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# Tobacco Awareness Among Elementary School Students: Does Advertising Effect Children's Impression of Cigarette Smoking?

John D. Johnson

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## Abstract

In 1996 the United States government began a series of lawsuits against the major tobacco manufacturing companies that have resulted in the elimination of major cigarette campaign slogans and/or characters judged to be aimed primarily at children. This action led to numerous state class-action lawsuits costing tobacco companies billions in future revenue. In their suit against tobacco companies, government lawyers successfully argued that tobacco companies had been deliberately marketing a dangerous product to the young. One of the more significant outcomes of this case was the elimination of the popular Joe Camel character.

This study examines the effects of cigarette ad slogans and characters on attitudes toward smoking among younger children. Specifically, the author looks at variables such as ad awareness, attitudes towards the ad, and the incidence of smoking in the home as possible causal connections with attitudes toward smoking. The findings suggest that children are highly aware of advertising in general, but that this awareness has little or no effect on a child's attitude toward smoking. The author concludes that family and societal values are more important in creating attitudes towards smoking than advertising messages. The author concludes that Joe Camel has been a rather successful ad, since a majority of the chil-

dren can still identify the character four years after his "death." This conclusion may have frightening ramifications when the children in this study reach the age at which parental and societal influences become less important than peer group pressure.

## Introduction

The ethical reservations about cigarette advertising usually stem from the link between cigarette smoking and two major health issues. The first issue concerns the addictive properties of nicotine that lead to long-term tobacco use and its lethal consequences. The second issue concerns the motivation of tobacco companies. Addicted smokers are typically very brand loyal, and cigarette advertisements often reinforce the spiraling effects of smoking addiction.

To maintain (and increase) the number of addicted smokers, tobacco companies often end up tilting their advertising toward younger audiences. This ploy makes good business sense because the strategic interest of *any* manufacturer is invariably to attract and maintain a younger market. Hence, tobacco companies advertise to do what every other manufacturer does: they try to attract younger buyers. One of the economic realities of smoking is that younger smokers, once they become addicted, also become a long-term source of revenue. A brand-loyal buyer is an extremely valuable customer; a young customer is even more valuable, because such buyers will ultimately have a positive impact on the firm's bottom line (Pollay 1995).

But what specifically is the effect of tobacco advertising? By design, advertising is used to promote trial use and then maintenance of the brand's image—but can cigarette advertising actually be the primary cause of a person smoking? Although much has been suggested to indicate that advertising may be the cause, the counter argument might easily be made that consumer awareness of a product does not necessarily lead to consumer usage. The advertising jingles of many popular car, computer, and Internet ads, for example, can be recounted from memory by millions. Yet memo-

ry of an ad does not always result in the sale of a product—if so, then everyone who knew the popular jingle *Be all that you can be* would join the Army. In fact, though companies spend millions of dollars annually to promote corporate logos and the products associated with various corporate images, the real truth is that no one really knows what the actual outcomes are of various corporate advertising actions (Brown and Dacin 1997). At best, there may be some measurable causality, but there is certainly no verifiable, one-to-one relationship.

Nonetheless, the irreverent cartoon character Joe Camel has been found to be better recognized by the very young than by the stated target audience, which is supposed to be mature adults. Such a finding is not unexpected and is consistent with the findings of other manufacturers using irreverent types of ads to reach the 12-25-year-old market (Marketing News 1994). Even if it could be proven that cigarette manufacturers have deliberately targeted the younger market, there is precedent for it. Placed in a historical context, cigarette manufacturers have always used the most popular media venues to promote their products. In the 1950's, for example, *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* (two very popular television shows of the era) were both sponsored by cigarette advertisers. If necessity is the mother of invention, then the loss of television as an advertising venue may actually have improved the creativity of the people creating tobacco ads. After losing television, not only did advertisers have to concern themselves with the content of the ad, but they had to be very judicious about *where* they placed the ad for maximum exposure.

Although the Joe Camel character has been outlawed since 1996, many school-aged children still remember the ad. What is more alarming according to the anti-smoking advocates is that many children can still make the connection between the character and the intended product. The same dynamic exists for the famous Marlboro Man. For the tobacco industry, this argument is difficult to rebut. To gauge the actual effects of advertising campaigns on the young, this paper addresses some of the cursory effects of such advertising on the attitude toward smoking among children

between the ages of 9 and 11. The paper also explores some of the research pertaining to the awareness of cigarette ads and the incidence of smoking among children of this age group and includes discussions on the nature of advertising and on theories of developmental psychology that might explain certain relevant behaviors in children.

