

RESEARCH PAPER

Tobacco point of sale advertising increases positive brand user imagery

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Objectives: To determine the potential impact of point of sale advertising on adolescents so as to inform changes to the Tobacco Control Act.

Design: Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the control condition, students were exposed to a photograph of a packet of cigarettes; in the intervention condition, students were exposed to an ad for cigarettes, typical of point of sale advertising posters. All students then rated the brand user on a set of 12 bipolar adjectives. Two brands were used in the study: Benson & Hedges, and Marlboro.

Subjects: One hundred year (grade) 6 and 7 students (age range 10-12 years), from four Western Australian metropolitan primary schools, participated in the study.

Results: In a majority of the brand user descriptions, the cigarette advertisements increased brand user imagery in a positive way, especially for Benson & Hedges. For example, participants viewing the Benson & Hedges advertisement, as distinct from those viewing the Benson & Hedges pack only, were more likely to describe the Benson & Hedges user as *relaxed, interesting, cool, rich, adventurous, and classy*. Relative to the Marlboro pack only, the Marlboro ad increased positive perceptions of the Marlboro user on *adventurous, interesting, and relaxed*.

Conclusions: The results presented here support restrictions being placed on advertising at point of sale, since such ads have the potential to increase positive brand user imagery directly in the situation where a product purchase can take place, and hence the potential to increase the likelihood of impulse purchasing.

Adolescent smoking rates have levelled out in many countries, but appear to be increasing in others.^{1,2} It has been estimated that in Australia, 20 000 teenagers commence smoking each year,³ and in the USA this figure is close to one million.³ In both countries, almost 90% of smokers commenced smoking before the age of 18.^{2,4} Of those who smoke daily in high school, it is projected that 75% will still be smoking 7-9 years later, and one third of these early starters will die from tobacco related causes.⁵

Although the tobacco industry claims that tobacco advertising and promotion are not aimed at those under age, it is widely accepted that cigarette advertising and promotion play a part in children's decision to smoke.⁶⁻¹⁰ The industry argues that, far from encouraging the uptake of smoking, its primary purpose is to encourage adults to switch brands.¹¹

Innovative studies that have utilised pictures of brand names and logos have shown that children as young as 3 years old can correctly recognise logos and understand advertisements,¹² with up to 90% of US 6 year olds being able to recognise the cartoon character Joe Camel. Other studies using similar techniques have shown that tobacco advertisements are widely recognised by young children, with primary school children being able to identify cigarette brands from advertisements in which the brand names were obscured.¹³ A similar study found that exposure to and awareness of tobacco advertisements are positively correlated with adolescent smoking.¹⁴

Cigarette brand advertising and promotion are characterised by "user imagery" creative tactics.^{15,16} It is felt that young people are particularly vulnerable to such advertising, as it contributes to self identity.¹⁷

Point of sale advertising

Point of sale advertising has become an established means of targeting consumers. The Point of Purchase Advertising Insti-

tute, an industry trade group in the USA, asserts that point of sale advertising is designed to target consumers at the place where they will buy the product, drawing shoppers' attention to the advertised brand when they are in the buying mood. It has been found that tobacco impulse purchases increase by as much as 28% when displays are present.¹⁸

An indication of how effective point of sale advertising can be has been demonstrated by Rothmans in Australia with their deck chair display for their Holiday brand. The deck chair display was produced for placement in 50% of tobacco outlets. Market share growth after two staggered six week campaigns over a nine month period achieved a 1.2% increase for the brand, from 7.0% to 8.2% of total industry sales.¹⁹

With the lucrative return that can be generated from point of sale advertising, and restrictions on other forms of advertising, it is not surprising that the tobacco industry is diverting large sums of money into this promotional avenue. It has been estimated in Australia that tobacco companies are spending as much as A\$15 000 per retail outlet, extending the shop floor area and enabling primary placement of their products. There is no cost to retailers involved, who are merely obliged to provide primary placement of tobacco products for a fixed period. These new and extended counters and display units allow the store to carry and display a quantity of stock that far exceeds demand.²⁰ In 1999, The Point of Purchase Advertising Institute awarded its "Permanent Display of the Year" award to RJ Reynolds Tobacco for its Camel trade store program.²¹

