

Media Power: Cigarette Package Design in China

Xiaolong Zhang
Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University

Abstract

Chinese tobacco packaging can be viewed as complex advertising practice. On the one hand, the cigarette pack is used to attract consumers, and on the other hand, it plays a role in health communication for discouraging smoking in China. When these two functions are mixed together, the media effect of the cigarette pack is supposed to be ambiguous and blurred. However, media effects of tobacco packaging in China seem to be lopsided: it is very effective in attracting consumers, but largely ineffective in discouraging smoking. What causes this phenomenon? Since the cigarette pack functions as a medium in the Chinese market, it has the power to asymmetrically influence the actions of others, but its power is subservient to the will of those who empower it. By using literature-based and focus groups methods, that the is piece of research finds that the incomplete health communication effect of cigarette packs is due to various reasons, such as political, economic, and cultural ones. The most influential factor is political, as the tobacco industry in China is entirely at the mercy of the government. The media effects and effectiveness of the package depend mainly on the government's will, interests, and values.

Keywords: China, health communication, media effects, media power, tobacco packaging design

China is the largest tobacco producer and has the most smokers in the world (Parascandola & Xiao, 2019; Leng & Mu, 2020). Although the Chinese government has taken many measures and introduced policies to control the tobacco industry and discourage tobacco use, smoking prevalence has been decreasing at a very slow rate. To describe the general situation of smoking in China, Yang et al. (2015) produced an overview. They start with a report by the National Patriotic Health Campaign Committee in 1984 which found that the average smoking rate among Chinese was 34.45%, which is higher than the global average of 14.3% (Gan et al., 2009). According to the Behavioral Risk Factors Survey conducted in 2002, smoking was prevalent among the Chinese population at a rate of 31.4% at the time. The year 2005 bears great importance for China, the Chinese tobacco industry, and Chinese smokers (as well potential smokers), because China ratified the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) by the World Health Organisation (WHO, Lin et al., 2019). China had a smoking rate of 27.7 per cent in 2015 (Parascandola & Xiao, 2019). As noted by Wang & Xiao (2012), the latest report by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention in 2018 indicates that the smoking prevalence in China was 26.6%. Here, only individuals aged 15 years or older were surveyed, and therefore the actual number is probably larger.

According to the statistics shown above, between 1984 and 2018 smoking in China decreased by just 7%. In comparison, the percentage of current American smokers dropped from 20.9 % in 2005 to 14% in 2019 (Cornelius et al., 2020). As a result, many researchers have commented that smoking reduction in China is far from optimal over the past several decades (Hu, 2006; Li et al., 2015; Leng & Mu, 2020). Previous research has indicated that the tobacco business can be more easily regulated in developed countries than in developing countries, owing mainly to the fact that developed countries' economies do not depend on tobacco revenues (Datte et al., 2018). However, compared with China, Thailand, a poorer nation, has a lower percentage of smokers, accounting for 22.8% of the population in 2018: it decreased by 5.3% between 2007 and 2018.¹ Thus, the question is, what has kept China's smoking prevalence relatively steady over the last decade against a global background of anti-smoking successes?

Past research has proven that, "It is hardly controversial to suggest that the media are powerful social actors" (Freedman, 2014, p. 319). When the media creates, gathers, and shares "health information" to encourage/discourage the audience, this process is widely conceptualised as health communication (Kreps, Bonaguro, & Query Jr, 2003). The media's (both mass media and new media) power of organising anti-smoking campaigns has already been proven time and again and is advocated by many studies (e.g., Carson et al., 2017; Brennan et al., 2012; Nghiem et al., 2019; Thrul, Tormohlen, & Meacham, 2019). These studies all focus on the role of media in tobacco control and anti-smoking activities of developed countries (predominately, the USA). What is worth noting, is that anti-smoking campaigns have only been found effective in persuading youths and young adults; for "seasoned" smokers, the media influence/power does not work very well. However, in China, my interviewees all demonstrated that they rarely see anti-smoking campaigns on mass media and new media (this issue will be discussed in more detail in the later part of this study). Therefore, the warning message on cigarette packs could be the most important anti-smoking campaign in China. In this research, I will apply a combination of literature-based and focus groups methods to investigate the media power of cigarette packs in China.

¹ Accessed from: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/THA/thailand/smoking-rate-statistics> on 25 November 2021.

Methods

The Literature-Based Method

Three considerations led to the selection of a literature-based technique for my research. First, as Leng & Mu (2020) noted, the literature-based method can help get a comprehensive and correct grasp of the study subject's status quo and make the most use of available data, experience, and scientific research achievements. Secondly, this method can be used to clarify some notions and make some fresh arguments based on the previous literature. Finally, according to Fichtenberg (2002), specialists have differing viewpoints on tobacco control in China. Therefore, the literature-based method may be utilised to assess published articles and provide some of the most up-to-date data accessible.

