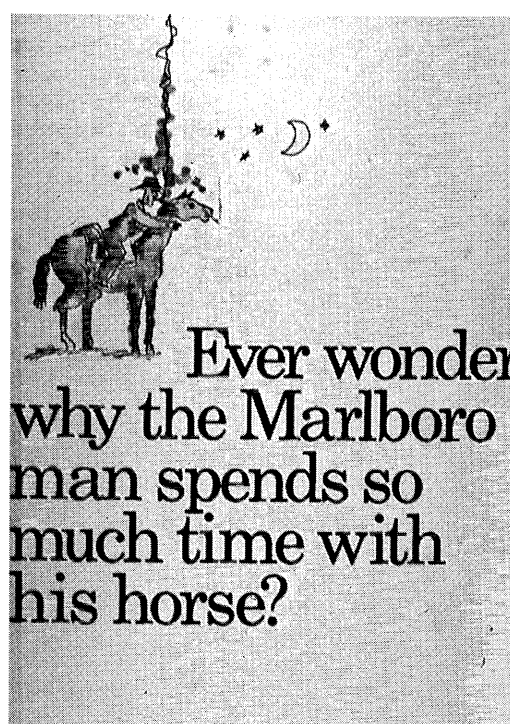


Figure 1 Creative by Dawson, Johns & Black Advertising (Chicago).

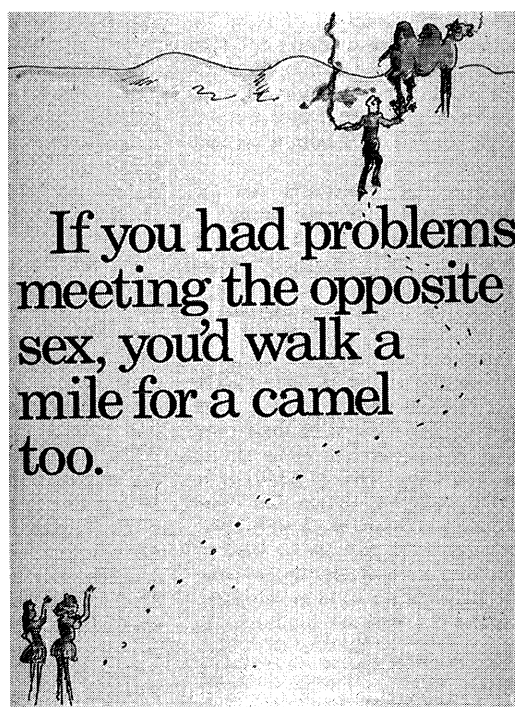


Figure 2 Creative by Dawson, Johns & Black Advertising (Chicago).

independent, self-sufficient, unattached – a dominant *male* mythic image in American culture.

When I, as a *woman*, looked at these same advertisements, I was able to follow and “see” Professor Pollay’s interpretation within them, but I also saw different meanings that arose when these same images struck my – female – eyes.

For example, the view depicted of “crotch canyon” is clearly used with male consumers in mind. If, indeed, the image depicts a partial female figure with spread legs – and I trust Professor Pollay’s reading that it does – it is not a visual that women would find attractive. (I maintain this is true, despite the advertisement’s placement in *New Woman*.) In fact, should women readers suddenly “see” it as representing themselves in a supine position, I believe most would find it egregiously offensive. This is not the way *women* like to think of themselves as sexual participants: headless, armless, legless cavities awaiting the entry of the male! In short, although this perspective of the female anatomy may be wildly erotic to a male onlooker, it is a “turn-off” to any woman who believes herself to be more than an inviting vagina.

In contrast is the Joe Camel campaign, which I agree with Professor Pollay is undoubtedly directed toward youthful consumers. Cartoon figures, such as this one, are culturally recognised as coded for preteens and adolescents. Further, Joe does “cool” things

such as play in a rock band, hangout at discos, and drive convertibles. He is hip – and he smokes.

Whereas men, as Professor Pollay points out, are likely to see Joe Camel as an obvious *male* figure (how could they miss?!), women, I believe, find the character ironically humorous. How many times have we – in our female-chauvinist, male-degrading minds – thought that a particular man, or occasionally even men in general, were indeed *pricks* (or in Yiddish terms: *schnucks* with cars). Here, in full colour spreads pasted across billboards, double-trucking through magazines and newspapers, peering down from supermarket cigarette counters, is proof-positive that we were right! Thus, although young men may think it is arousing to have their private parts on public display, dressed up in various costumes, women see these same images as poetic justice: men are dicks!

Similarly, from a woman’s perspective, the use of obvious – and grossly oversized – phallic symbolism in cigarette advertising, such as the big pencil and saxophone Professor Pollay cites, is also ironically humorous in that they not only “reduce” the man to this part of his anatomy, but also provide a penile model which no man (save perhaps one featured in pornographic movies) could ever possibly live “up” to. Most women know that men’s greatest fear is not being able to measure up to female expectations. These advertisements, which would seem to be exalting the male organ, may in fact be subconsciously playing into men’s deepest fears that they are undersized and inadequate. (Quite ironically, recent medical research has indicated that male impotence is substantially higher among cigarette smokers¹ – a finding that, if widely disseminated, will likely drop cigarette sales faster than 100 traditional anti-smoking campaigns.)

Finally, Professor Pollay is correct when he notes the failure of US regulatory bodies to address the meaning of visual images in advertising compared with the attention that has been given to written or spoken words. Visual images convey messages that are as powerful as, or more powerful than, those of the written word. Consumers may trust innately the associations made between the product and a visual image, whereas they have been taught to counterargue verbal rhetoric. As I recall again the beautiful, brown tobacco leaves hung in neat rows in their curing shed from my childhood, it is easy to forget that their aesthetic appeal disguises a deadly secret: tobacco kills.

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¹ Mannino DM, Kleven RM, Flanders WD. Cigarette smoking: An independent risk factor for impotence? *Am J Epidemiol* 1994; 140: 1003–8.