

Araştırma

SİGARA PAKETLERİNİN ÜZERİNDEKİ YAZILI VE RESİMLİ UYARI MESAJLARI: SİGARAYI BIRAKMAYA GERÇEKTEN YARDIMCI OLUYORLAR MI?

Text and Graphic Warning Labels on Cigarette Packages: Do They Really Help to Quit Smoking?

Deniz ATİK*

Tuğba ÖRTEN**

Turgut VAR***

*Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Izmir University of Economics

**Research Assistant, Department of Business Administration, Izmir University of Economics

*** Professor, Department of Business Administration, Izmir University of Economics

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, sigara içme oranının dikkat çekici bir boyutta yüksek olduğu Türkiye’de yazılı ve resimli uyarı mesajlarının etkilerinin sigara içenlerin deneyimleri üzerine yapılan kalitatif bir çalışma ile ölçülmesi sonucu daha önce yapılan araştırmalara katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamıştır. Bu çalışmada sigara içen 100 gence sadece yazılı ve yazılı-resimli uyarı mesajlarının yer aldığı sigara paketlerinin gösterildiği projektif teknik uygulanmıştır. Sonuçlar yazılı-resimli mesajların farkındalığı arttırmak ve sigara içme ile ilgili sağlık sorunlarını tekrar düşünmeye teşvik etmek bakımından sadece yazılı olan mesajlara göre sigara içenler üzerinde daha etkili olduklarını ancak sigara kullanımını bırakırmada beklenildiği kadar etkili olmayabileceklerini ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: sigara içmek, uyarı mesajları, Türkiye

ABSTRACT

This study aims to contribute to previous researches measuring the impact of text and graphic warning labels on cigarette packages by adding a qualitative depth on the experiences of smokers living in Turkey, a country with a prominently high smoking rate. Projective techniques, showing the pictures of cigarette packages with text-only and text-graphic warning labels, were conducted with 100 young smokers. The results suggest that although text-graphic messages have bigger impact on smokers in terms of increasing the awareness and encouraging re-thinking about smoking related health risks when compared with text-only labels, they may not be effective in getting smokers to quit as expected.

Key Words: smoking, warning labels, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Medical research has shown that chronic tobacco smoking is a major contributor towards serious health problems such as lung cancer, cardiovascular disease, or respiratory disease (Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). Consequently, governments all over the world have developed various regulations to discourage smoking. As the focus of this study, warning labels on cigarette packages is one of such essential anti-tobacco interventions, which aim to inform smokers of the harm of smoking and provide knowledge about how to improve their health. There have been many academic studies, especially in North America (Duffy and Burton, 2000; Hammond et al., 2007; Koval et al., 2005; O'Hegarty et al., 2007; Robinson and Killen, 1997), investigating the effectiveness of these warning messages to discourage smoking, but relatively much fewer in other countries. With this study conducted in Turkey, which is among the countries with highest smoking rates in the world, we aim develop a deeper understanding of smokers' experiences on whether such warnings would have an impact or not.

On one hand, some of these earlier North American studies emphasize the ineffectiveness of text-only warning labels, implying that the current labels, which contain only textual messages, are ineffective, hard to get across, and need to be more specific (Robinson and Killen, 1997). In Europe, a similar result was obtained from a study measuring the effects of warning labels on Pan European smokers including those in Finland, France, Germany, Greece,

Spain, Sweden, and the UK, pointing out that text based warning messages do not affect smokers (Devlin et al., 2005).

On the other hand, the latest studies stress the effectiveness of combined text and graphic warning messages, suggesting that more prominent health warnings are associated with greater levels of awareness and perceived effectiveness among smokers, reducing the attractiveness of cigarette packages (Hammond et al., 2007). When the impact of Canadian graphic warning labels were examined, negative emotional reactions such as fear and disgust were associated with greater effectiveness of the warning labels, and smokers were more likely either to have quit, or attempted to, or reduced smoking at follow-up (Hammond et al., 2004; Hammond et al., 2007; O'Hegarty et al., 2006).

