

# TOBACCO CONTROL

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## Editorials

### Smoking, branding, and the meaning of life

What are the best known words in the world? . . . Sex? . . . Life? . . . Death? . . . Jesus?

No. They're Coca Cola.

This is a tribute to the immense power of branding. In essence, Coke (notice we even have a pet name for it) is just a fizzy drink, but it has a turnover approaching £9000 million (US\$ 14 000 million) in some 185 countries and its familiar bottle, font, and red and white livery are symbols of fun, freedom, and the American way of life across vastly different cultures. And Coke is not alone: Kodak, Sony, Gillette, Levi, Marlboro, and countless other brands each provide mundane products with distinctive values and personalities.

This issue of *Tobacco Control* contains three articles that illustrate the power and ubiquity of branding in the tobacco market.<sup>1–3</sup>

Arnett and Terhanian<sup>1</sup> present a simple but elegant study showing that adolescents are very much aware of cigarette advertisements, that they like the ads, and that they feel that the ads make smoking more appealing. Furthermore, smokers are more likely than non-smokers to sense this reinforcement, and all the effects they found are more marked for Marlboro and Camel—the brand leaders among young people.

This study adds to an extensive literature, which began with the seminal research by Aitken *et al* in the UK during the 1980s, showing that among all children, and especially amongst those who smoke or are inclined to smoke, there is a disturbingly high awareness of, familiarity with, and appreciation of tobacco advertising.<sup>4</sup> This picture has been confirmed most recently in a longitudinal study by Pierce and colleagues,<sup>5</sup> which showed that involvement with tobacco promotion predicts the onset of smoking. All this research provides compelling evidence that advertising encourages the uptake, and reinforces the continuance, of smoking. In addition, and arguably more importantly, numerous studies have shown that branding is the primary conduit for this influence.<sup>6–8</sup>

Arnett and Terhanian also provide a neat repost to a familiar industry canard: that smokers pay more attention to cigarette advertising simply because they smoke—just as Volvo drivers pay more attention to Volvo advertising and Levi wearers to Levi advertising. The argument runs that this is perfectly natural, and there is nothing untoward or sinister about it. But Arnett and Terhanian point out that the ads must be “striking a resonant chord” with smoking adolescents to achieve this salience. They conclude that smokers of these brands are using advertising to support their decision to smoke.

This is exactly right. Young smokers pay more attention to cigarette ads because they provide them with an impor-

tant benefit: they make them feel better about their smoking. The same is true of Volvo drivers and Levi wearers. We know they seek out advertising to reassure themselves that they have made the right purchase decision. Marketers even have a technical term for this syndrome: “the resolution of post-purchase dissonance”.<sup>9</sup> If ever a customer suffered from post-purchase dissonance, it is the adolescent smoker.<sup>10</sup> The brand—be it Volvo, Levi, or Marlboro—is the durable manifestation of this type of emotional benefit.

The study by Feighery *et al*<sup>2</sup>, also appearing in this issue of *Tobacco Control*, moves the argument from advertising to other forms of tobacco promotion, such as merchandising and loyalty programmes. In an ingenious analysis they show that involvement with such promotions—which they categorise into three levels (awareness of them, wanting to participate in them, and actually owning tobacco merchandise)—is correlated with inclination to smoke. This is a cross-sectional study, and the authors rightly point out that they cannot make the jump from correlation to causation, but, nonetheless, the paper confirms that tobacco control advocates have to look beyond advertising if they are to combat the marketing efforts of the industry.

Even more importantly, the paper begins to explain why these promotions are so attractive to young people. They help them to experiment with or “try on” the identity of a smoker—“promotional items are intended to serve as a clear link between ‘me’ and the role ‘I wish to play’”.

These are well-established themes in the consumer behaviour literature. We develop actual and ideal self-concepts which are honed by the responses of those around us. Consumption behaviour is one way of moving from our actual to our ideal self.<sup>11 12</sup> Specifically, we buy and use brands that support our ideal identities.<sup>13</sup> The promotional items discussed by Feighery *et al* are one way of identifying these brands and of telling the rest of the world about our adherence to their values. They are also recognised by marketers as a tool for building “brand equity” (the set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand's name or symbol).<sup>14</sup>

In the third paper published in this issue, Zhu *et al*<sup>3</sup> take matters a stage further and remind us that the tobacco industry is busily globalising its brands. Their ground-breaking paper examines the penetration of foreign cigarette brands into the Chinese market and reveals that they have achieved astounding levels of awareness and popularity, despite tight controls on their promotion and distribution. Marlboro, for example, is more familiar to the Chinese than any domestic brand. Furthermore, this popularity is clearly linked to recall of Marlboro advertising, suggesting that brand imagery is particularly important to its success.