The Focus Group Method

Since this research aims to investigate the issue of “castrated” media power in terms of Chinese tobacco packaging's health communication process, it is vital to explore the case through the consumer's (the receiver) perspective (smokers and non-smokers), because, from Denis McQuail's point of view, media has the power is due to it has the ability to cause effects or influences on every individual and then our society (McQuail, 1979). Thus, it is necessary to understand Chinese consumers' perceptions of visual elements on cigarette packs. This section of my study will be designed on the basis of the findings of my literature search; the details will be presented in the beginning of section 4.

Literature Research

The Relationship Between Media Power, Health Communication, Public Service Advertising

As previously mentioned, to McQuail (1979), media influence is the proof for the power of media. Later research, for example, van Dijk (1995, p. 9) has advanced the old notion of media's influence on the audience and proposed that media influence/power “involves the role of the media within the broader framework of the social, cultural, political, or economic power structures of society”.

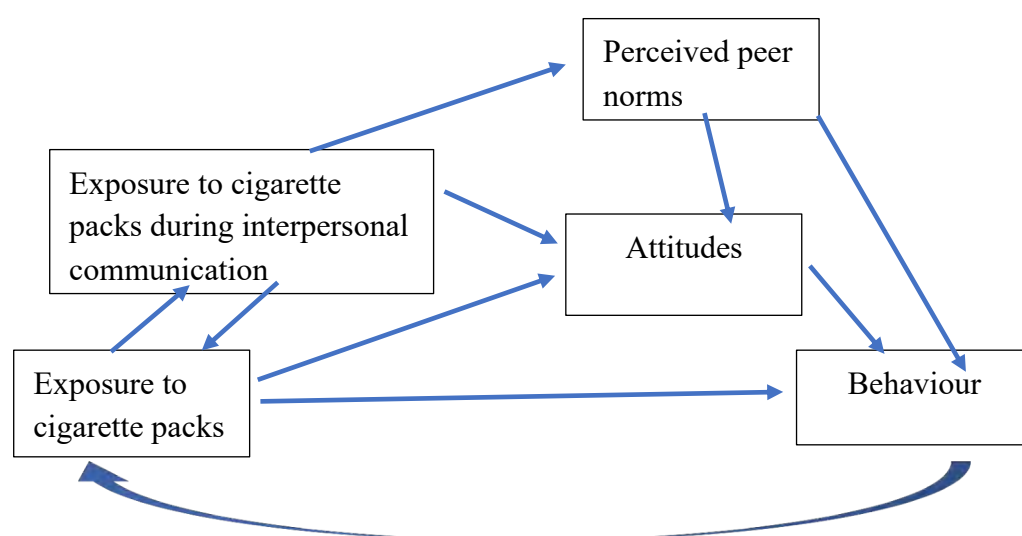
The scholarly interest in media effects or power began with the debate on advertising effects (primarily, propaganda) during the First World War (WWI), as it was discovered that individuals, such as WWI propagandists, advertisers, and totalitarian leaders, among others, came to believe in the media's ability to influence people (McQuail, 1979, p. 72). Within this concept of media power, public service advertising (PSA) for health communication is doomed to have “power”, because public service advertising aims to inform (encourages and/or discourages) the public, but only within the framework of non-profit objectives (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008). In the field of health communication, PSA has its specific goals and is designed to achieve these; it is thus salted to make media effects and influence. In McQuail's reading (1979), two terms, “effects” and “effectiveness”, are used to describe the power of media: “The former referring any of the consequence of media operation, whether intended or nor, the latter to the capacity to achieve given objectives, whether this be attracting large audiences or influencing opinions and behaviour” (p. 71). In short, these two terms can be understood as the strength of and the quality of media influence, respectively.

According to Freedman (2014, p. 319), media power is best understood as a link between disparate interests engaged in fights for various goals, including “legitimacy, influence, control, prestige, and, increasingly, profit”. Additionally, van Dijk (1995) has stated that it is vital to

find out what the “power” of media is and who controls it in the study of media impacts. More importantly, my research, in its nature, focuses on the media effects of Chinese tobacco packaging on Chinese consumers. Considering the above, based on the model of direct and indirect media effects on adolescent smoking (Gunther et al., 2006, p. 53), a new and advanced model displaying the progress of health communication of smoking cessation in China is proposed (see Diagram 1). Furthermore, previous research indicates that warning messages against smoking may incite existing smokers to smoke more and non-smokers to try (Grandpre et al. 2003); also, in the cultural context of China, sharing cigarettes is an important social custom and etiquette (Leng & Mu, 2020; Kohrman, 2007). Hence, the “unexpected” media effects and interpersonal communication will be considered in my model.

