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Plain cigarette packaging likely to deter smoking - study

The dangers of smoking are well-known and are no longer contested. Despite this, many smokers struggle to quit smoking. Most smokers regret that they started smoking and want to quit. While quitting smoking is a personal decision, the decision to quit can be influenced by external factors.

For example, some smokers might decide to quit if the price increases beyond a certain threshold. In economic terms, people will be more likely to quit smoking if the cost of smoking (which includes not only the monetary cost, but also the future cost of likely illness and premature death) is greater than the utility derived from smoking.

Findings from a doctoral thesis by Nicole Vellios that investigated quitting behaviour in South Africa revealed that plain packaging (where manufacturers can only print, on a dull background, the brand name in a standard size, font, and position on the pack) would effectively reduce people's utility for cigarettes. As such, plain packaging would create an incentive for some smokers to quit smoking.

Vellios is a researcher at the Research Unit on the Economics of Excisable Products at the University of Cape Town (UCT) - she graduated with a PhD in Economics on 14 December.

Plain packaging was one of three chapters that considered different aspects regarding smoking cessation. The other two chapters looked at the determinants of smoking cessation, and illicit trade.

The plain packaging research found that smokers preferred not to buy plain packs, and non-smokers preferred not to try plain packs. Cigarettes from plain packs are perceived to be less desirable than branded packs, and thus provide less utility. It also found that smokers and non-smokers perceived plain packs to pose the most significant health risk. This research is important from a public health policy perspective, because it demonstrates that plain packaging is effective in discouraging people to smoke.

In December 2012 Australia became the first country to mandate plain packaging on all tobacco products. Since then another 21 countries have implemented plain packaging. Currently South Africa is contemplating legislation that aims to introduce both pictorial health warnings and plain packaging. This research provides locally-generated data that indicates that plain packaging is effective in reducing the demand for cigarettes.

Data were collected in 2021 from 1400 UCT students. Smokers and non-smokers participated in the survey. They were shown several packs at the same time and were required to make

trade-offs to reach a decision. From the data that was collected, it was possible to determine people's preferences.

Cigarette advertising has been banned in South Africa for more than 20 years. One of the last avenues to promote cigarettes is through the use of cigarette packs themselves.

Plain packaging restricts the industry's use of the cigarette pack as a promotional vehicle, reducing the appeal of cigarettes. Plain packaging, together with graphic health warnings (GHWs) (e.g. images of diseased lungs or rotting teeth or a gangrened foot) is a low-cost way to communicate the health risks of tobacco use. GHWs were introduced by Canada in 2000 and have subsequently been adopted in 134 countries. South Africa is not one of them.

"Given that South Africa has eleven official languages and a high level of illiteracy, graphic health warnings will be more effective in communicating the risks of smoking," said Vellios.

Vellios said: "The existing ban on the sale of single cigarettes should be enforced to ensure that smokers and non-smokers see the health warnings on plain packs. By printing warnings on individual sticks, smokers who buy single sticks will at least see a written health warning."



Example of plain packaging



If these were the only options you had to choose from, which would you be most likely to buy?

- A
- B
- C
- None of the above

Which of these do you think would pose the least risk to your health?

- A
- B
- C
- Other. Please explain: _____

An example of a choice set

Photos: Supplied

ENDS

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