Portrayal of tobacco smoking in popular women’s magazines: a content analysis

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ABSTRACT

Background Whilst many countries have introduced legislation prohibiting tobacco advertising and sponsorship, references to tobacco continue to appear in the media. This study quantified and characterised tobacco smoking content in popular women’s magazines. Methods The 10 top weekly and 5 monthly women’s magazines most popular among 15-34 year olds in Britain published over a 3-month period were included. A content analysis was conducted for both written and visual content. Results In 146 magazines, there were 310 instances of tobacco content, the majority of which were positive towards smoking. Instances of celebrities smoking were most common (171, 55%), often in holiday or party settings that could be perceived to be luxurious, glamorous or fun. 55 (18%) tobacco references related to fashion, which generally created an impression of smoking as a norm within the industry; and 34 (11%) text and image references to tobacco in TV and film. There were 50 (16%) reader-initiated mentions of smoking, typically in real-life stories or readers writing in to seek advice about smoking. Anti-smoking references including the hazards of smoking were infrequent (49; 16%). Conclusion Although tobacco advertising is prohibited in Britain, women’s magazines still appear to be promoting positive messages about tobacco and smoking.
INTRODUCTION

Tobacco use is the global leading cause of preventable death, accounting for 6 million deaths worldwide each year.[1] Approximately one person dies every six seconds as a result of smoking.[2] Smoking is a major risk factor for chronic lung and cardiovascular diseases, cancers and diabetes, yet one billion people smoke tobacco worldwide.[1, 2] In Britain, 20% of adults smoke and approximately 40% of adults become addicted before they reach 16 years of age.[3] Smoking initiation is associated with factors such as socio-economic status, smoking by friends and peers and depictions of smoking in television, film and other media.[4-6] Despite declines in the proportions of adolescents who have ever smoked or are regular smokers,[7] addressing the factors associated with initiation is a public health priority: the earlier someone starts to smoke the less likely they are to quit and more likely they are to die from their habit.[8, 9]

To prevent young people from being exposed to tobacco promotion, many countries have introduced legislation prohibiting tobacco advertising and sponsorship. In the UK, the 2002 Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act (TAPA) prohibited tobacco advertising via media channels including television, radio, newspapers and other printed publications.[10] However recent evidence suggests that although declining in frequency, tobacco imagery to which young people are vulnerable[11] continues to appear in films and television programmes classified as suitable for viewing by children and young people, and includes branding as well as generic depictions of tobacco use.[12, 13] Film and television are however only two of a range of media accessed by children and young people, and to date there has been little investigation of tobacco content in print or other media. This includes magazines, and particularly women’s magazines, which reach approximately 89% of British women [14], with other data
suggesting popularity among women as young as 15 years. Magazines are an influential source of advertising that can shape and reinforce ideas about societal norms, which are reported to influence actual behaviour. Studies conducted before the introduction of TAPA found that cigarette advertising and positive images of smoking were common in magazines, and that there was little coverage of the harms of smoking. This study was therefore carried out to quantify and characterise tobacco content in British women’s magazines most popular among women between the ages of 15 and 34 years, and published in the summer of 2013.

METHODS

Materials

The top 10 women’s weekly magazines (OK!, Closer, Heat, Take a Break, Hello!, Now, Reveal, New!, Pick me up and Look) and the top 5 women’s monthly magazines (Glamour, Cosmopolitan, Vogue, Elle and Marie Claire) most popular among 15-34 year olds in Britain were identified from National Readership Survey figures between April 2012 and March 2013. All issues of these 15 magazines published over a 3-month period between July and September 2013 were selected for analysis. Since monthly magazines release issues one month in advance, for example, the August issue is published and sold in July; we selected the August, September and October 2013 issues of the 5 monthly magazines. We were unable to obtain one issue of one weekly magazine (Take a break, 4th July 2013). A total of 146 magazines were therefore included in the final sample; some magazines released more than 4 issues in one month.
Analysis

We used summative qualitative content analysis to identify the extent to which tobacco language (in text) and imagery was present in the sample of magazines, and to describe the nature of these occurrences.[24] Examples of written references that were coded included ‘cigarettes,’ ‘smoke too many cigarettes,’ ‘I do like the occasional cigarette. It’s bad I’m aware of that’, ‘nicotine,’ ‘Also give her the talk on how bad smoking is for her,’ ‘She cut her skin, burnt herself with cigarettes,’ ‘He also frequently disappears inside clouds of smoke with the words: “This is a beautiful question and needs a cigarette”,’ ‘I really want to ditch the cigarettes, but I succumb to peer pressure every time I go out with my friends, many of whom of smokers’.