Diagram 1

Media Effects of Chinese Tobacco Packaging on Chinese People



Various factors are involved in every communication process (Freedman, 2014; van Dijk, 1995; McQuail, 2010), and culture’s influence on health and health behaviour is becoming more widely acknowledged by health communication professionals in recent years (Kreuter & McClure, 2003). Thus, in the following of my literature research, in order to understand media effects of Chinese tobacco packaging on Chinese people, I will analyse the Chinese tobacco industry, Chinese tobacco packaging design, and Chinese smokers through various perspectives, such as political, economic, and cultural perspectives.

Introduction to the Chinese Tobacco Industry

The Chinese tobacco industry is composed of three main sectors: tobacco cultivation, tobacco manufacture, and the tobacco trade systems (Leng & Mu, 2020, p. 1). First, as per tobacco cultivation in China, tobacco is prevalently cultivated in all provinces and municipalities except in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Tibet. Especially some underdeveloped western areas of China, like Yunnan and Guizhou province, depend entirely on tobacco to grow their economies. Second, tobacco production is run by the China National Tobacco Corporation (CNTC), which means that the Chinese government has created and controls the tobacco production monopoly. Although between 2010 and 2019, China’s tobacco output fell from 3,250,000 to 2,200,000 metric tons, it still is the world’s largest tobacco producer. Finally, the tobacco trade system

mainly consists of distribution and retail subsystems. From 1996 to 2000, over 4.2 billion yuan were spent on tobacco distribution infrastructure. Besides the above, Ma's (4 May 2021) report shows that from 2016 to 2020, profits earned by the Chinese tobacco industry grew exponentially. In 2020, CNTC made 115.63 billion yuan in profit. By thus contributing significantly to the government's income, the tobacco business has established itself as an integral pillar of the national economy.

The above data is in line with the findings of Datta et al. (2018), that is, that the tobacco industry usually plays the role of a national economic mainstay and is increasing in developing countries. In the light of this, the implementation of Chinese cigarette packaging design seems to be clear: the whole industry is fully controlled by government appointed companies; if we say the pack is the medium, its corresponding media power is controlled by government appointed companies; if in the market of common goods, the consumer has the final say, which in turn directs the market (Zhou & Belk, 2004), then in the Chinese tobacco market, the government is the only sovereign. This is to say, the "agenda" of the Chinese tobacco market is set by CNTC, and this state-run company decides what the consumer ("viewer") gets to read in China.

In McQuail's (2010, p. 458) typology of media effects, advertising (both commercial and non-commercial) is classified in the group of highly planned media effects; thus, the cigarette package's media effects and the strength of those effects will depend on CNTC's aims. But the quality of those effects is multidimensionally influenced by CNTC (the message sender), the consumer (the message receiver), and noise (unclear transmission interference), because "despite the pervasive symbolic power of the media, the audience will generally retain a minimum of autonomy and independence, and engage more or less actively, instead of purely passively, in the use of the means of mass communication" (van Dijk, 1995, pp. 10–1). Furthermore, while it is undeniable that the message receiver will influence the strength of media effects of tobacco packaging in China, the quality of the receiver's influence depends on the attribute of media effects, because the Chinese tobacco packaging, by its very nature, is a complex whole of encouragements and discouragements. Thus, I will explore Chinese tobacco packaging practices in the next section.

Chinese Tobacco Packaging Design

Since the tobacco industry in China is a state-owned business, the design of cigarette packs in China results from governmental decisions. Chinese cigarette packaging is considered "beautiful" or "garish" by the public, even though it contains warning messages (Qin et al., 2011). Despite widespread criticism from the Chinese mainstream media (for example, *People's Daily Online*) and numerous experts, the very attractiveness of tobacco packages has not changed.

As previously mentioned, anti-smoking campaigns are rare in China; hence, warning messages on the packs seem to become the only (or the most important) communicator of "health information" for anti-smoking purposes in China. In this sense, the package is the medium for smoking-related health communication; however, the cigarette box is also the final advertising tool for tobacco promotions in China since tobacco advertising cannot appear on various kinds of media in China. Thus, I argue that tobacco advertising could be the most challenging advertising practice in China, simply because two contradictory advertising contents (persuasiveness and dissuasiveness) simultaneously appear in one medium.

Under pressure from social criticism, CNTC indeed made some improvements, but they are far

from enough. For example, as noted by CNTC (29 November 2019), first of all, the height of the font of the cigarette box pack is increased from not less than 4.0 mm to not less than 4.5 mm, with an increase of 12.5%, and the height of the font of the cigarette strip pack is increased from 6.5 mm to not less than 7.0 mm, an increase of 7.7%. Second, the space given over to the warning label is increased from 30% to 35% of the present surface, a 16.7% increase. Third, the warning area's font and background colour difference are raised from Eab30 to Eab40, a 33.3 per cent increase. In 2016, Xi Jinping announced the Healthy China 2030 strategy, setting "ambitious targets for the government to achieve, including a decrease in the rate of smoking to 20% by 2030" (Goodchild & Zheng, 2018, p. 409). This strategy aims at creating a "green", healthy national image at the global stage and is concerned with long-term economic development. As of 2004, smokers' yearly healthcare expenses have been greater than non-smokers' (Zhang, Ou, & Bai, 2011). Also, tobacco-related health issues disproportionately impact the working-age population, impeding overall economic development (Stillman et al., 2013).

