Guidelines for implementation of Article 11 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control recognise that ‘it is important to assess the impact of packaging and labelling measures on the target populations,’ yet how target populations may be identified is largely unspecified. We have previously characterised that early tobacco control efforts are often implemented in a given jurisdiction with a mass market approach, where the total population is treated in its entirety and largely undivided, but market segmentation should be adopted over time. Indeed, marketing strategists normally recognise the human diversity of consumers they are attempting to influence and a segmentation strategy involves the identification of well-defined consumer subgroups who share certain common characteristics to facilitate marketing communication that is more efficient, customised and personally relevant. When people find a message personally relevant, they are more likely to pay attention and process the message more thoroughly.

The target market heavily affects communication decisions regarding where it will be said, what will be said, how it will be said, when it will be said and who will say it. Concerning where it will be said, decisions must be made about the medium of communication (eg, magazines or the message channel of the traditional communication process). The cigarette package may also be regarded as a medium of communication for tobacco control efforts, with the cigarette brand serving to inform which health warnings and messages are most relevant based on the demonstrated preferences of the target market. The installation of PWLs, however, in part meant to replace text-only warnings on cigarette packages by Health Canada that aim to enhance awareness that there is no safe level of cigarette consumption and that occasional smokers are not immune from the harms of smoking. Obviously, message content can be tailored accordingly to appeal to social smokers as opposed to those classified as experimenters or heavy users of tobacco products.

Psychographics is another commonly used segmentation approach in which the personality, activities, interests and opinions of the target market are considered. One strategic consideration for making messages relevant to target consumers is whether to create messages that are predominantly visual or verbal according to the demonstrated preferences of the target market. People process information more cognitively and they tend to prefer verbal messages, whereas others tend to rely on how they feel when they process information and they are inclined to prefer visual messages. Moreover, consumers are different about how they process information regardless of the modality of information (ie, visual vs verbal information). Research, for example, has differentiated between visualisers, who are predisposed to process information with visual images, and verbalisers, who are predisposed to process information semantically without creating images.

In this issue, articles by Lochbuehler and colleagues as well as Popova and colleagues address important aspects of text and visual health warning labels in the context of the US Food and Drug Administration’s nine proposed pictorial health warning labels (PWL), which were meant to replace text-only warnings on tobacco products. Legal rulings prevented the installation of PWLs, however, in part due to the visual not being regarded as factual or informative. Lochbuehler et al found that the visual in the health warnings captured and held smokers’ attention better than the text component. Additionally, smokers demonstrate better recall when visual and textual information

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Who is the target? Package health warnings and the role of market segmentation

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Editorial

is congruent rather than incongruent. They suggest that the text should be complemented with congruent visuals in health warnings. Meanwhile, Popova et al argue that the dichotomy of ‘factual text and emotional pictures’ is overly simplified. Their study reveals that there are no significant differences in perceived information between textual and pictorial warning labels: pictorial health warnings can be informative and factual, whereas text-based health warnings can evoke emotions. Given the aforementioned psychographic considerations, an implication from both articles is that text-only health warning messages, as currently observed in the USA, are not likely to be personally relevant to visualisers.

By identifying and understanding the idiosyncrasies, attitudes and interests of identified targets, marketing initiatives are far more likely to elicit favourable consumer responses, in contrast to a single undifferentiated effort towards the mass market. While the extant literature concerning health warnings on tobacco packaging is considerable, future research could further account for the role of market segmentation to evaluate which themes and message content appear most effective. One direction for future research is to examine the advised number of health warnings that should be rotated on tobacco packaging. Canadian regulations, for example, require the rotation of 16 warnings, which has facilitated the targeting of subgroups. Nevertheless, the inclusion of themes such as the financial costs of smoking would allow for the further targeting of subgroups, with the health warning being strategically aligned with brands and their pricing strategy. Market segmentation principles also suggest rethinking the random rotation of health warnings. More research is needed that further builds upon the valuable contributions by Lochbuehler, Popova and their colleagues.

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