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## Tobacco Industry Smoking Prevention Advertisements' Impact on Youth Motivation for Smoking in the Future

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# TOBACCO INDUSTRY SMOKING PREVENTION ADVERTISEMENTS' IMPACT ON YOUTH MOTIVATION FOR SMOKING IN THE FUTURE

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REVIEWED | and Owen B. J. Carter

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to assess the impact on young people of three tobacco industry (TI) advertisements previously screened on MTV Europe and in cinemas in Australia. The three ads were exposed to 14–18-year-old smokers and non-smokers using commercial advertising copy-testing techniques. The primary dependent variable for both smokers and non-smokers was the advertisement's ability to increase feelings of not wanting to smoke in the future, and, for smokers, the extent to which the ad made current smokers think they should try to stop smoking. The results for the TI ads were compared with copy testing data for youth-targeted Western Australian tobacco control (TC) ads.

The TI ads performed as well or better than some TC ads, but not as well as other TC ads suggesting that attacks on the tobacco industry for airing smoking prevention ads cannot always use these ads' ineffectiveness as an argument for their removal. However, these tobacco industry ads may increase positive (or lessen negative) attitudes toward the tobacco industry, which could further the industry's aims of increased support or less criticism from community groups. It may be that this is the more important reason for advocates to call for such ads to be withdrawn.

## INTRODUCTION

Following Goldberg's (1995) call for social marketing to engage in more research relevant to policy and the social environment rather than focusing only on individual change, several authors have called for a more upstream

emphasis in social marketing (e.g., Andreasen 2004; Donovan 2000; Hastings and Donovan 2002; Hastings, MacFadyen, and Anderson 2000). Goldberg (1995) in particular pointed to the need to assess the impact of “sin product” marketers’ promotional strategies on vulnerable audiences such as youth, so that appropriate policies and regulations could be advocated from a solid evidence base.

More recently, the situation has arisen where a “sin” marketer actively engages in countermarketing of its product to a particular target population – namely, tobacco marketers engaging in youth smoking prevention campaigns. For example, in 1998 Philip Morris launched a youth smoking prevention television campaign in the USA targeted at both youth (“Think. Don’t smoke.”) and parents (“Talk. They’ll listen.”) (Henriksen and Fortmann 2002). The aim of the ads targeted at youth was to promote the messages that smoking was not cool and not necessary for self-identity (Sussman 2002). In 1999, Lorillard launched an advertising campaign also with the stated aim of promoting the message that it’s not cool to smoke (Sussman 2002). Philip Morris ceased their youth television campaign in the USA in 2003, although variations of the campaign continued in Europe, Latin America, and Asia (WHO 2004).

There has been much skepticism about the motivations for and effectiveness of these tobacco industry (TI) ads, with health groups denouncing the campaigns as a token or insincere effort by tobacco companies to address community concerns about youth smoking rather than genuine attempts to prevent youth smoking (e.g., Assunta and Chapman 2005; ASH 2001; Landman, Ling, and Glantz 2002). Others doubt the sincerity of these industry ads by noting that they do not include themes and

execution elements that best predict effectiveness in deterring youth smoking (Wakefield et al. 2002; 2005). This cynicism appears to be well-founded given that an internal Philip Morris memo from 1991 stated that the “ultimate means for determining the success of industry-funded youth anti-smoking initiatives would be: 1) a reduction in legislation introduced and passed restricting or banning our sales and marketing activities; 2) passage of legislation favorable to the industry; 3) greater support from business, parent, and teacher groups” (WHO 2002). It is clear that these tobacco industry objectives are “upstream objectives,” although the marketing tool used (youth smoking prevention ads) appears to target “downstream” objectives. Hence tobacco control advocates have mainly assessed the “downstream” efficacy of these ads in an attempt to show their relative ineffectiveness and hence draw attention to the tobacco industry’s covert upstream objectives.

