

Interplay of food and tobacco product descriptors and health claims

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The food and tobacco sectors commonly make use of the same product descriptors, including claims relating to health. In their *Tobacco Control* paper, Raskind and colleagues make a valuable contribution by highlighting Winston advertising that makes use of claims relating to ‘plant-based’ menthol cigarettes.¹ The authors call further attention to Winston’s advertising as an example of health-related claims being made where familiar terminology in the food sector is also applied to cigarettes. Plant-based products are commonly positioned as alternatives from red meat or dairy consumption based on claims pertaining to health and environmental sustainability (figure 1A).^{2–4}

‘Light’ serves as another example of a descriptor used for food and tobacco products that is indicative of a health claim. ‘Light’ signals a lowering of ingredients that are perceived as undesirable or unhealthy.⁵ For food products, ‘light’ often points to a reduction in sugar, fat or calories (figure 1B). For tobacco products, ‘light’ commonly signals a lower reported tar yield (figure 1C).^{6–8} According to Philip Morris’ market research, as ‘light’ brands increasingly entered the marketplace, ‘Almost all smokers agree that the primary reason for the increasing acceptance of low ‘tar’ brands is based on the health reassurance they seem to offer.’⁹

‘Thins’ and ‘slims’ serve as additional examples. ‘Thin’ or ‘slim’ suggests reduced thickness, where a moderated food size implies portion control, and less consumption of undesirable features such as fat, salt and calories (figure 1D). For tobacco products, ‘thins’ or ‘slims’ refers to a reduced circumference cigarette; such cigarettes are comparatively slender, being 100mm long and 23mm in circumference (figure 1E).¹⁰ The American Tobacco Company’s Silva Thins cigarette brand was launched in 1967, whereas Virginia Slims from Philip Morris was introduced the following year.^{11,12} Advertising for Silva Thins commonly referred to

the brand as offering ‘less tar’ than other cigarette types.

Raskind and colleagues also indicate that food and tobacco products are commonly labelled as ‘natural’. Not surprisingly, consumers hold the term ‘natural’ in higher regard than ‘artificial’, with many perceiving ‘natural’ to be healthier, while ‘artificial’ or ‘synthetic’ means something unhealthy that is to be avoided.^{13–22} The tobacco industry has a longstanding history of using ‘natural’ as a cigarette product descriptor,^{6,23} with the marketing of Natural American Spirit cigarettes serving as a notable example.²⁴ ‘Simple’ and ‘real’ are product descriptors commonly inter-related with ‘natural’ in marketing communication for both food and tobacco products. Synonyms for simple include ‘trouble-free’ and ‘clean’, with clean—in the context of eating—being food that is natural and free of artificial ingredients and chemicals. According to medical doctor, Ian Smith, ‘In its simplest form, clean eating is based on the basic premise that eating more natural, less-processed foods is not only good for one’s health, but equally important for the environment.’²⁵

The interplay between the food and tobacco sectors reflects that both are agricultural products (ie, involving the growth and production of crops), and businesses operating within these sectors being responsive to observed consumer trends of heightened health consciousness. Winston marketing communication—from more than 20 years ago—courted controversy with its No Bull campaign, which included claims of ‘real smokes’, ‘100% tobacco’ and ‘no additives’.²⁶ Raskind and colleagues make a valuable contribution by pointing out that comparable controversy persists today, with analogous health claims likely to prompt consumer misperceptions about the harmfulness of tobacco products.^{27–37}

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Figure 1 (A) This print advertisement for Silk plant-based products circulated in the March/April 2020 issue of *Canada Convenience Store News*. The ad copy states, ‘Plant-based goodness. Whenever. Wherever. Good for you!’ The statement attributed to the asterisk is ‘As part of a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle.’ (B) Advertising for Kraft Light peanut butter indicates: ‘For health nuts. With 25% less fat, who needs to work out?’ Kraft was previously parent-owned by Philip Morris. (C) Produced by Philip Morris, Marlboro Lights cigarette advertising copy indicates that the brand variant offers ‘The spirit of Marlboro in a low tar cigarette.’ This print advertisement circulated in 1980, whereas Marlboro Lights were first introduced to the marketplace in 1971. Source: Stanford Ad Collection. (D) ‘Thins’ is a product descriptor for Ritz crackers, which were publicised by its producer as a ‘better-for-you’ option. Advertising copy indicates ‘50% less fat than the leading regular fried potato chips.’ This print ad circulated during 2017 in *Sports Illustrated*. (E) Produced by the American Tobacco Company, Silva Thins cigarette advertising copy indicates ‘Think thins... they have less ‘tar’ than most Kings, 100’s, menthols, non-filters.’ This print advertisement circulated in 1972, whereas Silva Thins were introduced to the marketplace in 1967. Source: Stanford Ad Collection.

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action lawsuits as well as governments whose policies have undergone constitutional challenges.

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