

Use of imagery and text that could convey reduced harm in American Spirit advertisements

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► Additional material is published online only. To view please visit the journal online (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2016-053251>).

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Received 13 June 2016

Revised 11 August 2016

Accepted 15 August 2016

ABSTRACT

Background In 2015, the US Food and Drug Administration issued warning letters to three tobacco companies regarding use of the terms ‘natural’ and/or ‘additive-free’ to describe their products, as these terms inaccurately convey reduced harm. Yet, tobacco companies engage in a variety of alternate techniques to attempt to convey the same ‘natural’ (and thus reduced harm) message. It is critical to monitor these practices to inform regulatory action.

Objective To describe the marketing techniques used in Natural American Spirit (American Spirit) ads that could convey a natural and less harmful product image.

Methods Trained coders content analysed 142 American Spirit ads from 2012 to 2016.

Results In addition to use of the terms ‘natural’ and ‘additive-free’, American Spirit ads engage in a variety of other linguistic and iconic techniques that could convey reduced harm, such as references to small, local or organic farming, eco-friendly practices, and plant, farming and other nature-related imagery.

Conclusions American Spirit ads use a wide range of marketing techniques to convey a natural product image, which could subsequently communicate reduced harm.

BACKGROUND

In his seminal piece, *‘Rhetoric of the Image’*, Roland Barthes¹ argued that in addition to linguistic messages (the literal text) and iconic messages (the images), advertisements convey a symbolic message. In other words, the text and images in an advertisement interact to signify various concepts to consumers. Since the first reports emerged linking tobacco to lung cancer, advertising has leveraged such messages to allay consumers’ concerns about tobacco product harms. For instance, early on, campaigns linked cigarette smoking with favourable statements from and images of physicians, in an attempt to communicate the safety of the brand.²

More recently tobacco companies have used the terms ‘light’, ‘mild’ and ‘low-tar’ to convey reduced harm to consumers.³ Although the US Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act limited the use of these terms, tobacco companies have an arsenal of other tactics to communicate reduced harm.^{4–5} For instance, some companies have employed the terms ‘natural’ and ‘additive-free’, terms not explicitly addressed by the Tobacco Control Act. Considerable research has since demonstrated that this language conveys harm reduction to consumers, particularly youth,^{6–14} and formed the basis for US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issuing warning letters in

2015 to three tobacco manufacturers—ITG Brands LLC, Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company. (SFNTC: manufacturer of Natural American Spirit cigarettes, hereafter referred to as American Spirit) and Sherman’s 1400 Broadway N.Y.C.—for use of the terms ‘natural’ and/or ‘additive-free’ on their products,¹⁵ because the Tobacco Control Act prohibits misleading advertising or labelling that explicitly or implicitly conveys reduced harm without prior permission from FDA.

Following restrictions on allowable product descriptors, tobacco companies frequently engage in alternate marketing tactics designed to convey a low-harm message including use of language (‘smooth’) and imagery (lighter colours).^{16–17} Some prior work indicates that beyond use of the terms ‘natural’, ‘additive-free’ and ‘organic’, American Spirit advertisements employ other marketing techniques to convey a natural brand image that could potentially be perceived as less harmful, for example mailing flower seeds to customers.¹⁸ It is thus critical to systematically monitor the full spectrum of techniques tobacco companies use to convey reduced harm to consumers. In light of the recent warning letter issued to SFNTC, the current study identifies characteristics of American Spirit ads that could potentially communicate a natural product (and reduced harm) image.

METHODS

We conducted a content analysis of 142 American Spirit print, direct mail and email ads that ran between 2010 and 2015. We generated this sample of ads using the Trinkets and Trash tobacco marketing archive, ‘a surveillance system and archive that monitors, collects, and documents current and historic tobacco products and tobacco industry marketing materials’ (trinketsandtrash.org). All unique American Spirit ads hosted on the archive, dated between 2010 and 2015, were downloaded and coded, for a total of 144 ads. Two ads listed on the site as American Spirit ads were actually the emails from an external survey firm about a survey on American Spirit cigarettes, and were excluded from the sample, for a final sample size of 142. Three trained coders ($\kappa > 0.8$) double-coded the ads (% agreement across all ads=97.4) and discrepancies were resolved via in-person discussion.

Ads were coded for the presence of specific text descriptors, more general text references and imagery that could convey natural or organic product qualities. Codes were developed based on prior literature^{13–18} and by qualitatively assessing a subsample of the ads. Specific text descriptors coded were use of the terms ‘natural’, ‘additive-

To cite: Moran MB, Pierce JP, Weiger C, et al. *Tob Control* Published Online First: [please include Day Month Year] doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2016-053251

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free', 'organic', 'tobacco and(+) water', 'whole leaf' and 'fresh'. Ads were coded for more general text references to eco-friendly or environmentally sustainable practices (eg, references to not littering one's cigarette butts), farms or farmers (eg, referencing the farmers that grow the tobacco), and more specifically, references to the US grown tobacco or to local or small farms or businesses. Ads were also coded for nature-related imagery: images of plants/flora (eg, flowers, leaves, trees), images of farms or farmers (eg, crops, tractors), images of water (eg, dew drops, rain), images of wildlife (eg, insects, animals) and images of plant seeds (including seed packets). Ads from the sample exemplifying each code appear in an online supplementary file.

