The plain truth about tobacco packaging

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Hymenopus coronatus (the Malaysian preying mantis) has a cunning hunting technique. It disguises itself as an orchid; its four walking legs are exquisite replicas of petals and its lethal jaws blend into the background. This makes it beautiful to behold, but for the lizards and insects that are its prey, ruthless and deadly. What looks like a flower, and an enticing source of nectar, is actually a death trap.

The tobacco industry has learned well from H coronatus. It camouflages its deadly product in elegantly decorated packages making them look on the one hand uniquely attractive and on the other just like any branded product. Thus they acquire exclusivity and legitimacy. Like H coronatus, tobacco companies also succeed in hunting and killing small creatures. It is abundantly clear that young people are drawn into smoking by branding and that liveried packs play an active role in this process.

The UK Government is therefore to be applauded for its proposal to mandate plain packaging for cigarettes.1 This would involve removing all distinctive signs from packs leaving only the name of the brand in a standard colour and font, along with the legally mandated information.2 It’s the equivalent of turning H coronatus into a piece of couch grass.

The evidence for the harm done by liveried packs is clear. The first concerns emerge from the business literature, which emphasises that the pack in lots of product categories has become far more than a simple container:3 it also adds value, makes the product distinctively attractive and stimulates purchase and repeat purchase.4 It has become a key long-term marketing investment5 that “allows the brand to develop its message to the consumer and to act as a valuable form of promotion of the brand name and values”.6

In the case of tobacco, the pack has been used for years to generate evocative images such as luxury, freedom, glamour, status and masculinity or femininity,7 as well as to give smokers false comfort about health consequences.8 It is also the marketing tool with most direct links to the consumer9 and its power is increased because cigarettes are “badge products” which are conspicuously consumed, particularly by the young, to make public statements about the user’s self image and identity.10,11 Furthermore, as other forms of marketing have been removed, the pack has become increasingly important to the tobacco industry,12 providing a vital communication platform13 and link to other forms of marketing communication such as sponsorship.14

Consumer research confirms this marketing power. Studies of the whole population show that liveried packs evoke positive images17 and, conversely, that generic ones make the product and its perceived consumer less fashionable and attractive.18–22 The young are particularly susceptible to these effects. Large-scale research in the UK has demonstrated that even after advertising is banned (the 2004 Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act prohibited tobacco advertising in the UK), branding continues to drive teen smoking23 and that awareness of packaging and new pack design is a key element of this ongoing marketing.24 An industry analyst interviewed in the latest issue of the trade magazine Tobacco Journal International (TJI) confirmed this marketing value, commenting that “more than half the brand impact is in the design of the cigarette packet”.25 It is not surprising then that the leading business website Brand Republic is trilling the fact that UK “tobacco brands are putting packaging design at the heart of their marketing strategies”, noting that Gallaher and Imperial Tobacco have introduced design innovations.26

It is also clear that children, especially those from deprived backgrounds, find tobacco brands particularly enticing.
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(inadvertently) that the UK would be performing a valuable service to global public health because “if it goes ahead in the UK, it will sweep across many countries around the world in a few years”.29

It is, then, the time for action. H coronatus is a wonderful natural phenomenon; tobacco branding is an obscene product should be stripped of its enticing

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Tobacco Control

None.


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