Some examples of images were of an individual (often a celebrity) holding or smoking a cigarette, cigarette packs, tobacco paraphernalia (lighters) someone wearing a garment with an image of an individual smoking or tobacco branding. Magazines were read twice cover to cover (by author NK) to identify and record, in an Excel spreadsheet, any written references or images related to tobacco. Tobacco occurrences were then studied to explore the nature of the identified text and images, and preliminary codes assigned to them. These codes were revised following greater familiarity with the data and were collated into groups with similar contexts and characteristics, thus identifying distinct themes. To minimise researcher subjectivity in coding and to check the initial themes, author MB independently validated 20% (n = 30) of the sampled magazines. In these, there were 31 written references to tobacco and 6 images and the level of agreement between the two researchers was 89% (n = 33). Disagreements in coding were discussed to ensure that the boundaries of each themes were transparent, which led to final theme refinements.

Ethical approval
The study was approved by the Division of Epidemiology and Public Health ethics committee (University of Nottingham).

RESULTS

The sample of 146 magazines yielded 310 tobacco-related occurrences in text and imagery, in which our analysis identified four themes: the celebrity smoker; tobacco and fashion; tobacco in TV and film; and references to smoking in real-life situations. Tobacco content occurred throughout the magazines rather than being concentrated in particular sections, which is reflected in the themes generated.

The celebrity smoker

A celebrity is defined as “a famous person, especially in entertainment or sport”. [25] We identified 171 (55%) instances of tobacco-related language in text and imagery involving celebrities, of which 135 (79%) depicted smoking in a positive manner. Generally these comprised celebrities’ pictured smoking (Figure 1), often in settings that could be perceived as luxurious, glamorous or fun such as at parties, music festivals or on yachts. The same or similar images of particular celebrities often appeared in several of our sample of magazines including Simon Cowell (22 instances), Helen Flanagan (10) and Kate Moss (7), which also included a few instances of cigarette branding; Marlboro (2) and Kool (1) (Figure 1). Several images were accompanied by tobacco-related text which framed the act of the celebrity smoking in a particular manner. For instance, articles titled “Secret smokers revealed” (Now, 26th August 2013) (Figure 1) or images accompanied with text highlighting celebrities caught smoking a “sneaky cigarette” (Heat, Issue 747, 7th-13th September
2013) or having “a cheeky ciggie” (*Heat*, Issue 740, 20th-26th July 2013) seemed to construct notions of smoking being a rebellious behaviour; whilst other images of celebrities smoking used text to describe them as “sultry” (*Marie-Claire*, October 2013) or “a real rock star” (*Heat*, Issue 742, 3rd-9th August 2013).

There were 36 (21%) occurrences of celebrity smoking that took a relatively anti-smoking stance. For example, some images were accompanied by text labelling particular celebrity smokers as “irresponsible” (*New*, Issue 534, 26th August 2013) whilst others were more subtle, for instance the several examples of a celebrity being portrayed as someone who does not, has never, or has quit smoking; often in articles that were unrelated to smoking. Reasons for quitting given by celebrities were mostly motivated by the detrimental aesthetic effects of smoking, such as ageing of the skin. There were also instances describing celebrities substituting normal cigarettes with electronic cigarettes, to reduce ageing effects.

**Tobacco and fashion**

The fashion industry comprises of people working in the design, manufacturing, distribution, retailing and promotion of all forms of apparel.[26] We found 55 (18%) instances of tobacco-related text or imagery relating to the fashion industry, including the use of smoking-related language to describe fashion items. Most of these presented smoking as a norm within the fashion industry. Examples included descriptions of smoking by fashion designers such as J.W. Anderson who “sits on his desk, drawing on a cigarette” and “the shifty way he blows and gestures the unfurling plumes of smoke” (*Vogue*, October 2013) (Figure 2). Some references went further and described comprehensively the setting in which cigarettes were smoked, for
example “inside Coffeemania, Moscow’s trendiest coffee-shop chain, beautiful girls in beanie hats smoke thin cigarettes” (*Elle*, September 2013).