The National Health Organization, Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada (Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, 2007), reports in its website that countries like Canada, Chile, Australia, Brazil, and Thailand now require all cigarette packages to display a graphic health warning. The European Union does not require pictures on cigarette warnings; however, it does provide its member states with the option of using some picture based warnings. Belgium is the only European country to have thus far used this EU directive to employ graphic warning labels (Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, 2007). However, studies in EU assessing the impact of such graphical illustrations are quite lacking (Ruiter and Kok, 2005).

Considering this lack of research in assessing the impact of warning labels on cigarette packages outside North America, we conducted this research in Turkey to investigate both the impact of present text-only warning labels and possible future text and graphic combined warning messages. The World Health Organization [WHO] reports show that about 40% of adult population smoke in Turkey (World Health Organization, 2003). These rates are among the highest when compared with the rest of the world. According to Smoking and Health National Committee in Turkey, the number of smokers in Turkey is estimated to be 17 million people, consuming 5, 5 billion packages a year, and spending \$6.5 billion on cigarettes (Smoking and Health National Committee, 2007). Turkish Ministry of Health announced that smoking has caused nearly 100.000 premature deaths, and this number is expected to double by the year 2030 (General Directorate of Ministry of Health, Turkey, 2006). It is an interesting and ironic fact that about 43% of teachers, 50% of doctors, 40% of nurses, and 39% of medical students smoke in Turkey (İtil et al., 2004). These professionals hypothetically have the duty to warn people about the dangers of smoking, but unfortunately, they themselves smoke and may not be characterized as good role models. These are alarming statistics to indicate the magnitude of the problem in Turkey.

With this study, we hope to develop a better understanding of the deeper meanings of the cigarette packaging warnings in the minds of the smoking public to assess their potential impact.

By doing so, we also hope to shed light on better ways to reformulate messages to discourage smoking.

METHODS

Most of the research done on this issue has been conducted in North America, using mainly quantitative methods such as surveys, measuring the effectiveness of warning messages on cigarette packages. Thus, conducting such research in other parts of the world where smoking has become an even bigger threat to public health and particularly conducting such research with a qualitative depth may enlighten previous findings, leading to a deeper understanding on whether and how far such messages have an impact in discouraging smoking. Qualitative methods are increasingly preferred in health-related research to provide different perspectives of the reality under concern (Mays and Pope, 2000).

In this study, projective techniques were used to investigate consumer experiences with warning labels on cigarette packages. 150 college student smokers, both males and females, were exposed to the warning labels shown in Figure 1 and 2 below. In each slide, first row of labels addressed the health consequences of smoking on smokers themselves while the second row mostly contained social appeals about the harmful effects on those in the smokers' environment. This methodological approach also provided an opportunity to investigate the effects of different warning message statements.

In the first round, participants were shown text-only warning labels, and



Figure 1. Text-Only Warning Labels on Cigarette Packages shown to the Participants

Note: In Figure 1, in the first row, packets show health related warnings as “Smoking causes mouth and throat cancer,” “Smoking clogs the arteries and causes heart attack and paralysis,” and “Smokers die younger.” In the second row, packets display social messages such as “Protect children: Don’t make them breathe your smoke,” “Smoking while pregnant will harm the baby,” and “Smoking will slow the blood circulation and cause impotence.” The same textual messages are used combined with graphic warning labels in

they were asked to write down freely their feelings and thoughts about these, also stating if these messages had an impact on their smoking-related behaviour. Following this, they were asked to compare the messages to see which, if any, had greater impact and the reason for that. In the second round, similar

questions were asked for text-graphic combined warning labels. These were shown later because graphic warnings were new to most of the informants, and showing these in the first round could influence consumers’ responses to text-only warning labels. A limitation of the study arises since the graphic



Figure 2. Text-Graphic Warning Labels on Cigarette Packages shown to the Participants

Note: The pictures used on warning labels are selected among the ones proposed in the European Union.