In an earlier editorial in *Tobacco Control*, Amanda Amos<sup>15</sup> noted that the tobacco industry's marketing activities in these new markets are very similar to those developed for the West. "Marlboro Country" is as distinctly American in China as it is elsewhere, and Zhu *et al* note that Philip Morris sponsors a national radio programme (*American Music Hour*) in China as part of its American enculturation strategy. These tactics are succeeding because they feed a very real desire among the population to buy into—literally and figuratively—Western lifestyles.

The industry's success in China is particularly worrying, given its size. As Judith Mackay has pointed out,<sup>16</sup> there are at least 300 million smokers in China, and one in three of the world's cigarettes is smoked there. No wonder the industry greedily compares the potential of this market to "the limits of space".<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the need to manage international product portfolios by balancing declining markets in the West with developing markets elsewhere provides an additional imperative to succeed.

It is very apparent, therefore, that branding is at the core of successful tobacco marketing. For years the industry has successfully fed us the line that advertising is about brand loyalty and brand switching, not about increasing total consumption. We have responded with straight denials. But, as with all good deceptions, there is a kernel of truth in the industry's claim: their advertising is primarily concerned with branding—that's *how* it influences consumption.

A word of caution is needed here. There is a danger that we fall into the trap of portraying the industry as powerful manipulators of a passive and gullible populace. They become latter-day shamans, capable of getting consumers, and especially the young, to meekly do their bidding. This is not only deeply patronising, but misrepresents the reality. Our understanding of how advertising works has progressed significantly from the days of Vance Packard's "hidden persuaders",<sup>17</sup> and we now recognise that the audience plays an important role in the communication process. That is why commercial advertisers (and indeed health promoters) put so much effort into pretesting their communications.

Similar insights are now emerging for branding. It is clear that brands have so much potency because consumers can use them to obtain important benefits. Specifically, as the paper by Feighery *et al* begins to show, they enable us to construct meanings for ourselves, make sense of the world, clarify our position in it, and communicate this understanding to others.<sup>18</sup> We don't pay a premium for a Mercedes because we are stupid or suggestible, we do it because the Mercedes image confirms that we are successful and enables us to tell the rest of the world about it. Similarly, Chinese smokers opt for Marlboro because the brand *does* provide a valued fragment of American culture.

The young are very actively involved in the process of defining their own identity, and the social dimension of this process—the influence of the peer group—is particularly marked. Add to this the symbolic power of smoking as a forbidden rite of passage, and the potential value of tobacco brands to adolescents becomes all too apparent. It is unsurprising that numerous studies in different

countries have consistently shown that they buy the most heavily advertised cigarette brands and are much more "conservative" in their brand choice (that is, less adventurous in choosing brands, preferring to stick to one or two that are trusted)<sup>19 20</sup>

It is important to recognise the transactional nature of this phenomenon: the industry may be exploiting young people's needs and vulnerabilities, but in their turn, young smokers are using tobacco brands to help them cope with life and build their identities. The deeply ironic notion that the tobacco industry might actually be providing a benefit for young people may be unpalatable, but it is vital that we acknowledge and understand it if we are to counteract their brazen success. Without this insight, we are doomed to be naive to the industry, and patronising to young smokers.

Our task then is not just to limit advertising, promotions, and globalisation by the industry, as the three studies in this issue confirm, but, as they also suggest, to undermine and emasculate tobacco brands. Otherwise we run the risk of "Marlboro" succeeding "Coke" as the best known word in the world . . . followed closely by "death".

GERARD HASTINGS

Centre for Social Marketing,  
University of Strathclyde,  
Stenhouse Building,  
173 Cathedral Street,  
Glasgow G4 0RQ, UK.  
gerardh@market.strath.ac.uk

LYNN MacFADYEN

l.macfadyen@csm.market.strath.ac.uk

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