A number of researchers have undertaken various assessments of the Philip Morris “Think. Don’t Smoke” (TDS) ads aired in the USA (Biener 2002; Farrelly et al. 2002; Healton 2001; Niederdeppe et al. 2005). Although these assessments have varied in their methodological approach, the general conclusion has been that the Philip Morris ads are less effective than health organization anti-tobacco ads – and may even be counterproductive. For example, Healton (2001) found that amongst 12–17-year-olds, the “Truth” campaign ads were more convincing than the Philip Morris TDS ads; Biener (2002) reported that the TDS ads were given lower ratings on a perceived effectiveness scale than were health organization anti-tobacco ads; and Farrelly et al. (2002) found that attitudes toward tobacco companies were more favorable amongst those exposed to the tobacco industry

advertising than those not reporting such exposure.

In 2001, British American Tobacco (BAT), Philip Morris (PM), and Japan Tobacco International (JTI) launched an advertising campaign on MTV Europe. The ads featured a teen doing normal “cool” things while being a non-smoker, and were apparently based on focus group research with young people (WHO 2002). The advertisements apparently aimed to persuade teenagers that it is possible to be cool and popular without smoking (Landman, Ling, and Glantz 2002). The message strategy, formative research, and media schedule were criticized by health organizations because the message contained no information on health risks, the research apparently did not canvas other potentially more effective message strategies, and the media schedule was too light to reach many youth or yield an effective frequency amongst those reached (WHO 2002).

Three of these TI MTV advertisements were adapted for Australia and shown in cinemas in most states in December 2002 and January 2003. All three advertisements (Alex, Silvia, and Matt) have upbeat background music with no other audio. Copy is faded in and out in the advertisements. The Alex advertisement shows a young male playing in a band and mixing with females, with the copy: “Alex 17 . . . does jam . . . does dates . . . does crowds . . . doesn’t smoke.” The Silvia advertisement shows a young female shopping by herself, with quick shots of her with friends at a café and talking on a mobile phone. The copy says: “Silvia 15 . . . does fashion . . . does her own thing . . . does style . . . doesn’t smoke.” The Matt advertisement shows a young male surfing, skateboarding, and hanging out with friends on a beach, with the copy: “Matt 15 . . . does practice . . . does wipe out . . . does succeed . . . doesn’t smoke.”

These MTV cinema ads shown in Australia differ somewhat from the “Think. Don’t Smoke.” (TDS) ads shown in the USA. The MTV ads show the actors in motion whereas the TDS ads were a series of stills of the actors; several of the TDS ads delineated the young actors’ reasons for not smoking (although none mentions ill-health or negative cosmetic effects of smoking); and, in general, the TDS ads emphasize positive health benefits of not smoking, that it’s not cool to smoke, and that smoking or not smoking is a choice that young people have to make (Terry-McElrath et al. 2005). At least some of the TDS ads also showed (for 3–4 seconds) the Surgeon General’s warning that smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, and emphysema. The TI ads shown in Australia had no ill-health effects messages or health authority signature – just a small logo and website ([www.youthsmokingprevention.info](http://www.youthsmokingprevention.info)) on screen for about one second.

While the MTV ads have been criticized as “ineffective” (WHO 2002), the potential efficacy of these executions has not been assessed empirically. This article presents the results of a study investigating reactions to these three tobacco industry MTV advertisements by 14–18-year-old smokers and non-smokers. The results for the tobacco industry ads are compared to pre-testing results for ads used in the Western Australian youth targeted Smarter Than Smoking (STS) campaign (Donovan Research 1999; Clarkson et al. 2005) and for anti-smoking advertising concepts evoking the emotion of disgust developed by the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer Control (Donovan and Henley 2003).

One set of STS advertisements attempted to make smoking “not cool” by attacking via ridicule the use of cigarettes as props in fashion photos and movies. For example, one ad showed a young female model coughing uncontrollably after

**FIGURE 1**  
Summary of Ads and Their Main Themes

Ads	Main Themes
Tobacco Industry MTV	Can be cool and popular without smoking.
STS Fashion/Soaps	Fashion and movie industry use smoking to look cool – but models/actors actually don't smoke.
STS Bus Stop	Smoking leads to loss of fitness, smelly breath and clothes, and costs money.
Disgust	Smoking is associated with maggots, cockroaches, rubbish.

