

“They don’t draw attention”: Young Mexican Smokers Say Impact of Pictorial Health Warning Labels on Cigarette Packs Is Compromised by Branding

Fact Sheet

Background

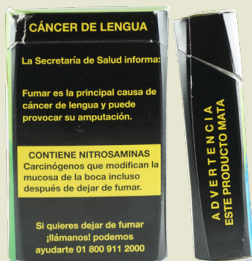
Visible at the point of sale, in hands of smokers, and in social settings, cigarette packs are an important advertising platform. Reviews of tobacco industry documents show that companies manipulate pack features to appeal to specific audiences.¹

Health warning labels (HWLs) can help diminish the appeal of packaging and communicate risks from tobacco use. Prominent pictorial HWLs featuring graphic depictions of harm may be particularly valuable in reducing packaging appeal.

Health Warning Labels in Mexico²



- Pictorial warning labels must cover 30% of pack front
- HWLs must rotate every 6 months



- Text warning labels must cover 100% of the back and one side of the pack

In November 2018, 15 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Mexico City, Mexico, to examine the ways in which cigarette packs appeal to adolescents and young adults, and **how the pack features affect perceptions of the HWLs**. The study was approved by the IRB at JHSPH and at the National Institute of Public Health (INSP), our local collaborator. FGDs were separated by gender (female vs. male), smoking status (smokers vs. non-smokers) and socioeconomic status (low vs. mid/high):

- Ten FGDs with adolescent smokers and non-smokers ages 13-17 years
- Five FGDs with young adult smokers, ages 18-24 years

This analysis focused on points of agreement and disagreement within and across groups of adolescents and young adults in discussions of visibility and impact of HWLs.



Participants examined a variety of cigarette packs. These are a few of the packs, highlighting some of the pack features discussed: use of bold, contrasting color; flavor indicator, such as flavor capsule and name; special edition; and, pack shape.

Main Findings

Adolescents discussed the HWLs in relation to the rest of the pack, explaining that appealing pack features detract attention from the HWLs. Both adolescents and young adults were dismissive of the consequences portrayed by the HWLs, feeling they were not relevant to their experiences.

Young adults were less responsive to the HWLs, explaining that they had grown accustomed to seeing them on packs. Still, young adults described a range of coping strategies for managing negative emotions elicited by the HWLs.

Health Warning Labels Fail to Stand out Against the Rest of the Pack

Pack features detract from pictorial warning labels

- *First thing I notice are the colors and design of the pack. I don't really notice these [warning] images. (Adolescent female, mid/high SES)*

Pictorial warning labels are too small

- *They don't distract from the rest of the pack because they are very small and hidden. They don't draw attention. (Adolescent female, low SES)*
- *They don't stand out more because [the picture] is small. (Male adolescent, mid/high SES)*

Health Warning Labels Change Perceptions of the Pack

Accustomed to Health Warning Labels

- *We are used to seeing these now. It has little effect. (Young adult female, low SES)*
- *This one seems normal to me, because I've seen this image many times. (Young adult male, low SES)*

Coping Strategies

- *I just tear off the top of the pack to take off that picture. (Young adult female, high SES)*
- *You can turn over [the pack] so you don't see it [the pictorial warning]. (Young adult female, mid/high SES)*

Conclusion and Recommendations

Appealing pack designs appear to be diverting the attention of young smokers away from health warning labels, thus comprising the impacts of this important information source. In addition, in the specific case of Mexico, having pictorial HWLs covering only 30% of the front of the pack allows smokers to easily avoid exposure to them by tearing the HWLs off or simply turning over the pack. Larger pictorial HWLs on both sides of the pack may enhance the visibility and improve effectiveness. Further, plain packaging completely restricts pack features and, consequently, diminishes the appeal of packs allowing more attention to be paid to the important messages communicated by HWLs.³



1. Wakefield M, Morley C, Horan JK, Cummings KM. The cigarette pack as image: new evidence from tobacco industry documents. *Tob Control* 2002 Mar;11 Suppl 1:173-80.
2. SEGOB. Diario Oficial de la Federación. Ley General para el Control de Tabaco en México. Available at: http://www.conadic.salud.gob.mx/pdfs/ley_general_tabaco.pdf.
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3. McNeill A, Gravely S, Hitchman SC, Bauld L, Hammond D, Hartmann-Boyce J. Tobacco packaging design for reducing tobacco use. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2017;4:CD011244.pmid:28447363.

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