

MISLEADING INFORMATION AND PLAIN PACKAGING



Article 11.1(a) states that: tobacco product packaging and labelling shall not promote a tobacco product by any means that are false, misleading, deceptive or likely to create an erroneous impression about its characteristics, health effects, hazards or emissions, including any term, descriptor, trademark, figurative or any other sign that directly or indirectly creates the false impression that a particular tobacco product is less harmful than other tobacco products. These may include terms such as “low tar”, “light”, “ultra-light”, or “mild”.

Tobacco packaging provides a direct link between consumers and manufacturers, and serves as a vital marketing channel for the tobacco industry. Package design is primarily used to reinforce brand imagery, to minimize perceptions of risk, and to communicate **deceptive differences** in the risk of different brands.¹ There are three primary types of potentially misleading information on cigarette packages:

1. BRAND DESCRIPTORS

Packages incorporate a variety of words into the name of their cigarette brands to shape consumer perceptions. Words such as *light* and *mild* are ostensibly used to denote flavour and taste; however, *light* and *mild* brands are often promoted as “healthier” products and are typically applied to brands with filter ventilation that generates lower levels of tar when machine-tested.¹ These words are inherently misleading to consumers and promote the **false** impression that

brands called *light* and *mild* offer lower tar exposure and risk compared to other varieties.² Internal tobacco industry research indicates that these descriptors are targeted towards health-concerned smokers and can delay or prevent quitting.^{2,3}

A number of jurisdictions have prohibited the words *light*, *mild*, and *low tar*.

Manufacturers have substituted words such as *smooth*, as well as the names of colours, such as *silver* and *blue*, which capitalize on perceptions of these colours as being “lighter” and “healthier”. These replacement words have the same misleading effect as *light* and *mild*: a recent study found that more than 70% of smokers reported that packages with words such as *smooth* and *silver* would contain cigarettes with lower health risks than *regular* and *full flavour* brands.⁴ Evidence also indicates that youth perceive brands with *smooth* descriptors as lower tar and lower health risk.⁵



2. REFERENCES TO PRODUCT DESIGN AND EMISSIONS

Numbers are commonly used in the names of cigarette brands to distinguish between different varieties.² These numbers often correspond to the machine levels of tar emissions.¹ When shown packages with different numbers in the brand name, as many as 80% of smokers report that the brand with the lower number would deliver less tar and have lower health risk.⁴ Packages with pictures and references to special cigarette filters are also rated as having less tar and lower health risk.⁴ These references to product design and chemical profile on the package are meaningless in terms of actual risk; however, as internal tobacco industry documents indicate, the illusion of improved filtration and technology falsely reassures consumers.⁶



3. COLOURS AND BRAND IMAGERY

Colour is routinely used in package design to shape consumer perceptions of risk.^{7,8} Research has shown that consumers associate the “lightness” or “strength” of a brand with different colours.⁵ For example, blue and gold tones are perceived as “lighter” than red, while products in silver and white packages are perceived to be the “lightest.” Different shades of the same colour, as well as the proportion of white space on the package, can also be used to manipulate perceptions of strength.^{4,5,7} Cigarette packaging throughout the world is remarkably consistent in the application of these basic principles.



WHAT IS “PLAIN” PACKAGING?

Plain packaging regulations remove the colour, brand imagery, and logos from packages. Research indicates that plain packaging has three primary effects: 1) reductions in brand appeal and the attractiveness of packs, particularly among youth; 2) increases in the credibility and recall of health warnings; and 3) reductions in misleading beliefs about the health risks of different brands.^{4,5,7,9} In general, any measure that helps to standardize packaging across different brands – including restrictions on the type of fonts and shape of packs – will help to minimize the deceptive potential of packaging.⁷



SUMMARY

- ⊙ Tobacco packaging misleads smokers regarding the health risks of tobacco products.
- ⊙ Words such as *light*, *mild*, and *low tar* are inherently misleading and should be prohibited; however, prohibitions on brand descriptors must be broader in order to eliminate misleading substitutes.
- ⊙ Removing misleading information will require prohibitions on the use of colour and brand imagery.
- ⊙ Regulations that “standardize” the appearance of packaging will reduce the deceptive potential of packaging and will increase the effectiveness of health warnings.

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