In order to test some of the a priori assumptions used in the legal arguments, the author had a survey completed by three classes of children ages 9-11. The survey developed for the project tested awareness levels of cigarette ads and the attitudes of these children toward the same. The author then compared these results with the sample's attitude towards smoking in general. Results of the findings will be presented in the methodology section.

#### Literature Review and Discussion:

##### The Effect of Advertising

Advertising is intended to sell products by shaping the attitudes and beliefs of the persons who see and then process the advertising (Brown and Dacin 1997). A good advertisement is designed to create a mental image whereby the potential customer has good feelings for and makes positive associations with the product being advertised. To accomplish this goal, marketers must first research their potential customer base to find out which activities or situations would most likely generate the desired affect; i.e., they find out what the customers like or what makes them feel good. Advertisers then create an artificial scenario in which the product being advertised is staged against a desired backdrop or situation so as to maximize the association between the product and the backdrop or situation. If possible, the ad's creators attempt to establish some level of causality (in the consumer's mind) linking the product to the positive image of the ad's backdrop or situation. The implied message is that by using the product one will instantly be connected to the backdrop and the inherent good feelings it stimulates.

Lutz (1975) noted that a person's attitude toward an ad can have a positive mental effect both on the cognitive (belief) and affective (emotional) component of an attitude toward a brand, suggesting that classical conditioning is very often quite effective in promoting attitudes about products. It is no small wonder then that cigarette companies use advertising strategies designed to make smoking seem appealing. Images of independence and freedom from authority are therefore frequently used to capitalize upon the psychological needs of the young starter smoker. By crafting and pre-testing these ads, cigarette manufacturers then attempt to produce spots that are not "too immature" for teenagers in need of symbols of maturity. By the same token, the ads almost always appear to relate to a feeling of relaxation, even sedateness, to prevent the audience from receiving some sort of counter argument to the one the ad intends to convey—i.e., the ad should not make the audience want to engage in an activity like aerobic exercise (Pollay 1995).

But what about younger children who are exposed to the ad? Are they not also inadvertently being targeted along with the teenagers to whom these ads are primarily directed? And, does it make a difference, even if the exposure is somewhat subliminal, in a child's decision to smoke or not to smoke?

Descriptive research indicates that the brands most popular with teenagers are those that offer adult images or images rich with connotations of independence and freedom from authority. Neither of these two images has been considered attractive, at least traditionally, to young children. The Joe Camel ads, which have proven wildly successful with young men ages 18-24, have been described by some researchers as being provocatively sexual in content since the camel's face bears a striking resemblance to the male genitalia (Cohen 1994). Given the success of the Joe Camel ads among males 18-24, however, it may shock some to discover that Joe Camel was never able to dislodge the Marlboro Man where it really counts—market share, the actual measure of advertising effectiveness. One might then look for explanations for the success of the Marlboro Man over Joe Camel and reach two conclusions: 1)

even among boys in high school, cowboys are still more popular than cartoon characters, or 2) the ads themselves do not necessarily influence a person's decision to smoke.

Market share lead or not, the Joe Camel ads were extremely successful in promoting Camel Cigarettes as a brand, and so it becomes increasingly difficult to refute the argument that cartoon characters such as Joe Camel are not aimed at teenagers and younger children. The question still remains, however: Does cigarette advertising have any real effect on a child's attitude toward smoking? Evidence suggests that more viable reasons can explain why some children take their first puff while others find the act abhorrent. Though studies have been conducted on the responses of children to particular advertising messages (Gorn and Goldberg 1980; John and Sujana 1990) and the cognitive capabilities of children at various ages (Case 1985; Siegler 1991), none has addressed the content of ads aimed at children and then evaluated that content in terms of the level of cognitive ability of individual children at different ages (Smith 1995). This observation leads the author to conclude that there may be more salient reasons for children to begin smoking at an early age than merely the advertising messages they may or may not be receiving.

### Cultural Influence on Childhood Development

According to Chapman (1996a and 1996b), well known child psychologists Erik Erikson and Sigmund Freud developed interesting theories about what may and may not constitute childhood influence. During the latency stage of Erikson's model (between the ages of 6 and 11), children are busy building, creating, and accomplishing. They receive their first systematic instruction involving the fundamental type of technology they will be expected to master. During this stage, it is not uncommon for children to experience some sense of inadequacy that may eventually lead to feelings of inferiority if their advancement is not at the pace of their peers. Children in this stage are at the socially decisive moment when their basic personalities are being challenged and

shaped. Freud's model suggests that during the latency phase, children typically acquire the beliefs and value systems of the people surrounding them. The mostly likely influences during this formative stage are a child's parents, siblings, and, to a lesser extent, childhood friends.