With no restrictions at point of sale, cigarettes are placed in the corner store alongside soft drinks, lollies, and chewing gum, all products that are innocuous and appeal to the young consumer. A recent survey of tobacco promotion awareness among 15 and 16 year olds in north east England found that 100% of the 629 young people surveyed had seen point of sale marketing for cigarettes.²²

Tobacco control legislation and point of sale

As the 2006 European Union ban on overt promotion of tobacco products draws nearer, marketing experts have “warned” that point of sale will become the last avenue for brand building by the tobacco industry. Similarly, in the UK, the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill being debated in the Lords seeks to ban all tobacco promotion except point of sale.²³

Last year, two pieces of Massachusetts legislation which aimed to curb the use of point of sale tobacco promotions within that state were overturned by the US Supreme Court²⁴ on the grounds that they were unconstitutional. Importantly, these pieces of legislation, which were aggressively fought by the tobacco and advertising industries, did not provide for a total ban on point of sale, but merely limited it to being more than 1000 feet (300 m) from schools and playgrounds, being at least five feet (1.7 m) off the ground, and banning giveaways.²⁵

Within Australia, as for the US, legislation varies between states. In New South Wales, for example, point of sale promotions of tobacco products were banned with effect from 31 August 1999.²⁶ In Western Australia, the Tobacco Control Act 1990 severely restricts tobacco sponsorship, advertising, and promotion; prohibits competitions, inducements, free samples, and merchandise along with promotion of tobacco products; makes selling tobacco to persons under 18 years of age a criminal offence; and limits the location of vending machines. A review of the Act in 1995 found that a major area of concern related to point of sale advertising in retail outlets and recommended prescribing the number, size, and placement of tobacco advertisements that may be inside a shop or retail outlet. They also recommended that the definition of a dispensing unit be changed to be more prescriptive.²⁷ However the government has failed to act upon the recommendations.

The Health Department of Western Australia estimates that there are over 4000 outlets selling cigarettes throughout the state. If Australian teenagers visit such stores as frequently as their US counterparts (three out of four teenagers shop at convenience stores at least once a week¹²) it means that adolescents are continually exposed to point of sale advertising.

Point of sale represents an effective advertising avenue for tobacco companies to promote their product and increase their market. This study aims to determine the impact of point of sale tobacco advertising on young people, as this remains one of the few avenues available to tobacco marketers, so as to ascertain the need for changes to the Tobacco Control Act.

METHOD

Participants

A convenience sample of 100 year (grade) 6 and 7 students (age range 10–12 years) from four Western Australian metropolitan primary schools, two with largely blue collar and two with largely white collar catchment areas, participated in the study. The school principals were approached in writing and then followed up with a telephone call requesting the participation of their years 6 or 7 in the study. All agreed, with two requiring a notification letter for the students’ parents. Convenient times to conduct the research were arranged and the questionnaires were completed in the classroom under the supervision of the teacher and the researcher. One class only was selected from each school, such that two schools provided access to a year 6 class and two provided access to a year 7 class. All students present on the day of testing were included in the study.

Study design

Two brands were used in the study: Benson & Hedges and Marlboro. Although these brands do not have a high market share among schoolchildren, they are well known among

Table 1 Percentage of children who could correctly identify the product type (n = 100)

Product name	Correctly identified the product type (%)
Uncle Toby’s (food)	97
Winfield (cigarettes)	88
Coca Cola (drink)	100
Peter Jackson (cigarettes)	87
Mars (food)	99
Colgate (other)	98
Milo (drink)	99
Holiday (cigarettes)	81
McDonalds (food)	98
Benson & Hedges (cigarettes)	83
Cadbury (food)	98
Nike (other)	99

students³ (table 1; Benson & Hedges awareness). Hence it was felt that any impact of advertising would be strong evidence for a point of sale advertising effect relative to the impact for unknown brands. The “control” condition for each brand was exposure to the cigarette pack only. The “intervention” condition was exposure to a poster ad for the brand. Randomising brands and conditions across students, the students were exposed to a photograph of a packet of cigarettes for one brand and to a poster style ad for the other brand. Hence, approximately n = 50 students were exposed to each brand in each condition. The ads used were selected from magazines published overseas but available in Australia.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was piloted on 11 children from a non-participating school, and changes made accordingly. The questionnaire took approximately 20–30 minutes to complete and comprised three sections.