taking a drag on a cigarette, thus interfering with the fashion shoot; another showed the set of a soap opera and a young male actor refusing to kiss a female actor because she was smoking, thus disrupting filming. Hence these ads were labelled "Fashion/Soaps." Another set of STS ads deals with the immediate effects of smoking: lack of fitness; smelly breath and clothes; and cost. For example, in one version, two girls talk about one losing a boyfriend because of the smell associated with her smoking; a boy loses his place on the football team because of a lack of fitness due to his smoking; and young people lament being unable to afford a concert ticket because they spent their money on cigarettes. The ads were labelled "Bus Stop" because one of the scenarios features young people at a bus stop. The Disgust advertisements associate smoking with disgusting stimuli such as maggots and cockroaches or disgusting actions, such as sorting through rubbish and finding and lighting a discarded cigarette. The ads and their main message themes are summarized in Figure 1.

## METHODS

The testing procedure and questionnaire items were based on

standard commercial copy testing procedures (Rossiter and Percy 1997), adapted for pre-testing health communications (e.g., Donovan, Jalleh, and Henley 1999) and used extensively by the STS program and the Western Australian Quit campaign for pre-testing tobacco control ads (Donovan, Leivers, and Hannaby 1999; NFO-Donovan Research 2002).

## PROCEDURE

Young people aged 14–18 years were intercepted by professional interviewers in the city center shopping mall and invited to the research company's test room to participate "in research on people's opinions about health issues." Subject to quota requirements, appropriately screened respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three tobacco industry advertisements. Respondents viewed the ads on a TV screen. The ad was shown twice without headers or footers and with a 5-second gap before the respondent completed an interviewer-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire first measured respondents' cognitive responses with respect to thoughts, feelings and images that went through their minds as they

**TABLE 1****Sample Composition: Smoking Status and Gender Age Breakdowns for Each Group of Ads**

	Tobacco Industry ads N = 257 (%)	Smarter than Bus Stop N = 240 (%)	Smoking ads: Fashion/Soaps N = 150 (%)	Disgust Ads N = 573 (%)
Gender				
Males	50	50	50	50
Females	50	50	50	50
Age group				
14–15 years	41	38	100	45
16–18 years	59	62	0	55
Smoking Status				
Smokers	50	50	100	68
Non-smokers	50	50	0	32

watched the ad as well as understanding of the ad's message. The measures described below were then obtained, followed by measures of likes and dislikes and demographic data. Ethnicity was not measured.

A quota was applied so that, for each ad, half the sample were males and half were smokers within each of the two age groups 14–15 years and 16–18 years (Table 1). In total, 257 young people viewed the ads, with approximately 85 respondents viewing each ad.

**MEASURES**

Most of the questionnaire items were used previously in pre-testing the STS and Disgust advertisements. The measures reported here are as follows:

- (1) "How much did the ad make you feel that you did not want to smoke in the future?" (5-point scale: *a lot; quite a bit; a little; not much; not at all*);
- (2) "To what extent did the ad make you think you should try to stop smoking?" (5-point scale: *a lot; quite a bit; a little; not much; not at all*) (Smokers only);
- (3) "How believable was the message in the ad?" (4-point scale: *very; somewhat; not very; not at all*);
- (4) "Overall, how well do you think the person who made this ad understands people your age?" (4-point scale: *understands very well; understands fairly well; doesn't understand very well; doesn't understand at all*); and
- (5) "Would you say that the ad was aimed at people older than you, people in your age group, or people younger than you?" (5-point scale: *people much older than me; people slightly older than me; people in my age group; people slightly younger than me; people much younger than me*).

## RESULTS

The sample compositions for the various data sets are shown in Table 1. The STS Fashion/Soap ads were shown only to 14–15-year-old smokers. Hence the major comparisons are between results for the TI, Bus Stop and Disgust ads. Smokers are defined as those who reported smoking all or part of a cigarette in the last week.

Apart from perceived target audience age (“Matt” viewers were more likely than viewers of “Sylvia” and “Alex” to state the ad was aimed at people slightly younger than themselves), there were no significant differences between the three TI ads on the measures described above. Hence the results were combined for the three ads for further analyses. The mean results for the five variables of interest are shown in Table 2 by gender, age, and smoking status. A 2 (gender) × 2 (smoking status) × 2 (age) ANOVA was conducted for each of the five measures. Significant differences are indicated in Table 2. There were no significant interactions for any of the variables.