However, CNTC still refuses to use pictorial warnings and plain packaging. In contrast, "Chinese cigarette packages are always designed with beautiful brand names and graphics, and with one sentence of text warning about the harm but without information related to specific smoking-related diseases" (Qin et al., 2011, p. 7). Many past studies have indicated that, compared with written warnings and branded packs, warning images and plain boxes can more effectively communicate the health risks of tobacco use and thus help users to quit smoking (e.g., Borland et al., 2009; Droulers et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2018). Thus, CNTC's intentions are manifested clearly. The company tends to weaken the media power of health communication and strengthens the media power of commercial advertising as far as possible within the framework of national laws and international treaties. As a result, we may deduce that the Chinese government does not want to completely prohibit smoking at present, because "the tobacco taxes are important and reliable sources of revenue for the central government" (Leng & Mu, 2020, p. 5), as was and still is the case for many other governments the world over. Besides this, the Chinese government hesitates to strictly control the tobacco industry because it could cause serious social challenges like increasing inflation rates and unemployment (Leng & Mu, *ibid*).

Aside from the appealing features of cigarette packs, the enormous quantity of point of sale (POS) outlets promotes tobacco exposure for both smokers and non-smokers. China has no POS advertising or display prohibitions. Chinese shoppers can readily find tobacco packs and cartons in shops and supermarkets. Consumers are drawn to the flashy packaging, because the cigarette packs' visual warnings are neither prominent nor eye-catching.

In sum, as a health-information communicator in China, tobacco packaging's feeble media impact is heavily reliant on the authorities' continued support for tobacco consumption. CNTC's intention remains to promote the sale by cigarette packs advertising rather than stop smoking. Warning messages do appear, because the FCTC asked the industry to do so; on the other hand, out of concern for long-term economic development, messages are not as strongly worded and illustrated as could be. Additionally, China's tobacco economy is also growing under the "protection" of the FCTC, because it merely gives a simple directive of warnings being "(iii) large, clear, visible and legible, (iv) should be 50% or more of the principal display areas and shall be no less than 30% of the principal display areas" (WHO, 2003, p. 10). Hence, the initiatives from the FCTC regarding stop smoking campaigns has only a tiny influence on the CNTC's advertising practice, because it provides continued flexibility for tobacco packaging in China. Also, "Healthy China 2030" is a "slowly-moving" or "long-term" project,

so its current influence is minimal.

On the other hand, the great deal of POS and the unregulated POS display greatly increases the cigarette pack's media effects in persuading the consumer to shop for tobacco products since the pack is well designed and the effect of the PSA is weak. Moreover, smoking, sharing cigarettes, and giving cigarettes as gifts have been viewed as a crucial socialising culture in Chinese people's social lives, which increases the re-exposure rate of cigarette cartons in public and private during interpersonal communication acts (Leng & Mu, 2020; Qin, 2011; Kohrman, 2007; Dong et al., 2007). Thus, in the following subsection, I will focus on Chinese smokers and their impact on non-smokers.

Consumer Culture in the Chinese Tobacco Market

“China has the largest smoking population in the world, with around 316 million adult smokers, and accounts for nearly one-third (30%) of smokers and 40% of tobacco consumption worldwide” (Parascandola & Xiao, 2019). In current China, there are 296 million male smokers, but female smokers are merely 1.18 million in numbers (Wang & Xiao, 2021, p. 938). Tobacco use is a primary source of disease and mortality globally, accounting for six million deaths per year. (Tindimwebwa, Ajayi, & Adeniyi, 2021, p. 1). Leng & Mu (2020, p. 2) noted that by 2004, about one million Chinese died from smoking-related diseases annually, and this number is expected to reach two million by 2025.

Despite many Chinese being aware that smoking may bring severe sickness and even death, and the warnings on cigarette packs to discourage smoking, the number of smokers in China has remained stable for over a decade. Based on the previous discussion, there are probably four reasons for this phenomenon. First of all, as a health-information medium, the pack's media effects are too weak (Cheng, McBride, & Phillips, 2013). Second, as part of a commercial campaign, the pack is too attractive (Qin et al., 2011). Third, China has a strong cigarette sharing and gifting culture (Leng & Mu, 2020; Qin, 2011; Kohrman, 2007). Fourth, cigarette consumption/usage serves as a metaphor for one's status (Li et al., 2015). As the first and second factors have already been analysed in the preceding paragraphs, I will now pay attention to the third and fourth points. Also, since the number of Chinese smokers is predominately male, the “smoker” in the following discussion points largely to Chinese male smokers.