Section 1 measured recognition of 12 product brand names and logos. These were Uncle Toby’s (cereal), Winfield (cigarettes), Coca Cola (soft drink), Peter Jackson (cigarettes), Mars (chocolate bar), Colgate (toothpaste), Milo (chocolate flavoured drink), Holiday (cigarettes), McDonalds (fast food), Benson & Hedges (cigarettes), Cadbury (chocolate), and Nike (sportswear). Participants were asked to match each brand name to a product by selecting one of four categories (food, cigarette, drink, “other”), or responding “don’t know”. Section 2 presented the children with colour photographs of the pack of one brand and a poster advertisement for the other. The order of presentation was randomised across respondents. After viewing the pack or advertisement, they then turned the page and were asked to describe, from what they saw in the picture, what kind of people they thought smoked the brand, by selecting from each of a set of 12 adjective pairs: relaxed—stressed out; boring—interesting; unhealthy—healthy; cool—uncool; rich—poor; timid—adventurous; someone I would like—someone I would not like; up-to-date—out-of-date; classy—ordinary; exciting—dull; unattractive—attractive; like me—not like me.

All participants first completed a practice example using a Quiksilver clothing advertisement.

Section 3 contained general questions on where the participants had seen cigarettes advertised, their smoking habits, and their attitude to smoking.

RESULTS

There were approximately equal numbers of girls (n = 47) and boys (n = 53), with the majority of the respondents being 11 years of age (59%) (19% 12 years; 22% 10 years). Only 11 students reported “ever smoking” (only one reported smoking in the “last seven days”).

Table 2 User imagery for Benson & Hedges pack and advertisement

Descriptive word	Benson & Hedges packet (n=50) (%)	Benson & Hedges ad (n=50) (%)
Relaxed**	24	46
Interesting***	18	44
Healthy	2	6
Cool	10	22
Rich***	34	66
Adventurous*	30	50
Someone I would like	22	30
Up-to-date	50	44
Classy	14	26
Exciting	20	30
Attractive	18	24
Like me	20	10

*p<0.1, **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 3 User imagery for Marlboro pack and advertisement

Descriptive word	Marlboro packet (n=50) (%)	Marlboro ad (n=50) (%)
Relaxed	14	26
Interesting	18	26
Healthy	2	0
Cool	10	12
Rich	36	38
Adventurous*	24	42
Someone I would like	20	20
Up-to-date	38	26
Classy	6	10
Exciting	16	16
Attractive	12	10
Like me	14	8

*p<0.1.

Brand identification

Children showed almost 100% awareness for many products, such as Nike, Mars, Coke, Cadbury, and McDonalds, which are purchased and/or consumed by people in their age group. The children's awareness of cigarette products, in terms of being able to identify correctly the brand names as cigarettes, was between 81–88%. This is a high level of awareness for adult products supposedly not marketed to the survey group. The results in table 1 are shown in the order they were given to the students.

Influence of advertising versus pack only

χ^2 analyses were used to assess differences between the conditions. In a majority of the brand user descriptions, the cigarette advertisements increased brand user imagery in a positive way, especially for Benson & Hedges (tables 2 and 3; positive adjectives only shown). For example, participants viewing the Benson & Hedges advertisement, as distinct from those viewing the Benson & Hedges pack only, were more likely to describe the Benson & Hedges user as *relaxed* (46% v 24%, $p = 0.035$), *interesting* (44% v 18%, $p = 0.009$), *cool* (22% v 10%, not significant (ns)), *rich* (66% v 34%, $p = 0.003$), *adventurous* (50% v 30%, $p = 0.066$), and *classy* (26% v 14%, ns). The impact of the Marlboro ad was substantially less, probably because the scene of outdoor camping was less relevant to this age group. Nevertheless, relative to the Marlboro pack only, those viewing the Marlboro ad were more likely to rate the Marlboro user as *adventurous* (42% v 24%, $p = 0.0884$), *interesting* (26% v 18%, ns), and *relaxed* (26% v 14%, ns). On the other hand, the Marlboro ad resulted in greater perceptions of the Marlboro user as *out of date* (74% v 62%, ns).