Tobacco-related language in text also appeared in the labelling of garments, particularly in magazine sections identifying the latest fashion trends. The most common example was the description of a particular style of trousers as “cigarette pants” or “cigarette trousers” (Figure 2). Celebrities or influential women in the fashion industry mentioned that they owned such items, suggesting notions of them being fashion-forward (*Now*, 26th August 2013). Another example related to a type of shoe: the “cigarette heel”, characterised by a heel similar in appearance to the shape of a cigarette. A perhaps less clear association with tobacco was mention of the “smoking slipper”: a flat shoe (Figure 2). The terms “smoking” or “smokin” were also used frequently as adjectives to describe clothing or people in the context of being stylish and attractive.

Images of smoking were presented on t-shirts displaying pictures of models smoking. In most cases these were endorsed by celebrities, thus appearing to promote the trend further (Figure 2).

**Tobacco in TV and film**

There were 34 (11%) text and image references to tobacco in the genre of TV and film. These included references to the film character Bridget Jones, which typically included mention of her smoking habit. There were recurring tobacco references in reviews of the film “Rush”, which was released during the magazine sampling period, and included six images (often on the same page) of characters wearing outfits carrying the Marlboro logo (Figure 3). The TV listings sections of magazines, relating
to dramas and soap operas sometimes included mentions or images of characters smoking as part of their routine activity (*Heat*, 10th-16th August 2013).

**Smoking in real-life situations**

There were 50 (16%) occurrences of smoking in real-life situations. These included instances in which readers wrote to magazines seeking advice regarding smoking from health experts, who often responded by presenting a negative view of smoking, and encouraged cessation (*Take a break*, 22nd August 2013). In most cases, doctors used published research to corroborate their responses (*Reveal*, Issue 32, 10th-16th August 2013). Additionally, health articles regarding topics including pregnancy, stroke and cardiovascular disease, in weekly magazines, all highlighted the benefits of quitting smoking and outlined the negative impacts of smoking on health.

Smoking was also often mentioned in readers’ real-life stories. A small number of articles seemed to support the notion of a non-smoker being healthy relative to a smoker, where 13 (4%) seemingly framed smoking in a negative manner. For instance, in a few cases readers shared personal stories about illness experienced by themselves or a loved one, with the common inference that since the affected individual was healthy and did not smoke, their illness or death came as a surprise (*Take a break*, 19th September 2013). Other real-life stories suggested smoking was simply part of a daily routine and thus irrelevant to the story itself. In some cases however, smoking was referred to in articles describing traumatic events such as murder, rape or abuse, where the villain in such stories was depicted as a smoker or the cigarette was used as a tool for abuse (*Pick me up*, 22nd August 2013).
DISCUSSION

Main findings of this study

This study demonstrates that magazines aimed at young women in Britain contain substantial smoking content in both text and imagery. Although some tobacco content focused on the harms of smoking, the majority presented smoking as a desirable, fashionable or rebellious activity, either by representing famous celebrities smoking, or by associating it with the fashion industry. Celebrities and fashion designers were shown with cigarette brands such as Marlboro, which appears to overlook the recommendation by the World Health Organization that prohibits identifiable tobacco brands and imagery within entertainment media.[1] Text and image references to tobacco in relation to TV and film also commonly promoted tobacco brands. The film ‘Rush’ contained considerable Marlboro branding, and although not typical in this respect, it indicates that secondary reporting of branded imagery remains a potentially powerful medium of indirect advertising.

What this study adds

Previous research on tobacco advertising and promotion in magazines carried out before prohibition under the terms of TAPA[10] focused on quantifying cigarette advertisements in magazines, and whether smoking references were pro or anti-smoking.[19, 20, 27] Since paid-for advertising is now illegal the tobacco content we have found is either happening by chance, or because editors seek or choose to include it, or because celebrities and others involved in the fashion industry consciously choose or else condone publication of images of them smoking. Any payment to induce choices to include brand imagery would be illegal under TAPA, but the possibility remains that some tobacco content arises from the work of product
placement companies, as outlined in an e-mail exchange dating from before TAPA.[28] Further investigation is required to establish the extent of this content in magazines aimed at other groups, to try to establish the people or processes responsible for the content.

