

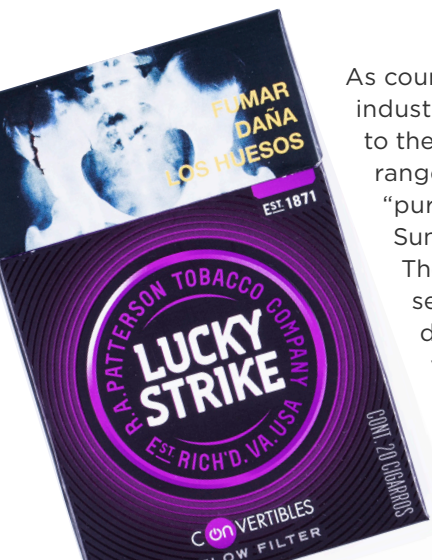
# CONCEPT DESCRIPTORS, REAL FLAVORS

The full published journal article is available at [Tobacco Control](#).



Our senses of taste and smell can register strong responses of memory and emotion. For years, the tobacco industry has used traditional flavor descriptors on packs such as menthol, fruit, and dessert to help sell their products.

As countries move to enact restrictions on flavors, the tobacco industry has moved beyond descriptors of traditional flavors to the use of “concept” descriptors. These concept descriptors range from suggestive terms like “fresh”, “ice burst”, and “purple”, to aspirational and fictional contexts like “Ibiza Sunset”, “Tokyo Midnight”, and “Double Fusion Velvet”. These concept descriptors imply that a taste, aroma or sensation awaits the user. Further enhancing these concept descriptors are elaborately designed packaging with vibrant color schemes and images [which consumers find to be eye catching and appealing](#).



One aim of the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is to reduce the appeal of tobacco products. Ratified by 182 countries, it states “*there is no justification for permitting the use of ingredients, such as flavoring agents, which help make tobacco products attractive.*” As of April 2020, 11 countries and the European Union (EU) have implemented a national-level tobacco product flavor policy. But the presence of flavors in cigarette packs with concept descriptors makes it clear that tougher bans are necessary for all tobacco products.



# RESEARCH

Since the landscape of flavors in tobacco products continues to evolve, no research existed about the kinds and amounts of flavor chemicals in cigarettes from packs with concept descriptors. We put together the first study of its kind, testing **27 packs** of cigarettes with concept descriptors from Mexico and Canada for **177 flavors**. We found **21 packs** that contained cigarettes with menthol as well as another flavor, all from Mexico. We designated these cigarettes as “menthol-plus.”

All cigarette packs from Mexico with menthol had flavor capsules in the filters, which is consistent with other findings that capsules have become a common means used by the tobacco industry to deliver flavor chemicals in cigarettes.



Concept descriptors on cigarette packs are in common use by multinational tobacco companies in Mexico as a means to market flavored cigarettes without explicit flavor identification.

Bans on flavored tobacco products have been shown to reduce adolescent tobacco use, but the tobacco industry exploits loopholes in tobacco control policies. Flavor bans need to be comprehensive across all flavors and across all tobacco products, concept descriptors cannot be allowed, and strong implementation of the ban are necessary to prevent tobacco companies from marketing some form of flavored tobacco product.



# CONCLUSIONS

Studies have shown that [bans on flavored tobacco products](#) can reduce adolescent tobacco use but the effect is diminished by the continued availability of menthol cigarettes and other flavored tobacco. Strong flavor ban policies are needed and in order to be effective, they must include bans on concept descriptors; larger health warning labels; and, stronger packaging restrictions including the implementation of [plain and standardized tobacco packaging](#). Countries should also implement stronger [regulations on point-of-sale advertising and promotion](#) which further enhances the appeal of these products. In Canada, tobacco companies are complying with the country's comprehensive flavor ban, which could be used as a model for other countries looking to eliminate menthol and flavored cigarettes.



Given that the harm from tobacco products depends in part on the number of people who use them and their patterns of use, and that product appeal is one determinant of patterns of use, it is important for regulators to address appeal including flavors. In addition to the actual flavors in tobacco products, research has found that appeal is also influenced by the presence of flavor descriptors, imagery and colors on the product packaging.

# THOUGHTS FROM THE AUTHORS

## IMPORTANCE

This is the first study to examine the flavor chemicals in cigarettes marketed with concept descriptors. This is important because the use of concept descriptors has grown, and it is essential to know whether these cigarettes contain flavor chemicals and, if so, which ones. This information is useful for countries considering restricting flavors in tobacco products, to ensure that there are no loopholes.



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Many countries already ban misleading descriptors such as "light" and "mild." This study shows that cigarettes marketed with concept descriptors do contain flavor chemicals, so it is important that policies restricting flavors take this into account (e.g., banning "characterizing flavors" may not be sufficient - [Erinoso et al](#) describe present stronger policies, such as the Canadian one).

Authors:

James F. Pankow  
Wentai Luo  
Kevin J McWhirter  
Samantha Gillette

Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering,  
Portland State University

Joanna E. Cohen

Institute for Global Tobacco Control, Department  
of Health, Behavior and Society, Johns Hopkins  
Bloomberg School of Public Health

## ROLE OF NAMES AND COLORS

This paper did not look at this but some of our other research ([Grilo et al](#); [Brown et al](#)) show that young people do find these names and colors appealing in Mexico and the Philippines, respectively.