(http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/photo/photo_search_en.cfm?keyword=help)

warning labels are not used yet on cigarette packages in Turkey; thus, it was not possible to investigate their impact on actual smoking behaviour as with text-only labels. However, we could still explore smokers' thoughts and feelings about these graphic labels, their possible impact on smoking behaviour in relation to their intentions for quitting. Also, such limitation has been valid for many of the previous studies, particularly the ones conducted in countries,

like the USA, where graphic warning labels are not used on cigarette packages.

On the other hand, the projective techniques were helpful in investigating the deeper meanings attached to the warning labels on cigarette packages, allowing informants to express themselves freely. The participants were not asked to write down their names to allow anonymity to further encourage uninhibited expression. For the analysis, some of

the most advised steps for qualitative data analysis were followed (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2005). Once each participant's written discussions had been analyzed, coded in terms of main themes, it was possible to compare and contrast and look for patterns as well as irregularities, dividing them into categories. As we aimed at genuinely valid findings, assumed relations between phenomena were refuted, and constant checks were conducted between transcriptions, interpretations, and theory, at the same time questioning certain moral and ethical issues that could be incorporated into analysis.

RESULTS

Text-only warning labels

The analysis suggests that the text-only warning labels were to some extent successful, especially when they were first introduced to the market. Some of the participants stated that these warnings increased their concern about smoking related health risks while very few mentioned that they actually reduced the number of cigarettes smoked per day. Conversely, a vast majority of the participants argued that these text-only warning labels have no impact; people do not notice or read them anymore, as some of the previous studies also suggested (Devlin et al., 2005; Robinson and Killen, 1997).

Warnings on the packages held my attention when they were first added. I was reading them out of curiosity. Now, I even forget that they are there because I have become used to seeing them and there is nothing written there

that I do not know (Female, smoking for 5 years, 10 cigarettes a day).

These warnings have no meaning to me. It is not possible that they encourage stopping smoking. A person who smokes regularly is already aware of the messages even if they were not written on the packages (Male, smoking for 9 years, 2 packages per day).

These kinds of writings seem ridiculous to me. I think they did not help anything other than ruining the package aesthetics. Everybody already knew that smoking is harmful to health before these warnings (Male, smoking for 7 years, 1 package per day).

The majority of the informants stated that they did not see, read, or remember the existing textual cigarette warning labels. Although they noticed them when they were first introduced, through time these warnings became less noticeable, obsolescent, and worn-out since they were not saying anything new or different (Hammond et al., 2007; Devlin et al., 2005; Robinson and Killen, 1997). The impact of salient health warnings among smokers faded away in the long run.

The results of this study support the previous arguments about the ineffectiveness of the textual warning labels on cigarette packages to discourage smoking (Hammond et al., 2007; Devlin et al., 2005; Robinson and Killen, 1997). Almost all smokers indicated that these warnings did not motivate them to actually quit smoking because they already knew the health-related consequences of smoking, and the warnings did not change anything. Moreover, another important

finding was that young people see such harmful effects of smoking unlikely to happen to them, due to their young age.

I did not think to quit smoking because of these warnings. Maybe I am not concerned because of my age, maybe because it seems to me that I will never die (Female, smoking for 6 years, 1 package per day).

Young adults tend to believe that they will not face smoking-related health problems such as cancer or heart attack as they are young. They perceive such risks as something possible in a distant future, but not in the present (Denscombe, 2004; Devlin, 2005); consequently, these justifications encourage respondents to continue smoking.

Text-graphic warning labels

Text and graphic combined warning labels were new to most of the informants since such warnings are not used in Turkey. Many of these participants stated that the inclusion of such pictorial displays on packages decrease package attractiveness and cause more annoyance than with text-only warning labels.