Exposure to Cigarette Packs During Interpersonal Communication

In aggregate, two main activities lead Chinese people to be frequently exposed to cigarette packets: (1) sharing cigarettes; (2) giving cigarettes as a gift. These two kinds of activities are common among adults and adolescents due to the absence of explicit rules regulating the minimum age for tobacco usage in China (Leng & Mu, 2020). In addition, giving cigarettes as a gift is widespread between Chinese smokers and non-smokers (Qin et al., 2011), increasing the frequency of non-smokers' exposure to cigarette packs and the likelihood that they might take up smoking.

Social custom is a major impediment to cigarette regulation in China (Kohrman, 2007). In China's Confucian society, *guanxi* and *renqing* occupy a very important position in social relationships; the former emphasises personal networking connections, and the latter addresses repaying favours in a relationship (Huang & Lu, 2017; Zhang & Weng, 2019; Wang, Siu, & Barnes, 2008). Research has found that cigarette sharing is an effective way to show respect and courtesy; hence, it is very widespread in many social contexts among members of various

economic groups, including physicians, merchants, and labourers (Dong et al., 2007). Furthermore, Cheng, McBride, & Phillips have discovered that in China, when smokers leave an employment, many of them are willing to stop smoking; but reasons for this fact are completely clear; however, it can be speculated that cigarette sharing is an important part of professional bonding at the workplace. Moreover, Leng & Mu (2020, p. 7) point out that sharing cigarettes “can be repeated many times, lasting several hours, and it not only promotes an active social interaction between men but also contributes to the consumption of a variety of cigarettes”.

Giving cigarettes (usually meaning cartons of cigarettes) as gifts is a well-documented social act in China. According to Qin et al. (2011, p.7), beautifully decorated “packaging and the high prevalence of cigarette smoking among males make cigarettes popular for gifting in social communication”. This kind of activity is happened not only among smokers but also between non-smokers and the smokers. Also, interviewees state that much of the time, non-smokers will actively get touch with smokers for enquiring about tobacco-related information (like brand, price, and taste) when they are planning to give cigarettes to their friends, bosses, leaders, etc.; also, some these non-smokers end up becoming smokers in the process of acquiring this information. Moreover, Leng and Mu (2020, p.7) indicate that “even for non-smokers, cigarettes are a suitable gift as well because they can transfer the cigarettes to their smoking friends and family members, thus saving them from buying gifts for others”. Thus, giving cigarettes increases not only smokers’ but also non-smokers’ exposure to cigarette packs. Besides the essential social function of sharing and giving cigarettes, consumer culture also contributes to China’s high smoking prevalence. Although “giving cigarette is giving harm..., the current Chinese warning labels have a limited effect on not giving cigarettes as a gift” (Qin et al., 2011, p. 7).

Cigarette Consumption/Usage Symbolises One’s Status

First and foremost, smoking is a symbolisation of [Confucian] masculinity in China (Leng & Mu, 2020, p. 7), even though many men smoke to alleviate stress. One qualitative study indicates that nowadays, in second-and-third tier cities of China, “men and smoking can’t be separated. The two have become one”, as the connotation of smoking is highly associated with economically successful men, men’s high social status, good relationships with others, “powerful” husbands in families, and so on (Mao, Bristow, & Robinson, 2013, p. 161). Thus, the above is probably a powerful explanation for why almost all smokers in China are men.

Along with visually appealing packaging, Chinese tobacco packaging has been thoughtfully created to distinguish individual brands amongst customers in order to better satisfy the demands of a broader spectrum of consumers and represent their varying socioeconomic positions. According to Li et al. (2015, p. 28), “most consumers of very expensive cigarettes may use them as a type of ‘status good’, that is, to signal that person’s economic and social status to others, rather than for normal everyday consumption”. CNTC current provides a wide price range for cigarettes (from ¥2 to more than ¥100); low-income and middle-income consumers are more likely to switch from low-price brands to higher-priced brands, as it is perceived as a symbol of success. However, this will expose them to a wider variety (and possibly higher number) of cigarette packs.

The above is a summary and analysis based on established studies. In order to gain a better knowledge of Chinese smokers, a qualitative research study using focus groups was conducted and its results will be displayed in the next section.

