
Short Report

Young adult smokers' perceptions of illicit tobacco and the possible impact of plain packaging on purchase behaviour

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Plain (unbranded) packaging for cigarettes is at the top of the tobacco control agenda in both Australia and Europe. The evidence suggests that it will benefit public health by decreasing the appeal of tobacco products and increasing the power of the health warning. The tobacco industry instead argues that plain packaging would make it easier to counterfeit cigarettes, which would both confuse consumers and reduce price; thereby increasing consumption. Using focus group research we examined young adult smokers ($N=54$) perceptions of, and ability to recognize, illicit tobacco and the possible impact of plain packaging on illicit tobacco purchasing behaviour. We found that the pack has no impact on the decision to buy illicit tobacco. Smokers were easily able to identify counterfeit cigarettes, not least by the pack, and buy it knowingly and in the full expectation that it will be inferior in quality. Illicit tobacco purchase, including that for counterfeit tobacco, was instead driven by availability and price. Given the extremely low manufacturing cost, per pack, of certain types of illicit cigarettes, it is difficult to envisage how plain packaging would alter the price of illicit tobacco in any meaningful way. The findings therefore suggest that a move to plain packaging would have no impact on young adult smokers' purchase behaviour.

Keywords: Labelling, plain packaging, tobacco control

Introduction

The Australian Government has declared its intention to mandate plain packaging for all tobacco products by 2012. The European Commission is currently consulting on further revisions to the Tobacco Products Directive, which includes the possibility of plain packaging. These moves are supported by an evidence base which suggests that plain packs make tobacco products less attractive, increase the salience of health warnings and prevent the use of colours that consumers mistakenly associate with reduced harm.¹ The marketing literature confirms that the pack, the 'silent salesman', performs many important promotional functions.

Logically, then, mandating plain packaging for tobacco products should benefit public health. The tobacco industry argues, however, that such a move could be counterproductive by making counterfeit cigarettes simpler to produce, thereby confusing consumers about genuine product and also reducing the price of illicit tobacco which would, in turn, inadvertently increase consumption. Counterfeit cigarettes and the so-called 'cheap whites' have emerged as the primary form of illicit cigarette trade in the UK, and represent >90% of all large cigarette seizures in the UK in 2008/2009.² Counterfeit products are illegally manufactured, and bear a trademark without the consent of its owner. Cheap whites are legally manufactured cigarette brands, which are only intended for the illegal market. The most known 'cheap white' is Jin Ling, a cigarette brand legally manufactured in Russia, but destined for the illegal market in the rest of Europe.³

That the illicit cigarette trade is driven by macro-economic factors such as the presence of supply routes and distribution networks, the stringency of customs regulation and international cooperation,^{4,5} rather than micro-level factors such as pack design, suggests that plain packaging would not fundamentally change anything. Nonetheless, the industry argument that plain packaging would reduce costs for producing illicit tobacco, and make it easier to fool consumers, warrants further investigation. When considering the first of these points, it is important to note that the true cost of manufacturing illicit tobacco, on a large scale, is so low that it is difficult to envisage how it could be reduced much further. For instance, one of the most seized cigarette brands in the European Union is Jin Ling. The manufacturer of Jin Ling sells to smugglers by the container-load at 20 US cents (14 euro cents, 12 pence) a packet.³ At this cost it is simply not possible for plain packaging to make any meaningful difference to pricing.

In terms of making counterfeiting simpler to produce and therefore making it easier to fool people into thinking the copy is the real thing, two sets of people would have to be fooled: regulators and consumers. The need for regulators to be able to identify counterfeit tobacco has been recognized by policy-makers and measures have been taken to ensure this is possible. In Europe, for example, a purpose designed covert security mark has been mandated as part of the 'verification of genuine product' scheme.² Thus, regulators do not depend on pack design to identify counterfeit product and plain packaging would therefore have no effect on their ability to do so. Turning to the consumer, the tobacco industry position presupposes that (i) the decision to buy counterfeit cigarettes is influenced by pack design,