**What is already known on this topic**

There is now strong evidence that exposure to tobacco imagery in film is an independent determinant of smoking uptake,[12, 13, 29] and possibly more so among young people at otherwise relatively low risk.[30] To our knowledge the effect of printed media imagery on smoking uptake has not been explored, but we see no reason to believe that positive imagery of the kind we have documented is any less likely to have an effect on behaviour in young people than that in film. Social learning theory suggests that behaviour is often learned through imitating models,[31] and thus readers exposed to images of their favourite celebrities smoking may initiate smoking intentions in the same way as research reported on smoking in films,[29] because they aspire to be like them. Such instances may also normalise the act of smoking amongst current smokers and those thinking about starting smoking, for example by triggering the urge to smoke among non-smokers.[32] Given that previous studies have shown that societal norms contribute to the uptake of smoking, the potential implications of positive references to smoking on readers as young as 15 years cannot be ignored.

In line with previous research demonstrating that films are the largest source of tobacco imagery in television programming,[12, 13] we also found six examples in the television and film review sections of the magazines in which images of characters with cigarettes or tobacco brand logos were presented. The impact of multiple exposures via different media channels needs to be considered. For example,
tobacco-related imagery in magazines, such as in a film review section (showing an onscreen character smoking) may reinforce the salience of the smoking behaviour in the film. Whilst this requires further investigation, we would argue that stricter regulation is required along with working with television and film content regulators, particularly to reduce high levels of adolescent exposure to such images, which has been found to impact smoking initiation.[11, 29]

Only a small number of tobacco-related references appeared to discourage smoking, and these cases were predominant in sections where readers were seeking advice from health experts about smoking cessation. These instances need to be considered in relation to the entire content of the magazines, where anti-smoking references were presented in the same issue showing many more instances that were pro-smoking. This finding is consistent with results from a previous study of women’s magazines,[23] and also research on anti-smoking messages broadcast before, during and after cinema broadcasts (that contain smoking),[33, 34] which are currently giving mixed messages about smoking. Such indecision regarding attitudes to tobacco within magazines may diminish readers’ perceptions of the severe consequences of tobacco use.

**Limitations of this study**

Due to time constraints our sample of magazines was limited to a three month period and our analysis is therefore potentially distorted by brief or otherwise temporary high levels of tobacco content in the subjects covered in the magazines, as for example in the case of the unusually high levels of Marlboro branding in Rush. Further analyses would therefore be necessary to determine the representativeness of our findings across a longer time period. However the more generic approaches of celebrity
smoking and smoking in fashion did not obviously contain sources of unusually high content, indicating that the main content we have documented is typical. Since many of the celebrities involved are famous outside Britain, it is likely that similar imagery is appearing in magazines in other countries, though further work is required to establish whether this is the case.

Conflict of interest

None.

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Figure 1: The celebrity smoker

References for each image to be placed at bottom of the figure:


*Now*, 26th August 2013, pages 50-51
Figure 2: Tobacco and fashion

Jonathan (the “J” in JW) sits at his desk, drawing on a cigarette. It might have something to do with the shifty way he blows and gestures the unfurling plumes of smoke in the direction of a small gap in the open window, but his little corner at the back of this whitewashed studio looks more like a student’s dorm than a burgeoning enterprise of the fashion industry’s newest, brightest: Big Thing.

He enjoys walking his two pointers, Seb and Steen, browsing bookshops and pint-stopping at multiple cafes – his daily coffee consumption regularly hits double figures. “He doesn’t sleep. His fuel is coffee and Marlboro Lights,” reveals Charlotte Hall, Jonathan’s friend and co-founder of underground concept store LN-CC. She’s the sort of woman, he says, whom he loves seeing dressed in his clothes. “Every decision he makes is considered.

References for each image to be placed at bottom of the figure:
Description of fashion designer smoking, *Vogue*, October 2013, page 335.

Extract about fashion designer smoking, *Vogue*, October 2013, page 337.

Cigarette pant, *Look*, 16th September, page 64


Image of Rihanna wearing t-shirt with Kate Moss pictured smoking. *New!,* Issue 527, 8th July 2013, page 12.
Figure 3: Tobacco in TV and film

References for each image to be placed at bottom of the figure:

Image of Sharon Stone smoking in the film *Basic Instinct*. Now, 2nd September 2013, page 47.