In general, and consistent with the literature, non-smokers responded

significantly more favorably than smokers with respect to not wanting to smoke in the future, message believability, and ad maker’s perceived understanding of people their age. Also consistent with the literature, younger respondents responded significantly more favorably than older respondents with respect to the ads’ impact on not wanting to smoke in the future, but there was no age difference for message believability or perceived understanding of people their age, or for smokers’ thinking they should stop smoking.

The results for the major variables of interest are shown graphically in Figures 2 through 5 for the three TI ads combined and for the STS and Disgust ads for the two age groups, 14–15 years and 16–18 years, and according to smoking status (i.e., smokers vs. non-smokers). Chi Square was used to test for differences in impact between the TI and TC ads. Given the nature of the study population, the moderate sample sizes and the field rather than laboratory data collection, we refer to both significant ( $p < .05$ ) and near significant ( $p < .10$ ) results.

TABLE 2

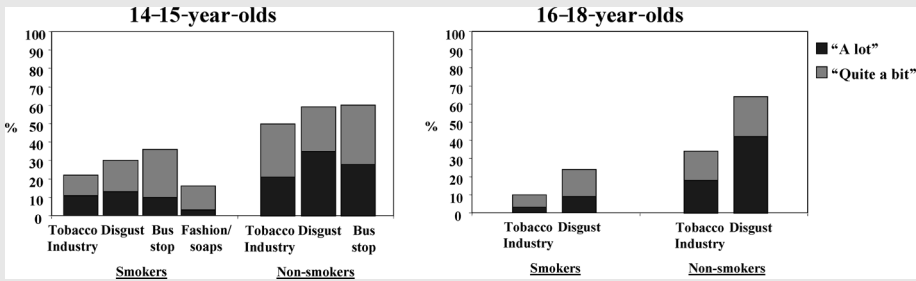
## Means by Smoking Status, Gender, and Age for Tobacco Industry Ads

Variable (scale)	Smoking Status		Gender		Age	
	Smkr	Non Smkr	Boy	Girl	14–15	16–18
Not want to smoke in future (1–5)*	3.7	2.9 <sup>^</sup>	3.4	3.3	3.1	3.5 <sup>^^</sup>
Think should try to stop smoking (1–5)*	3.5	N/A	3.4	3.6	3.3	3.7
Believability of message (1–4)*	2.1	1.8 <sup>^^</sup>	2.1	1.9 <sup>^</sup>	2.0	2.0
Ad maker understands audience (1–4)*	2.4	1.9 <sup>^^</sup>	2.2	2.1	2.1	2.2
Aimed at your age group (1–5)**	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.1	2.8	3.2 <sup>^^</sup>

\*lower numbers indicate greater ad impact; \*\*lower number indicates ‘older.’

<sup>^</sup>p < .01; <sup>^^</sup>p < .05.

**FIGURE 2**  
Impact of Ads on Not Wanting to Smoke in the Future



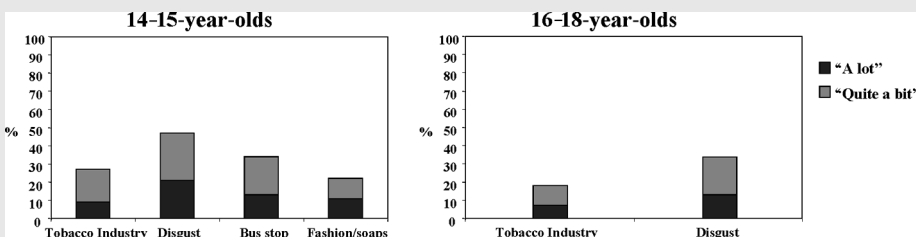
**Impact on Not Wanting to Smoke in the Future.** Figure 2 shows that amongst 14–15-year-old smokers, the proportion of respondents reporting “a lot” that the ad made them not want to smoke in the future was similar for the TI, Disgust, and STS Bus Stop ads, and all were significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) than for the STS Fashion/Soaps advertisements (11% vs. 13%, 10%, 3%, respectively). Among 14–15-year-old non-smokers, the top box (“a lot”) response was lower for the TI ads compared to the Disgust ads (21% vs. 35%;  $p = .08$ ).