Writings on the cigarette packages do not affect me very much, but I really think that the photos can because when I look at the photo on the package, I put myself in that person's place. I smoke too and suddenly the thought of being like that comes to mind, and that kind of image makes me feel disgusted with cigarettes once more. I guess that the photos are more persuasive than the text for demonstrating the harm caused by cigarettes (Female, smoking for 6 years, 1 package per day).

The majority of the respondents reported that the graphic warnings on cigarette packages had more impact than the text-only ones (Hammond et al., 2007; O'Hegarty et al., 2007; Fong et al., 2006; Kees et al., 2006). Thus, these pictorial warnings can be interpreted as better able to increase notice, providing information and encouraging rethinking about the effects of smoking on health. Participants stressed that such vivid and prominent visual warnings aroused negative feelings such as fear, disgust, anxiety, and uneasiness (Hammond et al., 2004; Kees et al., 2006; Willemssen, 2005). Especially, the feeling of disgust emerged as the emotion most associated with graphic labels during our study. Many participants associated disgust-inducing emotions with pictures because these were either showing innocent victims or causing them to empathize with the persons in the pictures (Pechmann and Reibling, 2006). However, these are the interpretations of smokers exposed to such labels for the first time. As with the limitations found in such previous studies, it is highly questionable whether these graphic warning labels would eventually encourage smoking cessation or reduce tobacco consumption. They, just like the text-only labels, could become less noticeable and their effectiveness may erode over time. Moreover, even exposure and attention to a warning will not guarantee improvement in smoking behaviour unless those warnings are perceived as important and believable (Duffy and Burton, 2000).

Photos, I mean, presenting some kind of visual things maybe will not make the addicted person avoid the cigarettes, but each time he/she tries to reach a

package, they can slow him/her down, reducing the consumption. I guess that the image of cavity on tooth (mouth cancer) is the most dominant one because it concerns the individual. Thinking of child and external factors only awake an instantaneous feel of mercy (Female, smoking for 1 year, 10 cigarettes per day).

Whenever something is written about me, it does not attract my attention whereas when there is something written about children, I try to pay attention; when I am pregnant I wouldn't smoke, because I could harm my own child. I know that I am harming myself; therefore as long as I smoke, I should bear its consequences, but, I should consider my environment because I wouldn't want to harm other people by my habit. In my opinion, these pictures are not so effective; the individual should decide to give up smoking by him/herself (Female, smoking for 2 years, 1 package per day).

Above are two conflicting views from the informants. Reflecting a division in the respondents, on one hand, about half declared that they were more affected by the disgust-inducing visuals which were more personally relevant, such as the ones showing the mouth and throat cancer or someone dying younger (Borland and Hill, 1997). On the other hand, some were more affected by the social interaction messages, highlighting the negative consequences of their smoking habit on others. The fundamental reason behind the power of such social warnings may come from the individual's responsibility felt towards others, especially children and unborn babies. However, the

impact of such messages on the actual smoking cessation is still questionable. Our findings also underline the fact that smokers can do many things to avoid being subject to these warnings.

If the packages were like this, I would probably cover them with a white paper in order to not to see them. But, for giving up smoking, these really have a small effect. (Female, smoking for 5 years, 1,5 packages per day).

Nobody wants to see an ugly scene all the time. If these pictures were used, I would feel uncomfortable about smoking. However, using special boxes that are suitable for cigarette packages would help me to avoid this disturbance. Frankly, I wouldn't want to spoil my enjoyment of smoking, seeing these ugly pictures on my package (Female, smoking for 5 years, 10 cigarettes per day).

Yes, the pictures are absolutely effective, but they wouldn't stop me smoking. I would find a cover for the package because I wouldn't like the package to stay on my table while I am eating (Male, smoking for 4 years, 1.5 packages per day).