Qualitative Research

In order to find participants for the study, I have joined one Social Medium, a WeChat group with currently 436 members and which has been in existence since 2017. It is a smoker's paradise, as smokers discuss cigarette puffs and share knowledge about cigarettes with each other there. Also, my interviewees are all smokers, so I had difficulty finding a suitable meeting room—a place for eight people to smoke at the same time. Thus, participants were recruited from this WeChat group via convenience sampling. Research was conducted through video calling on WeChat for providing my interviewees with a relaxed environment (they can smoke whenever they want). These eight interviewees were male, between the ages of 25 and 45, have smoked for at least five years, and consumed at least ten different cigarette brands. To preserve the anonymity of my interviewees, they were marked as M1, M2, M3..., and M8 in this article. Here, I would like to make a special introduction to M4; he is the chat master of the WeChat group, who has been selling tobacco in China for more than 15 years (selling both domestic and foreign brands) and whose parents both work for CNTC.

Building upon previous literature research, the following questions were addressed to solicit smokers' opinions, remarks, and comments on Chinese tobacco packaging.

1. Why do you smoke?
2. Have you ever seen any anti-smoking campaigns, and what do you think of these ads? (if they all said “no”, I would remind them the cigarette pack is a kind of anti-smoking ad itself.)
3. Does the visual design of tobacco packaging affect your tobacco consumption, and, if yes, how?

First, it was interesting that my interviewees were all caught off guard when I posed the first question. It seemed that this short and simple question was difficult for them to answer. After about three minutes, M5 said that:

I was probably heavily influenced by my father. My father is a smoker. When I was a child, he would smoke in front of me, and when I saw the smile of pleasure on his face as he smoked, I wanted to try it. However, at that time, my father forbade me to smoke, and I was afraid to do so for fear of being beaten up. However, you know, people are always tempted to taste the forbidden fruit. Thus, during my senior year in middle school (at the age of 14), I purchased a pack of cigarettes and smoked covertly, which was the first time I smoked.

Following M5's answer, five other participants said that they had had similar experiences. Their smoking fathers had a massive impact on them, and they wanted to engage in activities that were considered prohibited for children by their parents. Their statements are in line with the finding of Grandpre et al. (2003) in some respects. These researchers found that children aged 9 to 15 are at significant risk of tobacco usage, and anti-smoking interventions will sometimes cause them to smoke in the first place. My interviewees' answers indicated that their first smoking experience happened when they were junior high school students (12-15). However, M6's words reflect the fact that cigarettes are really a convenient means of socialising in China, as he said that:

I smoked when I was in junior high school because it made me look more “bad” and made me blend in with the other “bad” students very quickly. We smoked together; we shared cigarettes; we then were good friends. Also, this significantly reduced the likelihood of me

being bullied at school because the bully was my friend.

Additionally, M1 and M7 added that they wanted to smoke when they were three or four years old because the tobacco packaging was too attractive.

The Chinese tobacco packaging was even better looking than my candy packaging; I always thought that was a pack of candy for grown-ups when I was little. I had a fondness for cigarette packs (M1).

When asked where they had seen the cigarettes at that time (at the age of 3 to 4), they said they saw it in the convenience store when they were buying candy. I then asked, “If you did not ask your parents to buy them for you?” M1 replied,

Of course, I have asked my parents to buy them. But then the adults, including the shopkeeper, would have a good laugh when they heard it. Sometimes my parents would explain that it was terrible for my health and that children should not use it. But at that time, I was too young to understand the concept of health hazards, and there were all kinds of cigarette cases behind the glass window, so colourful and dazzling that you couldn't see the hazards. I couldn't read or write at that time, and I could only read pictures. As I got older, I learned about the dangers of smoking, but I still wanted to fulfil my childhood dream (try tobacco).

M1's answer was echoed by many other interviewees. Past research had shown that youth are more aware of and like tobacco advertisements than adults (Grandpre et al. 2003). However, their research does not explain if this is because children are more curious than adults or because cigarette packaging is particularly appealing to children. Nevertheless, M1's words reflect that to illiterate people (especially young children), pictorial warnings will be more effective in showing the dangers of smoking.

As per question #2, many participants indicated that when they were in primary school, sometimes the school would organise trips to see public service announcements about quitting smoking and drugs. But after junior high school, they basically did not see them anymore. However, M8 said that he just saw an anti-smoking campaign while smoking (he showed us his Hong Kong version of the package of the cigarette brand *Furong Wang* while talking; the box is almost completely covered with a warning picture).¹ The other participants were puzzled by M8's words and questioned whether this could be considered an anti-smoking advertisement. They tend to see anti-smoking advertising as a video or poster appearing on television, in newspapers, and on other online mainstream media. After I explained that the pack is a kind of anti-smoking campaign, M1 argued that,

I agree with M8. His Hong Kong cigarette box does look like a tobacco control ad. I have also bought the European version of Marlboro, which is very different from Chinese Marlboro, as some uncomfortable pictures are placed on the packs. But I do not think warnings on the Chinese cigarette packs [Chinese domestic brands] are anti-smoking ads. I believe advertising has to be convincing, and the Chinese cigarette boxes just have the words “smoking is harmful to health” on them. It is just a piece of very common knowledge rather than advertising warning; the text warning seems like a superficial way of dealing with some legal provisions.