RESULTS

Results of the content analysis (see [table 1](#)) found that American Spirit ads contained multiple text descriptors that could communicate a natural product image. Most prominent were the now restricted text descriptors—the words 'natural' and 'additive-free'—appearing on over two-thirds of ads. Other (currently FDA allowable) words used to convey the natural message included 'organic', 'water' and 'whole leaf' to describe the product and text references to eco-friendly or environmentally sustainable growing and business practices. Finally, ads used visual imagery that featured pictures of plants (55.9%), farms or farmers (23.1%) and water (22.4%). An online supplementary table reports frequencies and percentages of each descriptor by advertising type (direct mail, print, email).

DISCUSSION

This study's findings demonstrate the variety of linguistic and iconic devices SFNTC uses that could communicate a natural product image in American Spirit advertisements. In addition to the use of specific text descriptors of the product, these ads use more general text that describes natural or organic growing practices. These text descriptors and more general text references are reinforced by nature-related visual imagery of plants, farms and wildlife.

Restricting use of specific text descriptors is a necessary and important regulatory action in order to avoid directly communicating that these products are healthier than other brands of cigarettes.

However, as this study's findings demonstrate, advertising is a complex system in which products are imbued with symbolic meaning through the careful selection of text and imagery.¹⁹ Previous research has demonstrated that when certain descriptors are restricted, tobacco companies use other linguistic and iconic tactics to convey the same message.^{16 17} For example, tobacco companies restricted from using the terms 'light' and 'mild' turned to the terms 'fine' and 'smooth'.¹⁷ Imagery is a powerful marketing tool as well.²⁰ The Silk Cut cigarette brand, in response to the proposed UK restrictions on text in tobacco ads, launched a campaign that relied almost exclusively on imagery to convey its message. This campaign resulted in an increase of market share,²¹ demonstrating the potential for images to communicate information that drives sales of a tobacco product.

Research indicates that consumers use imagery, such as pack colours, to make inferences about a product's qualities and risks.^{4 16 22} Emerging research also suggests that consumers perceive 'natural' tobacco products to be safer,^{6 8–12} but work examining specific advertising features that communicate a 'natural' product image has largely focused on use of the specific descriptors 'additive-free', 'natural' and 'organic'. The current study extends this work by documenting how American Spirit uses a wider range of techniques to potentially communicate a natural (and subsequently less harmful) product image in their advertisements.

The current study also underscores the need for additional research. Some of the content in the ads also had implicit quality claims (eg, regarding the production of or ingredients in the tobacco) that could also affect consumer harm perceptions; further research on the use of these tactics is also needed. It is also important to understand how a marketing campaign evolves across different media and over time, particularly in response to restrictions on advertising tactics.

A tobacco advertising campaign contains innumerable components that communicate about the product's qualities, the broader product image and the consumer who uses the product.²³ These techniques—including text and imagery, objects, settings, sponsorships, colours, fonts and so on—work synergistically to build a brand image that is marketed consistently over time.²³ Given FDA's regulatory authority over tobacco products, it is critical to monitor how tobacco marketers leverage this broad range of techniques and examine how these techniques work separately and interactively to affect consumer product perceptions and use behaviour.

The current study identifies textual and iconic tactics used in recent American Spirit advertising, and it will be important to update this list as marketing strategies evolve to comply with recent regulatory action. The next step is to examine whether these tactics are associated with perceptions of reduced harm that impact consumer behaviour. Such research is a necessary step before specific regulatory action, such as restricting the use of plant imagery or references to eco-friendly business practices could be recommended. Based on such evidence, regulations that address marketing tactics beyond use of specific keywords could have a larger impact on these advertising campaigns, which have the capacity to mislead the public into thinking that certain brands of cigarettes pose a lower risk to health compared with other cigarette products.

Table 1 Frequency of descriptors, text references and imagery

	N	Per cent
Text descriptors		
Natural	103	72.5
Additive-free	100	70.4
Organic	39	27.5
Tobacco and (+) water*	27	19.0
Whole leaf	24	16.9
Fresh	4	2.8
Text references		
Eco-friendly or sustainable practices	56	39.4
Farms or farmers	33	23.2
US grown tobacco	21	14.8
Local or small farms or business	4	2.8
Imagery		
Plants	79	55.6
Farms or farmers	33	23.2
Water	32	22.5
Wildlife	5	3.5
Seeds	5	3.5

*Some ads used a plus sign instead of the text 'and'.

What this paper adds

- ▶ Product descriptors such as 'additive-free' and 'natural' convey reduced harm to consumers. In 2015, the US Food and Drug Administration issued warning letters to three tobacco companies, including Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (maker of Natural American Spirit (American Spirit) cigarettes) regarding use of these terms.
- ▶ The full range of techniques used in American Spirit ads that could convey reduced harm beyond use of the terms 'natural' and 'additive-free' is not known.
- ▶ This study identifies multiple techniques used in American Spirit ads that could communicate a natural and subsequently less harmful product image. The inventory of techniques identified in this study can be used to guide studies that test the effects of these techniques, and to inform more comprehensive regulatory action.

Contributors MBM conceptualised and lead the data collection and write-up for this manuscript. JPP and JDS contributed significantly to the conceptualisation of the manuscript, and to the study design and write up of the manuscript. CW and MCC contributed significantly to the data collection instrument and data collection procedures, and to the literature review in the manuscript. MCC contributed to the statistical analysis.

Funding MBM's effort is supported by National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and FDA Center for Tobacco Products (CTP) (K01DA037903, PI: MBM). This manuscript was also supported by National Cancer Institute (NCI, R01 CA172058, PI: Messer) and Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program (24RT-0036, PI: Messer). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NIH or the FDA.

Competing interests None declared.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data sharing statement Unpublished data may be made available by request.

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Tob Control published online September 8, 2016

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