



Room 101: are gender-specific cigarette packets the way forward?

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You asked me once,' said O'Brien, 'what was in Room 101. I told you that you knew the answer already. Everyone knows it. The thing that is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world...The worst thing in the world,' said O'Brien, "varies from individual to individual. It may be burial alive, or death by fire, or by drowning, or by implement, or fifty other deaths. There are cases where it is some quite trivial thing, not even fatal." [1]

The above quotation from George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984 offers an insight into the ways in which different people fear different perceived threats [1]. The threat of danger is an important element in current tobacco control policies [2, 3]. However, an examination of the current combined anti-smoking messages and graphics currently mandated by the European Union reveals a number of important issues [4]. In relation to the 42 required images, this includes both a lack of racial diversity [5], as well as an inequity in female representation [6]. These are important issues given higher smoking rates among members of some ethnic groups and the significance of smoking as a feminist issue [7–13]. The central importance of gender in health programming has long been acknowledged [14] and is a crucial consideration in relation to health equity [15].

In terms of the 14 required EU anti-smoking themes behind the images, it is clear that, although all are relevant to both

males and females, some are directly targeted more at one gender than the other [4, 6]. Perhaps the most obvious example of these gendered warnings is 'Smoking increases the risk of impotence' [4, 6]. Other messages that instead have more of a female gender focus include 'Smoking can kill your unborn child' and 'Smoking reduces fertility' [4, 6]. Although both have relevance to males, the impact is more direct among women. The gendered nature of these messages is also reflected in the gender composition of the images used in these warnings [6]. For example, the three graphical warnings for impotence each feature a male (see Fig. 1) [4]. The three fertility images respectively feature the following: a hand of a person of indeterminate gender, two women and a girl and an apparently heterosexual adult couple with a female doctor [4]. It is acknowledged that an important aspect of anti-smoking health warnings is their self-referential nature [16]. Therefore, the question must be asked how effective is it to feature either an issue that is less relevant, or someone of a different gender on the warning?

Complacency or simply maintaining the status quo on the issue of tobacco control is not acceptable. The damage wrought by tobacco-related mortality and morbidity is significant and costly [17–21]. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the decline in smoking rates appears to have stalled in countries such as Ireland [22]. Therefore, a new approach is required. Undoubtedly, part of this is the current move to introduce plain packaging [23]. However, another approach should be to creatively explore gender in the anti-smoking graphics and warnings.

On this issue, there are three distinct options. The first of these is to remove any image that identifies a particular gender, instead focusing on diseased non-gender-specific body parts (e.g. heart or lungs). Examples of such graphics can be seen in Fig. 2. At present, only a small proportion of the current EU mandated anti-smoking graphics is based on this tactic [4].

An alternative strategy may be to promote androgynous images in anti-smoking graphical imagery. However, although there has been a shifting in masculinities and femininities in

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Fig. 1 The three current EU anti-smoking warning graphics highlighting the risk of impotence

many Western cultures [24, 25], it is unclear whether this would be an effective strategy. Whether one views gender as a social construction or as having a more biological basis, its importance as a fundamental construct in many areas of contemporary society remains [26, 27].

The third option is a move towards gender-specific tobacco packaging with different packs being given to men and women. Such packaging would for example either exclude or reduce to minimum warnings that are not specific to the gender of the purchaser. Therefore, in the ‘female’ tobacco packaging, the impotence theme might, in the EU context, be removed or reduced from a 1-in-14 frequency to a frequency of 1-in-50, or 1-in-100. Gender-specific packaging would also change so that the vast majority of photographs featured people of the same gender as the purchaser. Emerging evidence demonstrates that the gender dimension of the self-referential aspect of tobacco warnings is important [28]. Evidence already exists noting how for example warnings over the impact of smoking on ageing skin and wrinkles can often hold or no relevance for men [29, 30], and the specificity of warnings about the health of unborn children [30, 31].

It must be acknowledged that there are few examples of products that when ordered are delivered in a gender-differentiated manner. However, examples do exist. For example, although the practice may now have ceased, many parents may be familiar with the practice of being asked the gender of a child when ordering a child’s ‘Happy Meal’ in McDonald’s fast food restaurants. This practice determined the type of ‘gender-specific’ toy that was given with the meal [32, 33]. A second example would be the old custom in more traditional

pubs in the UK serving a half pint of beer or cider for a woman in what is termed a ‘ladies’ glass, which features a more tapered glass [34–36]. The use of gender-specific packaging and hence imagery and warnings would also facilitate other moves at strengthening warnings on the basis of gender. At present, anti-tobacco text-based warnings in some EU countries, such as Spain, are based on a cultural norm of male as standard in linguistic terms [6]. Specific targeting of packs could thus avoid this norm and potentially increase the impact of some warnings to women.

The importance of combined graphic and text warnings should not be under-estimated. International evidence supports the effectiveness of such warnings [37, 38]. This is not surprising given, as noted by Noar et al. have noted ‘A pack-a-day smoker potentially sees a cigarette packet an estimated 7300 times per year (20 views/day x 365 days/year)’ [39]. Such exposure is obviously significantly higher than standard exposure to other anti-smoking initiatives, such as mass-media campaigns. How to fine tune such warnings to maximise impact therefore remains a crucial consideration. Gender-specific cigarette sales and warnings and imagery may be a step in the right direction

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

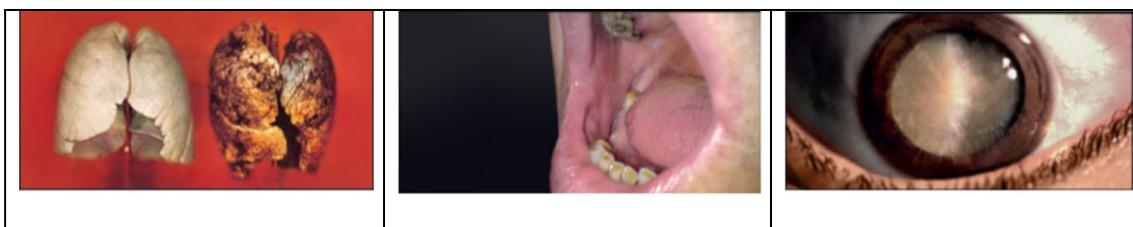


Fig. 2 Three non-gender specific diseased body parts used in current EU antismoking graphics

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