

Plain packaging policy: Preventing industry innovations

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ABSTRACT

The pack is a marketing tool for the tobacco industry – its shape, colour, fonts, descriptors and logos attract and mislead smokers. Health warnings on cigarette packs serve as a knowledge reminder for smokers to quit smoking. Plain packaging eliminates brand imagery elements from cigarette packs and has many benefits, including the reduction of intention to smoke and the denormalization of smoking behaviour. The tobacco industry has devised pack and product marketing innovations that thwart the effectiveness of health warnings. Plain packaging policy needs to address these innovations by restricting their use and preventing them from undermining health warnings.

KEY WORDS: Policy; public health; tobacco

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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Cigarette packages are one of the few remaining marketing vehicles for the tobacco industry.¹ They are mini-billboards, carrying package design elements that connect consumers with cigarette products.^{2,3} For instance, light-blue coloured packages resonate with health-conscious smokers because they implicitly denote a less harmful alternative to red-coloured variants. Similarly, attractive brand text and logos facilitate consumer identification with the product and its association with positive characteristics.⁴

Adding to the package design issues is the misleading and insufficient information about the chemical content of cigarettes on the packs. Words such as “smooth” inform consumers about taste but deceptively suggest low harm. Cigarette packs display inaccurate tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide concentrations as they reflect the amount delivered to machines rather than to the smoker’s system.^{2,3} The packs also do not include any reference to the thousands of chemicals and hundreds of carcinogens in cigarettes, leaving consumers uninformed about the product’s content. Finally, consumers are deceived by “filtered” cigarettes because these suggest reduced harm.⁴

To rectify issues related to cigarette packaging design and product content, graphic health warnings were developed.^{4–9} Graphic warnings divert the attention of consumers away from package design toward health warnings, reduce pack appeal, increase Quitline call volume, and decrease smoking consumption.^{1,3,4} Despite the effectiveness of graphic warnings on branded packages, there remains unaffected the issue of pack design, which continues to influence consumer perception and behaviour. Plain packaging, referring to the elimination of brand imagery, was introduced to weaken the connection of smokers to cigarette packs and enhance the effectiveness of graphic warnings.^{4,10} The importance of plain packaging is embodied in the World Health Organization’s (WHO) message on World No Tobacco Day, which called member states to strengthen their labelling policies and progress towards plain packaging.

The purpose of this article is to outline the merits of plain packaging and warn against the innovations of the tobacco industry in response to health warnings on cigarette packs. In the commentary, I suggest some recommendations for establishing solid plain packaging policies that limit industry pack and product innovations. This article is relevant for countries that are considering the implementation of plain packaging policies.

WHY PLAIN PACKAGING?

There is growing evidence on the effectiveness of plain packaging of cigarettes as a tobacco control policy measure.¹⁰ Plain packaging carries many advantages:

- increases negative feelings (e.g., fear);⁴
- decreases willingness to pay;⁵
- increases attention to warnings;⁶
- decreases product appeal over and beyond graphic warnings;⁴
- increases warning recognition;¹
- increases support for legislation;⁷
- increases quit rates;⁸
- decreases brand awareness;⁹ and
- increases Quitline call volume.⁴

Australia has led the way, enacting plain packaging policy on December 1, 2012, prior to the availability of conclusive evidence on the subject. The tobacco industry challenged the Australian government on intellectual property and trademark violation claims, which have so far been dismissed in court. Australia’s leadership, its success in court against the tobacco industry, and the emergence in recent years of conclusive evidence on the

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effectiveness of plain packaging, served as an encouragement for other governments to follow the lead – France, Ireland and the UK among other countries passed legislation in 2016. This snowball effect suggests that plain packaging has the potential to be implemented on a global scale.

MARKETING INNOVATIONS THAT UNDERMINE HEALTH WARNINGS

An effective plain package should take into consideration tobacco industry innovations. The innovations related to both packaging and product content are crucial to examine when defining plain packaging policies.

Packaging innovations

Package shape

The shape of cigarette packages is manipulated to connect with various demographics. For instance, slim packs resonate with women because they associate it with “fashion-consciousness”, “independence”, and “femininity”.⁴

A secondary pack within the external (primary) pack

The secondary pack slides like a drawer, lacks health warnings, and contains marketing messages such as “Big hearty taste. It’s what’s inside that counts” on one of the cigarette brands sold in Canada. Secondary pack marketing undermines health warnings on the external pack.

Flavoured cards

The use of flavoured cards within tobacco packaging is an innovation that bypasses laws prohibiting the sale of flavoured cigarettes. Placing the cards inside the package infuses the cigarettes with flavours, yielding a product similar to flavoured cigarettes.

Foil stamping

Foil stamping serves as a marketing feature for smokers. It increases appeal and elegance and might enhance consumer attention to many products.

Size of text in the text warning surface area

There have been some manipulations by the tobacco industry where the text warning box occupies the mandated surface area, but the text within the text box occupies only a small percentage of its surface area. This reduces the visibility of the warning and decreases the chances of diverting smokers’ attention from pack design towards warnings.