¹ *Furong Wang* is a leading Chinese tobacco brand; it is produced in mainland China.

However, after M1's address, an interesting thing happened because at least three other participants contradicted him. M4's words (M4's remarks seemingly led the discussion and would extend the discussion to question three as well:

I would like to say that although the threatening pictures could be effective in discouraging smoking in some foreign countries, in the current Chinese market, the horrifying images are very attractive to a lot of young Chinese smokers. This is because the box with threatening visuals is perceived as "coolness" and "mystique." Many of my customers have asked me to help them find some foreign versions of cigarettes with scary pictures; the scarier, the better). This made me feel very confused. As a businessman, I needed to understand my customers' wants and needs. Thus, I did some short interviews with them. Most of my clients said that cigarette boxes with threatening pictures are rare in the Chinese market; hence, when they take the pack out and share it with their friends, their friends are amazed and can hardly wait to smoke because the box is so rare. The box is cool and mysterious.

After M4 finished his contribution, all the other participants agreed with him. They said they had similar experiences and wanted to try the cigarette packaged by threatening pictures when they first saw it. This is a very interesting point. It reflects that instead of discouraging smoking, threatening images will attract more consumers in the current Chinese market, even though some other researchers have demonstrated that deterrent pictures are effective in discouraging smoking (Evans et al., 2013) and exhort non-smokers not to start smoking (Noar et al., 2015). But Grandpre et al. (2003) found that as teenagers mature, several effective anti-tobacco interventions lose their early advantages. Second, Droulers et al. (2017, p. 2) aggregate research which shows that threatening visual warnings have little or no influence on people's [adult smokers] responses and behavioural intentions toward smoking. These results may be explained by smokers' cognitive dissonance: individuals may resist threatening images by downplaying the harm, dismissing the issue, or disregarding the message.

Additionally, M6 commented that,

I am not sure whether you guys have noticed that, in addition to the attractiveness of cigarette packs with threatening images, a kind of pure white cigarette pack [plain packaging] also draws Chinese consumers towards them. Strictly speaking, these cigarettes are not a commodity, as they are not available in shops and can only be obtained by those [a privileged stratum, namely governmental officials] with special access to them. These plain white packs are very popular. Some non-smoking officials who have these cigarettes will sell them on the second-hand market, and these goods are highly sought-after because they represent a unique social status and position in China.




M4 explained that,

Cigarettes in this type of plain packaging really cannot be considered a commodity, as money will not buy them. In the early days, these cigarettes would have been regarded as a special item for government officials only since the absence of brand labels and other visual cues made it more challenging to determine the price. However, these special offers were slowly withdrawn over a decade ago. The white packets of cigarettes that can be seen today are experimental products of new cigarette brands or so-called counterfeit cigarettes not produced by CNTC [illegal goods].

Through M6's words and M4's two statements, we can see that plain and threatening packing does not always discourage smoking or reduce cigarette consumption. Conversely, such packaging stimulates consumer curiosity, and in particular, the plain packaging can represent a high level of power and social status in Chinese consumer culture.

As the discussion about the visual effects of tobacco packaging on consumption seemed to be slowly going off-topic, respondents were asked to list one or two favourite brands that they thought had the greatest design appeal (regardless of price and taste). Also, they were asked to indicate what they liked and disliked about them in terms of the visual design. Respondents offered three brands as their most popular choices, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Three Popular Chinese Cigarette Brands

Brands	Strengths	Weaknesses	Price (RMB)
<p>Figure 1. Ruan Zhong Hua (软中华).¹</p> 	<p>Red colour has been heavily used. Red is widely perceived as a lucky, festive, and cheerful colour in China. Hence, this brand is suitable for various kinds of everyday social occasions, especially for the Spring Festival and weddings. Also, the visual element of <i>Hua Biao</i> (“marble pillar”) is placed in the centre of the pack, which shows a sense of tradition and “orthodoxy”.</p>	<p>The brand has not updated its packaging in decades, so it looks a bit dated.</p>	70
<p>Figure 2. Huanghe Lou 1916 (黄鹤楼 1916).²</p> 	<p>The brand name is written in <i>Zhuan Ti</i> (“seal script”) with other visual elements such as the images of the crane and Huanghe Lou (“yellow crane tower”) to give the packaging a harmonious look. The name of the brand is also identical with an ancient Chinese poem, which most Chinese students will be aware of and drawn to, as they perceive the poetic meaning in the packaging. In addition, the whole pack is made up of dark and light yellow. Yellow was only used by royalty in ancient China, and thus displays a sense of grandeur.</p>	<p>It is perfect.</p>	100
<p>Figure 3. He Tianxia (和天下).³</p> 	<p>The brand name is written in <i>Cao Ti</i> (“cursive script”), which produces a lively and “manly” feeling. Also, a mix of deep purple and violet looks mysterious.</p>	<p>The size of the brand name should be bigger.</p>	100

First, it can be seen from Table 1 that the cigarette brands the respondents like and consider to

¹ Retrieved from: <https://img1.cnxiangyan.com/2021/1103/61823543e54a3.png?x-image-process=style/sy>
 On 17 December 2021.