The culture in which children are raised will also play a role in their development, but the major figures shaping the life of a particular child are those of the immediate family. During this period children will typically learn a sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable social behavior. Their behavior is often dictated by both their family's social standing and the surrounding culture. If children are strongly connected to their families, then their development will be shaped more by familial influences than by the surrounding culture. Absent the strong family bond, children take their cues on issues of right and wrong from cultural influences. Hence, an advertisement cannot change a child's opinion about a product if the product has been condemned by his family or by the surrounding culture.

Levy (1966) indicated early on that social class is a better indicator of consumption patterns than income, concluding that the resulting differences in consumption and in media, store, and product patronage among various groups in society were not due to variations in income. He further concluded that rather than study income levels, marketing researchers should look at lifestyles as the more important segmentation base because lifestyles tend to capture better the values informing consumption. Other theoretical variables discussed in terms of their effect on product usage include learned behavior, memory, attitudes toward the ad, stimulus response, and personality. Of the various measures used to explore any sustained use of a particular product category, however, some researchers have suggested that the one that cannot be overlooked is Freud's model of childhood developmental psychology and its effect on personality (Kassarjian 1971).

It is not surprising then that advertisers, who are themselves well-schooled in psychology and certainly understand the motives that drive consumer purchases, know exactly how to "push the right

buttons." But the child psychology models of Adler, Erikson, Freud, Fromm, and others suggest that in some cases our buttons have already been pushed at an early age. If we buy into this argument, then advertising may not be a key factor in developing our desire to do anything—much less in influencing us to smoke.

It is therefore this study's contention that latent desire must already be present in order for advertising to be effective; otherwise, consumers won't process the information provided by the ad. Because younger children are believed to be more susceptible to family and societal influences than to advertising messages and because the predominant message (over the last two decades) regarding smoking has been profoundly negative, it is expected that:

H<sub>1</sub>: Young children (ages 9-11) will have only limited knowledge of cigarette ads and the majority will not be able to associate a particular ad with the type of product the ad depicts.

H<sub>2a</sub>: Young children (ages 9-11) are more likely to have a positive attitude towards smoking if they like the ad.

H<sub>2b</sub>: Young children (ages 9-11) are more likely to have a negative opinion towards smoking if they don't like the ad.

H<sub>3a</sub>: Young children (ages 9-11) are more likely to have a positive attitude towards smoking if someone in their family smokes.

H<sub>3b</sub>: Young children (ages 9-11) are more likely to have a negative attitude towards smoking if no one in their family smokes.

## Methodology and Results

A survey on knowledge of cigarette ads and children's attitudes toward smoking was administered to three classes of school children ages 9-11. Prior to administering the surveys, however, the author learned that he would need parental permission to allow children to participate in the study. 200 surveys were printed and then delivered to the principal of the elementary school where the

survey was to be conducted. The principal then distributed the surveys among the three elementary teachers who administered the survey. A brief letter explaining the research was attached. Although 200 surveys and cover letters were printed, only 176 were carried home to the parents. Of this number, 54 parents agreed to allow their children to be part of the survey.

The survey presented a series of four ads in which the wording was removed so that only the main figure was visible. Three of the ads featured a live model while one depicted a cartoon character. Only one of the ads actually featured a person smoking (e.g., a Kool ad), and only one of the ads was for a product other than a cigarette (e.g., a Chrysler automobile ad). At the bottom of each ad page, the children were first asked to identify the product category that the ad represented. The second question asked the children to indicate whether or not they liked, felt neutral about, or disliked the ad. At the end of the survey, the children were asked a series of questions about their attitude toward smoking. The results of the study are included below.

## Results

### Hypothesis 1 (Awareness of Ads)

- Marlboro Cowboy: 30 of 54 correctly identified the ad as representing a brand of cigarette.
- Joe Camel: 42 of 54 correctly identified the ad as representing a brand of cigarette.
- Chrysler Convertible: 46 of 54 correctly identified the ad as representing a brand of automobile.
- Young woman smoking a Kool: 9 of 54 correctly identified the ad as representing a brand of cigarette.

A total of 81 of 162 (50%) possible correct responses were received. Twelve children (22%) correctly identified all three responses, 24 (44%) correctly identified two of the three ads, and 46 (85%) identified at least one of the three ads.

Partly as a way of disguising the intent of the survey and partly as a test of general advertising knowledge, the author includ-

ed a magazine advertisement featuring a Chrysler convertible. Forty-six of the 54 (85%) were correctly able to identify the sponsor of the ad as an automobile company, indicating an extremely high recognition rate for advertising in general. With the results of the survey, however, the author concluded that  $H_1$ , relating to the presupposed low advertising awareness level of children, could not be supported. The overall recognition rate of this group of school children for these ads was very high.