A substantial number of the participants indicated that they would not like to see these disturbing pictures on their cigarette packages; however, despite this motivated avoidance (Fong et al., 2006), they also emphasized that these pictures would not make them stop smoking. Even at first sight of such graphic labels, they proposed to cover the packages with a paper or to put them in a more attractive box to avoid being subject to them. If we suppose that smokers are more likely to notice

the health warnings when they are actually in contact with the package like taking out a cigarette (Borland and Hill, 1997), once they start using the cigarette cases as an escape, the awareness will be reduced and whether these warnings are textual or graphical, they will not have an impact.

People give importance to their position in society: how they look, how they are perceived and treated by others, have great value. If we take this stand point, treating smokers as 3rd class citizens would have an impact. Due to smoking prohibition in closed areas, other people passing by your window could be looking at you as if you were a disgusting creature, turning your pleasure of smoking into a torture inside a cage with 20 people around, under a heavy cloud of smoke. The best way to discourage smoking is to humiliate and isolate the smoker from society (Female, smoking for 5 years, 1 pack-age per day).

From another perspective, this participant interestingly suggests that the warning messages could be reformulated, emphasizing the risk of isolation from society. People generally tend to follow society's expectations regarding how they should act or look (Gergen and Gergen, 1981; Thibaut and Kelley, 1956); therefore, endorsing the act of smoking as an unfavourable event in society may have greater impact on smokers as it could make them feel outsiders. This kind of social influence can be an effective way of developing health policies. Peer pressure, which has traditionally encouraged smoking, can be used to discourage it. For example, interventions supporting and

popularizing group prototypes for being non-smoker could as well mean being more mature, fit, and healthy (Lennon et al., 2005). Such social messages could also be incorporated into warning labels on cigarette packages.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to previous researches, measuring the impact of text and graphic warning labels on cigarette packages, examining in greater depth through qualitative methods, smokers' experiences with such messages and how they attend to or escape them. The study also carries the empirical setting outside North America, where such research was lacking and needed.

The findings suggest that although text-graphic combined warning labels on cigarette packages may have greater impact on smokers since they are more striking and prominent compared with text-only warning labels as the previous North American studies suggest, they may still be another futile attempt to discourage smoking. As the limitations of many such studies conducted in countries where graphic warning labels are not used in the market, it is dubious if such pictorial messages would eventually promote smoking cessation or reduce tobacco consumption. As the informants expressed, when first seen, these pictorial messages may attract attention, but over time, as with the text-only labels, could become less noticeable and their effectiveness could fade away. One suggestion is that refreshing the messages may help to increase the amount of attention they receive (Devlin et al., 2005).

On the positive side, many participants associated disgust-inducing emotions with the graphic labels, increasing awareness of potential health risks. Also, those which emphasized social interactions such as the negative effects of smoking on vulnerable others like children are found to be successful in terms of creating the feeling of guilt among smokers (Pechmann and Reibling, 2006). However, these feelings may not be stimulating enough to encourage young smokers to quit. Even at first sight, they proposed to cover the packages with a paper or to put the cigarettes in a more attractive case to avoid these disturbing images. Such attempts of smokers could diminish or even eliminate all potential impact of more prominent graphics.

On the other hand, as one of the informants suggests, promoting the act of smoking as an unfavourable event or a "not cool" event in society may have greater impact on young smokers because of their fear of isolation from society. Incorporating such social messages into warning labels may eventually become the impetus needed to create a peer pressure that reverses the traditional encouragement of smoking, and becomes a force against smoking, especially among young adults. Future research may also be conducted with adult smokers to assess the impact of such graphical warnings.

In conclusion, although inventing more successful warning messages both textually and graphically may stimulate re-thinking about the negative social and health effects of smoking, they may not be the ultimate solution for smoking cessation since smokers can

ignore, avoid, or escape them. Since smoking is a very coercive behaviour, quitting is very challenging, and there is always the potential of relapse (Falkin et al., 2007), more radical anti-tobacco regulations may be necessary to ban smoking in all public places, both indoor and out-door, and eventually, a possible ban on all tobacco production may need to be considered.

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