Effects of dissuasive packaging on young adult smokers
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ABSTRACT
Background Tobacco industry documents illustrate how packaging promotes smoking experimentation and reinforces existing smokers’ behaviour. Plain packaging reduces the perceived attractiveness of smoking and creates an opportunity to introduce larger pictorial warnings that could promote cessation-linked behaviours. However, little is known about the effects such a combined policy measure would have on smokers’ behaviour.
Methods A 3 (warning size) *4 (branding level) plus control (completely plain pack) best-worst experiment was conducted via face-to-face interviews with 292 young adult smokers from a New Zealand provincial city. The Juster Scale was also used to estimate cessation-linked behaviours among participants.
Results Of the 13 options tested, respondents were significantly less likely to choose those featuring fewer branding elements or larger health warnings. Options that featured more branding elements were still preferred even when they also featured a 50% health warning, but were significantly less likely to be chosen when they featured a 75% warning. Comparison of a control pack representing the status quo (branded with 30% front of pack warning) and a plain pack (with a 75% warning) revealed the latter would be significantly more likely to elicit cessation-related behaviours.
Conclusions Plain packs that feature large graphic health warnings are significantly more likely to promote cessation among young adult smokers than fully or partially branded packs. The findings support the introduction of plain packaging and suggest use of unbranded package space to feature larger health warnings would further promote cessation.

INTRODUCTION
The World Heath Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) recognises smoking as the leading cause of preventable death and disease internationally and aims to limit the harm caused by tobacco.1 Signatories have agreed to restrict tobacco marketing and several have banned tobacco advertising and sponsorship, and restricted retail marketing. Nevertheless, marketing continues through other media, particularly the branding that appears prominently on tobacco packaging.2

At its most fundamental level, branding uses distinguishing symbols to help consumers identify products or services.3 However, brands comprise more than a series of signs or colours; they also possess symbolic meanings that marketers and consumers create jointly, to the extent that brands become relationship partners.4–6 This anthropomorphic status enables brands to develop, communicate and reinforce ideas, images and personalities; these attributes have particular significance in relatively homogeneous markets such as the tobacco market, where each market partition contains brands with similar functional properties.7 8 Cigarette companies create, promote and sell images that they communicate via branding, specifically brand livery, which includes colours, fonts, logos and images.9–11 The distinctive imagery associated with tobacco brands means this imagery functions as a ‘badge product’, for which consumers’ choice depends less on the brands’ physical properties than on their alignment with smokers’ (or potential smokers’) aspirations.2 9 Branding theory suggests the bonds between consumers and the brands they use are often robust, entrenched and resistant to change.5

Analyses of industry documents also highlight the crucial importance of branding, and of cigarette packaging as a medium to communicate brand attributes.9 Cigarette packets are meticulously researched and designed, their livery reassures smokers about risk12 and their brand imagery reinforces smokers’ self-image.11 Tobacco packaging thus ensures smokers and potential smokers continue to receive messages that promote smoking.

Increased regulation has led tobacco companies to rely on packaging to establish and reinforce brand imagery.2 15–15 Packaging is largely unregulated and, as cigarette packets are retained until empty, they are highly visible and frequently displayed to others. Moodie and Hastings concluded: ‘Tobacco packaging is no longer the “silent salesman” it once was...it now has to shout loudly. This increased volume is used to defy advertising bans and drown out health warnings’.16 Tobacco control researchers have argued that packaging’s role in promoting tobacco brands contravenes Articles 11 and 13 of the FCTC, and called for its regulation.17 Previous studies found the progressive removal of brand elements led adult smokers to view cigarette packs as increasingly unattractive. Furthermore, perceptions of the people who would smoke cigarettes from plain packages, the inferred experience of smoking these cigarettes and the risk of forming misleading beliefs were lower than for those smoking branded cigarettes.11 18

Young people are disproportionately at risk of taking up smoking and many appear resistant to interventions designed to deter smoking initiation among non-smokers and encourage smokers to make quit attempts.17 This group is also particularly susceptible to branding, so may be responsive to plain packaging and larger graphic warning