Among 16–18 year old smokers, the Disgust ads performed better than the TI ads (“a lot”: 9% vs. 3%,  $p = .06$ ; “a lot/quite a bit”: 24% vs. 9%,  $p = .01$ ). The Disgust ads also significantly out-performed the TI ads among older non-smokers (“a lot”: 42%

vs. 18%,  $p = .00$ ; “a lot/quite a bit”: 64% vs. 34%,  $p = .00$ ).

**Impact on Thinking about Trying to Quit (Smokers).** Figure 3 shows the impact of the ads on thinking about quitting among smokers. For 14–15-year-old smokers, the proportion of respondents reporting that the ad made them think about trying to quit “a lot” was similar for the TI ads and the STS Bus Stop and Fashion/Soaps ads (9% vs. 12% and 11%, respectively), but significantly lower than for the Disgust advertisements (9% vs. 21%;  $p = .05$ ). For the top two response categories combined, the TI ads performed better than the STS Fashion/Soaps ads (28% vs. 16%;  $p = .06$ ), but significantly lower than the Disgust advertisements (28% vs. 47%;  $p = .01$ ). For older (16–18 years) smokers,

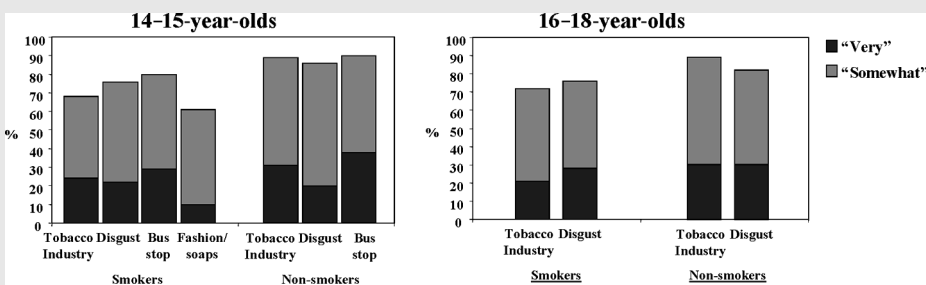
**FIGURE 3**  
Impact of Ads on Thinking about Quitting: Smokers Only





**FIGURE 4**

Proportion of Respondents who Perceived the Advertisement as Believable



the Disgust ads performed significantly better than the TI ads (“a lot/quite a bit”: 34% vs. 17%;  $p = .01$ ).

**Message Believability.** Figure 4 shows that among younger smokers, the proportion of respondents who rated the ads “very” believable was similar for the TI ads and the Disgust and STS Bus Stop ads, and all were significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) than for the STS Fashion/Soaps ads (24% vs. 22%, 29%, 10%, respectively).

For younger non-smokers, almost all found the TI, Disgust, and STS Bus Stop ads “very” or “somewhat” believable: 89%, 86%, and 90%, respectively. However, the proportion of respondents rating the TI ads “very” believable was higher than for the Disgust ads but lower than for the STS Bus Stop ads (31%, 20%, and 38%, respectively). However, the differences were not significant.

Among older smokers, the TI ads attracted less “very” believable responses than the Disgust ads (21% vs. 28%) but similar overall ratings for “very” or “somewhat” responses: 72% vs. 76%, respectively). The vast majority of older *non-smokers* found the Tobacco Industry and Disgust advertisements “very” or

“somewhat” believable (90% and 83%, respectively).

**Perceived Understanding of the Target Group.** Figure 5 shows the proportion of respondents rating the ad makers as understanding people their age. Among *smokers aged 14–15 years*, the TI ads were more positively perceived in terms of understanding people about their age than the STS Fashion/Soaps ads (52% “very” or “fairly” well vs. 45%), but less positively than the Disgust ads (59%) and significantly less than the STS Bus Stop ads (52% vs. 68%;  $p = .05$ ). Among younger *non-smokers*, a higher proportion of respondents felt people who made the TI ads understood people their age “very” or “fairly” well compared to the Disgust and STS Bus Stop advertisements: 90% vs. 79% and 86% respectively. However, none of these TI differences was significant.