#### Hypothesis 2a and 2b (Attitudes Toward Ads and Smoking)

- Marlboro Man: 22 of 54 indicated they liked the ad.
- Joe Camel: 38 of 54 indicated they liked the ad.
- Chrysler convertible: 21 of 54 indicated they liked the ad.
- Young woman smoking a Kool: 20 of 54 indicated they liked the ad.

When comparing the attitudes of those who liked the ads to those who were either neutral or disliked the ads, the author discovered that almost all of the respondents (48 of the 54) gave negative responses when asked what they thought about smoking. Of the 2 children who answered with a neutral or no opinion to the question regarding their attitude toward smoking, both gave positive responses to the Joe Camel ad. Of the 4 who did answer positively to the question regarding smoking, however, all 4 gave positive responses to the Joe Camel ad.

Hence,  $H_{2a}$ , which attempts to link a child's positive attitude toward an ad with his or her positive attitude toward smoking, is not supported. Of the 38 respondents indicating that they liked the Joe Camel character, only 4 indicated that they had a positive attitude toward smoking, suggesting something other than the ad as the reason for the attitude. Forty-eight of the 54 surveyed gave negative responses to the question relating to their attitude toward smoking, regardless of whether they liked the ads or not, suggesting that there is very little relationship between a child's attitude toward the ad and his or her attitude toward smoking.

H<sub>2b</sub> has only tenuous support because none of those who said they disliked the ads had a positive opinion toward smoking. Still, while the number of children who liked an ad often outnumbered the number who did not, both groups tended to have negative feelings toward smoking. The conclusion in this case was that attitude toward the ad and attitude toward smoking were not related.

#### Hypothesis 3a and 3b (Smoking of Family Members)

- 8 of the 54 children indicated that they have one or more family members who smoke.
- Of the 8 who had a family member who smoked:
  - 2 indicated a favorable attitude toward smoking.
  - 3 indicated they were neutral on the subject of smoking.
  - 3 indicated that they had negative opinions about smoking.

Of the 54 children surveyed, only 4 indicated that they had ever tried smoking a cigarette. Of the 4 indicating that they had tried smoking, 2 indicated that they continued to smoke *occasionally* (defined as less than monthly but at least once every three months). None indicated that they smoked *routinely* (defined as weekly). Surprisingly, one of the individuals who had tried smoking (but who indicated a negative attitude toward smoking) had no one in his/her family who smoked. Of the 4 who had tried smoking, 3 had family members who smoked, and 2 of those had a positive attitude toward smoking.

Hence, both H<sub>3a</sub> and H<sub>3b</sub> were both supported, although H<sub>3a</sub> somewhat tenuously because of the small number reporting family members who smoked. Of the 8 reporting family-member smokers, 5 of 8 indicated either a positive or neutral response in their attitude toward smoking, a result suggesting that children whose family members smoke may be more inclined to smoke than those whose family members do not smoke. Conversely, children are more likely to have negative attitudes toward smoking if no one in their family smokes.

## Conclusion

An attempt was made to determine if children had been adversely affected by cigarette ads. Put another way, had these advertisements been influential in the decision of children to smoke? It was originally believed that children in the age group studied (9-11 year olds) would not be aware of these ads, at least not enough to be influenced by them. The results of this survey indicated that children really do possess a decent knowledge of advertising in general, but that cigarette ads, at least at the age level examined, have not been particularly effective in generating interest in smoking. One possible explanation for the negative attitude of the majority of children in this group toward smoking may be that the government's anti-smoking campaign has finally proven effective in promoting the notion that smoking is dangerous. Another factor could have been the relatively low number of children who came from homes where a family member smoked. Younger children do appear to be influenced by parental guidance when it comes to smoking, and the results of this study demonstrated that claim.

Though the cigarette companies have been highly effective in generating awareness of their products, they apparently have not been very effective in generating interest in smoking—at least not at the age level studied. One reason may be that children at this stage are still more obligated to their parents than to their friends and are not as likely to succumb to peer pressure as they will be as teenagers. Hence, the government, parents, and teachers must be doing a good job of warning young children of the dangers of smoking. Nonetheless, the fact remains that more than two years after the Joe Camel character was removed from advertisements, 85% of the children in the sample could correctly identify a picture of Joe Camel as being a cigarette advertisement—an identification that may make these children more likely to smoke once peer-pressure kicks in.

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