Product innovations

Brand names that denote brand variety

Although long brand descriptors are not allowed under plain packaging policy, companies have started using lengthy brand names that serve the purpose of prohibited brand descriptors such as “Fine Cut Special Blend” and “True Special Blend”.

Menthol capsules

These capsules release flavour upon pressing on them. Menthol is attractive for smokers because it allows for smoother inhalation. Menthol is used to flavour cigarettes and has been shown to

contribute to decreasing the likelihood of quitting smoking and increasing the chances of experimenting with smoking, thereby serving as a starter product for youth.^{11,12} Youth describe cigarettes with menthol capsules as “brilliant, fun and cool”. They also think that such cigarettes are “nice” and provide “fresh breath”.¹³

Cigarette paper colours and shape

Youth find coloured cigarettes “colourful, nice and exciting”.¹⁴ Females are more likely to smoke coloured cigarettes and think that they are “lovely, girly and colourful”.^{13,14} Adults suggest that colourful cigarettes are problematic because they are attractive to minors.^{13,14} Smokers believe that slim-shaped cigarette sticks are possibly a good option for those who want a healthier alternative and those who want to experiment with cigarettes.^{13,14}

PLAIN PACKAGING REMEDIES AGAINST INDUSTRY INNOVATIONS

The abovementioned innovations are based on exploiting loopholes in tobacco control policies pertaining to plain packaging which have traditionally focused on the elimination of brand descriptors and logos and the standardization of pack colours and shapes. They also serve as alerts for the tobacco control community to take action for advocating for more stringent plain packaging policies. Some possible remedies against the industry’s innovations in response to plain packaging include the following.

Prohibit secondary packages or inserts within external packages

This will prevent the tobacco industry from using secondary packages as a marketing tool that neutralizes health messages on the external package.

Prohibit the use of descriptive brand names

Such a measure will prevent the inappropriate use of brand names as a brand differentiation tool.

Prohibit filter modification and the use of menthol capsules

Like menthol-flavoured cigarettes, menthol-capsuled cigarettes serve as starter products for such subpopulations as youth, experimenters and females.¹³ The prohibition of flavoured capsules and filter modifications will prevent the tobacco industry from using filters as flavour vessels.

Set a standard for both the size of warnings within the surface area of text boxes and the pack shape

Specifying the size and surface area of text warnings within text boxes will prevent the industry from minimizing the size of text warnings to reduce their visibility. Further, it is recommended to set standardized tobacco packaging in a rectangular slide and shell format; smokers are less likely to smoke cigarettes with this style of packaging, believing they taste worse and are more harmful compared to those packaged in flip-top formats.¹⁵

Standardize the size and colour of cigarettes

Policy-makers should mandate the standardization of cigarette colours and shapes to prevent cigarette paper from serving as a marketing canvas for the tobacco industry.

PLAIN PACKAGING POLICY

Add warnings on cigarettes themselves

Adding such warnings may serve to further deter smokers from smoking. Smokers might be able to place their pack back into their pockets but they are very likely to look at their cigarettes at least occasionally as they smoke. When they do, there will be a visual reminder of the harms of smoking. “Smoking kills”, for instance, is a particularly effective and short text warning that would be simple to print in a large visible font on cigarettes.

Eliminate foil stamping

This measure is expected to reduce the attraction of consumers to cigarettes by reducing pack elegance.

Maintain warning novelty

It is crucial to periodically change circulated health warnings to prevent smokers’ desensitization to the warnings.⁴

Mandate plain packaging of all tobacco products

Plain packaging should be implemented with cigarettes, cigarillos and other tobacco products to prevent package design from attracting all tobacco users.⁴

CONCLUSION

Plain packaging is an effective policy measure that is increasingly receiving attention from policy-makers across the globe. To maximize its effectiveness, plain packaging should take into consideration recent pack and product innovations by the tobacco industry. Standardizing the inside and outside of a cigarette pack in terms of its colour, shape, descriptors and physical elements is important to prevent industry tactics from undermining plain packaging policy.

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RÉSUMÉ

Le paquet est un outil de commercialisation pour l’industrie du tabac – sa forme, sa couleur, ses polices de caractères, ses descripteurs et ses logos attirent et trompent les fumeurs. Les mises en garde sur les paquets de cigarettes servent à rappeler des connaissances aux fumeurs pour qu’ils cessent de fumer. La banalisation des emballages supprime les éléments d’image de marque des paquets de cigarettes et comporte de nombreux avantages, dont la baisse des intentions de fumer et la dénormalisation de l’usage du tabac. Or, l’industrie du tabac a imaginé des innovations dans la commercialisation des paquets et du produit qui déjouent l’efficacité des mises en garde. La politique de banalisation des emballages doit aborder ces innovations en limitant leur utilisation et en les empêchant de discréditer les mises en garde.

MOTS CLÉS : politique (principe); santé publique; tabac