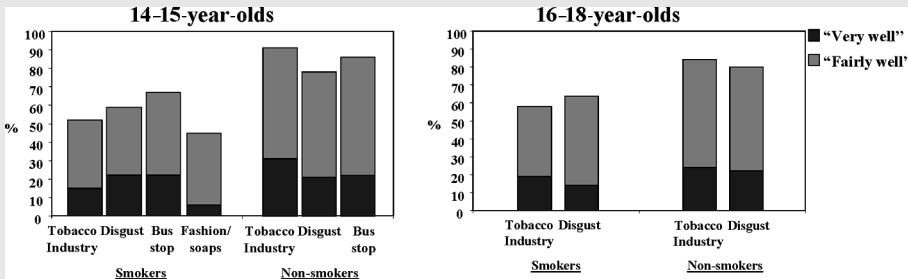
Among older non-smokers, for both advertisements, a high proportion of respondents felt that the people who made these advertisements understand people their age “very” or “fairly” well (TI: 84% and Disgust: 80%).

## DISCUSSION

Limitations of this study include a limited sampling of tobacco industry

**FIGURE 5**

Proportion of Respondents who Perceived the Person who Made the Advertisement Understands People Their Age



and tobacco control ads, and non-simultaneous comparison data. Nevertheless, in terms of not wanting to smoke in the future amongst non-smokers, and trying to quit amongst younger smokers, the TI advertisements tested here performed better than the STS Fashion/Soaps advertisements amongst younger respondents but not as well as the Disgust and STS Bus Stop advertisements. The TI ads did not perform as well as the Disgust advertisements in increasing not wanting to smoke in the future among older (16–18 years) respondents, and older smokers who were shown the Disgust ads were far more likely to think about quitting than those shown the TI advertisements.

Overall then, these results do not show that the TI ads are ineffective with respect to smoking prevention. In that sense, these results are consistent with others' findings. For example, although conclusions about tobacco industry advertising are sometimes framed as "likely to be ineffective" (e.g., Wakefield et al. 2003, 240), some results suggest they are simply likely to be less effective than tobacco control ads. Terry-McElrath et al. (2005), when comparing eight tobacco industry ads (including TDS ads) against a large variety of health

organization anti-tobacco ads ( $n = 37$ ), found little difference on any of their measures between the results for the combined tobacco control ads and the combined tobacco industry ads. Similarly, Niederdeppe et al. (2005) reported that the TDS "my reasons" ad performed better than the Truth "shredder" ad on their composite ad evaluation score, and, for 13–15 year olds, not substantially less than two other Truth ads. However, and consistent with other reports, the TDS ad scored substantially lower than the Truth ads against older (16–18 years) smokers.

As noted in the Introduction, the tobacco industry does not include smoking prevention as an objective of its youth anti-smoking initiatives, and, although not explicitly measured here, other studies have suggested that tobacco industry ads in the US may be counterproductive, particularly in lessening negative attitudes towards the tobacco industry (Farrelly et al. 2002). Such findings are consistent with the tobacco industry's aims for their ads (ASH 2004). Our results with respect to believability and the ad maker's understanding of youth provide an indication of why this might be the case. It may well be that the credibility of the advertising message and this perceived

empathy with the audience lessens negative affect towards the ad source.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our and others' results suggest that some tobacco industry ads may be as effective as some health authority tobacco control ads in impacting intentions to not smoke in the future. These results provide smoking prevention campaigners with a considerable challenge to increase the potential effectiveness of their advertising.

Also, although generally less effective from a smoking prevention view, these tobacco industry ads were considered to be as believable as the tobacco control ads and to generate equal if not better empathy with the target audience in terms of the ad maker's understanding of the target age group. These results suggest that these tobacco industry ads may increase positive (or lessen negative) attitudes toward the tobacco industry, which could further the industry's aims of increased support or less criticism from youth groups in the community. It may be that this is the more important reason for tobacco control advocates to call for such ads to be withdrawn rather than their lesser effectiveness in terms of impact on smoking intentions.

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