**Figure 1** Benson & Hedges advertisement.**Figure 2** Marlboro advertisement.

DISCUSSION

The generalisability of these results is limited by the small sample size and by the experimental nature of the study. Nevertheless, the methodology is similar to that employed by commercial advertising researchers. These results are consistent with previous studies that show children can easily recognise product brand names and their associated products,^{12–13} including cigarette brands, even though cigarettes have limited promotional avenues and tobacco companies claim that advertising is not directed at children.¹¹

It is not surprising that companies that invest large sums of money in advertising, such as Coca-Cola and Nike, are recognised by almost all the children (100% and 99%, respectively). What is noteworthy is that nearly 9 out of 10 children were able to recognise the names of cigarette brands, even though tobacco is supposedly an adult product and all forms of media advertising have been banned in Australia since before these children learned to read.

Children are referred to by marketing researchers as “consumers in training”. Market researchers believe that brand awareness and positive brand attitudes created in childhood can be the basis for product preference later in life.²⁸ This effect has even been shown to influence their preference for products that they are too young to use, such as lipstick and diet soft drink.²⁹ As the tobacco industry itself acknowledges, brand preferences at adolescence tend to remain fixed for life,^{30–31} hence making the youth market not just attractive, but essential for tobacco marketers to remain competitive.

Brand user imagery is one of the major positioning strategies that advertisers use to create positive attitudes to their brands, and hence an increased likelihood of purchase.³² This applies also to the product category.³² This study found

What this paper adds

There have been numerous studies of the impact of tobacco media advertising and other promotions on adolescents. However there are few studies that have attempted to assess the potential impact of point of sale tobacco advertising. This study shows that point of sale tobacco advertising has the potential to increase significantly positive brand user imagery, and hence not only adds to long term user imagery, but would increase the likelihood of impulse purchasing.

that advertising can improve a child's perception of people who use the product (user imagery). In the majority of cases, children who were shown a cigarette brand advertisement described the user more positively than those who were shown just a picture of a packet of the same brand of cigarettes. For example, when looking at a Benson & Hedges cigarette pack, 18% of children thought the user would be an *interesting* person, but when they looked at the advertisement this increased to 44%. This increase was noted in a range of categories, clearly indicating that point of sale advertising has the ability to impact on children's brand user imagery.

The two ads clearly had different impacts. The Benson & Hedges ad was a surrealistic drawing (fig 1) whereas the Marlboro ad depicted an outdoors adult scene (fig 2). Given today's children's visual literacy, such graphics appear to be one way tobacco advertisers can reach children without targeting them in a more direct manner that would arouse opposition. Many UK tobacco campaigns use these sorts of ambiguous (or "clever") visual images in their print and poster advertising (for example, the Silk Cut campaign).

Point of sale is obviously an excellent promotional avenue. About a third of children surveyed stated that they had seen cigarettes advertised in shops. Given that children are frequent visitors to shops, this leads to a potentially considerable amount of exposure. The results presented here, at least for Benson & Hedges, support restrictions being placed on advertising at point of sale, since such ads can increase positive brand user imagery directly in the situation where a product purchase can take place. Hence impulse purchases are more likely in such situations than where point of sale ads do not exist. Even if a purchase is not or cannot be made, exposure to the advertising increases user imagery and hence a positive predisposition towards the product for purchase at a later date. In short, the results presented here are precisely what any commercial advertiser would hope to see—that is, evidence that their point of sale advertising works!

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