² Retrieved from: <https://cnxiangyan-upload.xiazai63.com/uploads/180502/2-1P502141J5K1.jpg>
 On 17 December 2021.

³ Retrieved from <https://img1.cnxiangyan.com/2021/1124/619e00f626b66.png?x-image-process=style/sy>
 on 17 December 2021.

be better-designed all are high-end brands. This might reflect the fact that the current Chinese tobacco industry is market-driven, because the more expensive the cigarette brand, the more sophisticated the packaging design. Also, as per the weakness of the packaging design, none of the participants said that they felt the warning text negatively influenced the visual effects of the entire tobacco package and then their consumption; they seemed to ignore the warning text naturally. When they were asked to list some warning words they knew of for the cigarette box, seven of them simply said, “Smoking is bad for your health”. Only M4 successfully listed the other warning labels currently used by CNTC in China; these are “Do not smoke in smoke-free places”, “Discourage young people from smoking”, and “No smoking for primary and secondary school students” (for more details, cf. CNTC, 29 September 2019). The above evidence shows that the warning text has no media effects on anti-smoking campaigns, or at least so for the respondents in this study.

Final Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it is safe to conclude that the media power of Chinese tobacco packaging is conflicted, because Chinese tobacco packaging does double duty as commercial advertising (attracting the consumer) and PSA (dissuading the consumer). In the research at hand, media power and health communication theories were applied to explore media effects of Chinese tobacco packaging. Results suggest that Chinese tobacco packaging has powerful media effects as a form of commercial advertising, but as a PSA, it has minimal media effects for discouraging smoking.

According to Yuan, Head, & Du (2003, p. 8), media effects are influenced by four main factors in the communication process. Since these researchers study net-based media, I slightly adjusted the four influential factors to make them applicable to my research. They are communication efficiency (the strength of the communication), communication effectiveness (the quality of the communication), positive social-emotional communication, and negative social-emotional communication.

Communication efficiency is achieved via tobacco packaging in China, since tobacco advertising cannot be published in traditional and online media in China. Also, anti-tobacco advertising is uncommon in China, and thus it is tobacco packaging that becomes the final communicator for both promoting and discouraging tobacco use in China. To enhance and promote tobacco consumption, CNTC has licensed tremendous distribution points and POS nationwide. There is no POS display ban in China, so people can easily access cigarette packs in various shops and supermarkets. Also, owing to the fact that China has many smokers and a strong cigarette sharing and giving culture., the cigarette pack has high visibility in public, and is therefore an efficient communicator.

As Chinese tobacco packaging is beautifully designed, warning pictures have never been used, and warning texts only occupy a tiny part of the package; hence, the pack is more effective in promoting tobacco consumption and minimally successful in promoting anti-smoking goals. There are many reasons for this result. First, the first and most important reason is that government revenues are currently dependent on the tobacco economy. Second, the FCTC does not oblige all countries to use picture warnings which provides flexibility for the tobacco packaging design in China. Despite the current public criticism of overly “garish” tobacco packaging, CNTC, as a state-owned enterprise, is virtually immune to its influence. There is some consolation in the fact that the Chinese government, mindful of long-term development and health reasons (“Health China 2030”), has promised some improvements, such as

increasing the font size of the warning text, increasing the colour contrast between the text and the background, and adding more warning messages. However, the evidence above still suggests that, whether tobacco packaging in China is market-oriented or health-communication-oriented, depends on the government's policy, will, and the level of economic development of the country.

Furthermore, the sharing and giving of cigarettes as gifts play an important role in China's social and cultural environment, and smoking is widely considered manly and a sign of economic success. This dramatically increases the exposure of the tobacco pack in the interpersonal communication process. In addition, as evidenced by the participants of the study conducted, the warning graphics on some foreign cigarette packs may not discourage some young Chinese customers from trying them, but rather serve as a source of attractiveness and curiosity. Also, since plain packaging design represents belonging to a privileged class in the Chinese cultural context, it does not have the effect of eliminating brand awareness in China.

Based on the above, we can see that smoking in China largely still produces positive social-emotional communication effects. It helps enhance social network connections, construct personal status, and foster trust among people. Smoking does also produce negative socio-emotional connotations, as everyone knows that smoking is bad; but it seems that not many people care. This clearly demonstrates that for various reasons, cigarette packaging has not been successful in achieving its health communication objectives in China.

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Corresponding Author: Xiaolong Zhang

Email: Xiaolong.Zhang19@student.xjtlu.edu.cn