What Do Cigarette Pack Colors Communicate to Smokers in the U.S.?

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Background: New legislation in the U.S. prohibits tobacco companies from labeling cigarette packs with terms such as light, mild, or low after June 2010. However, experience from countries that have removed these descriptors suggests that different terms, colors, or numbers communicating the same messages may replace them.

Purpose: The main purpose of this study was to examine how cigarette pack colors are perceived by smokers to correspond to different descriptive terms.

Methods: Newspaper advertisements and CraigsList.org postings directed interested current smokers to a survey website. Eligible participants were shown an array of six cigarette packages (altered to remove all descriptive terms) and asked to link package images with their corresponding descriptive terms. Participants were then asked to identify which pack in the array they would choose if they were concerned with health, tar, nicotine, image, and taste.

Results: A total of 193 participants completed the survey from February to March 2008 (data were analyzed from May 2008 through November 2010). Participants were more accurate in matching descriptors to pack images for Marlboro brand cigarettes than for unfamiliar Peter Jackson brand (sold in Australia). Smokers overwhelmingly chose the “whitest” pack if they were concerned about health, tar, and nicotine.

Conclusions: Smokers in the U.S. associate brand descriptors with colors. Further, white packaging appears to most influence perceptions of safety. Removal of descriptor terms but not the associated colors will be insufficient in eliminating misperceptions about the risks from smoking communicated to smokers through packaging.

(Introduction) Product packaging is an important tool for producers to communicate with consumers. Tobacco manufacturers have effectively used cigarette pack design, colors, and descriptive terms to communicate the impression of lower tar or milder smoke while preserving taste “satisfaction.” Smokers’ beliefs about a given product are likely to be shaped in part by the descriptors, colors, and images portrayed on the pack and in related marketing materials. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Article 11) calls for a ban on misleading descriptors in an effort to address consumer misperceptions about tobacco products. New regulations contained in the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009 (FSPTCA) prohibit tobacco companies from labeling cigarette packs with terms such as light, mild, or low after June 2010. However, experience from countries that have removed these descriptors suggests that cigarette marketers circumvent the intended goal of the regulation by using different terms, colors, or numbers to communicate the same messages. Recent research has shown that consumers in the United Kingdom and Canada, which have removed “light” and “mild” descriptors, perceive cigarettes in packs with lighter colors as less harmful and easier to quit compared to cigarettes in packs with darker colors.

The main purpose of the present study was to examine how different pack colors are perceived by U.S. smokers to correspond to different descriptors. Participants were shown a series of packs for a brand with which they are familiar as being heavily marketed and sold in the U.S. (Marlboro, Philip Morris USA) as well as a brand with