The packaging of tobacco products

Executive Summary
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This new report from the Cancer Research UK Centre for Tobacco Control Research at the University of Stirling considers packaging from a broad marketing perspective, and how it is perceived and used by the tobacco industry. New UK research exploring young people’s perceptions of both branded and plain packaging is also presented. The report provides:

1. A summary of the marketing function of packaging for consumer goods, including tobacco products
2. A review of research on tobacco industry documents in respect of tobacco packaging
4. Focus group research exploring young people’s perceptions of packaging for consumer products, including tobacco packaging and also plain packaging

Key findings:

Packaging: The multifunctional marketing tool
Packaging is an effective marketing medium that helps to build consumer relationships through possession and usage. Packaging innovation, design and value packaging are used to promote the product, distinguish products from competitors, communicate brand values and target specific consumer groups. These packaging strategies, together with the visual and structural aspects of packaging design, such as colour, size and shape, influence consumer perceptions and purchase and usage behaviour. They give packaging an important role both at point-of-purchase and post-purchase.

Packaging also has a close relationship with the product. For example both smokers and non-smokers erroneously associate lightly coloured packs with weaker product strength and reduced harm.

Packaging: A tobacco industry and retail perspective
Tobacco packaging has multiple functions for tobacco companies, beyond that of brand identification, navigation and selection. It is used to promote the product using the same strategies employed by other consumer goods manufacturers, specifically packaging innovation, design and value packaging. Packaging is viewed as a key marketing tool for tobacco companies, according to both their own internal documents and also the retail press. Packaging has a wider reach than advertising and is the most explicit link between the company and the consumer.

Perceptions of packaging and plain packaging: A focus group study
Research exploring young people’s perceptions of tobacco packaging found that youth appear to be attracted to tobacco packaging design. Branded packaging presented positive user imagery and functional and emotional benefits to young people. Conversely plain cigarette packaging was perceived as unattractive, reduced emotional attachment to the packaging and enforced negative smoking attitudes among young people. Plain packs with different shapes were also found to influence young people’s perceptions, suggesting that a standard shaped plain pack is the most effective approach to reducing the ability of packaging to communicate with young smokers and potential smokers.

The full report is available at www.cancerresearchuk.org/tobacco

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Extracts from research exploring young people's perceptions of plain packaging

About packaging generally:
I think the packaging is a big part of the product... Probably just as important as the product
(GIRLS, C2DE)
...something you would use in public. You don’t want to have to bring out something ugly
If it’s too big as well, so you can’t carry it around with you
(GIRLS, ABC1)

About superslims:
They’d be easy to hide
(GIRLS, C2DE)
If any of them are attractive it’s that one just because it’s kind of perfume shaped
(GIRLS, ABC1)
They (limited edition pack) look too colourful to be harmful...
(GIRLS, C2DE)

About packs of 14:
I don’t know if they are deliberately trying to sell to fourteen year olds, but I think it sort of appeals, because they’ll look at it...
They are sort of saying it without actually saying it, like subliminally saying you know, fourteen year olds
(BOY, ABC1)

About lighter pack colour:
They look cool, not friendlier, but they don’t look as harmful
You wouldn’t want to get into the strong stuff at the start
(GIRLS, ABC1)
See the packets with the white they look a lot less harmful ...
Cos it’s white, it just looks cleaner
(BOYS, ABC1)
The pink just looks really like it would attract teenage girls
(GIRLS, ABC1)

Emotional responses to packaging:
It (a particular brand) looks as if you’re like more mature. Better and more popular
(BOY, C2DE)
It (a different brand) makes me feel quite cool ...It makes you feel stylish and that, kind of upper class
(BOY, C2DE)

About plain packs:
Looks dead cheap ...No one would buy it
(GIRLS, ABC1)
You’d feel better about it (smoking) than carrying that brown thing (plain pack) ...
To see that (plain pack) you’d think, ‘what am I doing, carrying this about?’
...Aye, in front of all your pals if you brought it out you wouldn’t feel embarrassed, but if you brought that (plain pack) out you’d be pure embarrassed. People who don’t smoke would look at you like they were ashamed of you
(BOYS, C2DE)
I think that one (plain pack) looks like you’d be more ill if you kept smoking them but they ones (superslims) look like you wouldn’t be so unwell if you smoked them for ages
(GIRLS, C2DE)

Some examples of existing packs.
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