

Tobacco industry's use of outer packaging in Mexico increases product marketing space

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Dear Editor,

Mexico requires graphic health warning labels (HWLs) covering 30% of the front, and text HWLs on 100% of the back and one side of cigarette packs¹. The tobacco industry has used inserts and onserts (information attached to packaging) to increase marketing space on packs². Companies can also include marketing on outer packaging that encloses the primary package that directly contains the cigarettes³. Outer packaging provides additional space for advertising and promotion and can obscure HWLs⁴. For example, Japan Tobacco International introduced a limited-edition tin pack before the implementation of plain packaging in Ireland, seemingly to reduce policy impact⁵. Here, we describe marketing appeals on Mexican cigarette outer packaging that potentially undermine packaging policy.

Following the Tobacco Pack Surveillance System (TPackSS) systematic protocol⁶, unique cigarette packs (i.e. packs with at least one different exterior feature, such as color or stick count) were purchased in Mexico during October–November 2021. Purchases were made in twelve culturally and geographically diverse neighborhoods, of different socioeconomic status, in five cities (Mexico City, Guadalajara, León, Durango, and Mérida). Packs were purchased from convenience stores, small/independent grocery stores, wholesalers, and pharmacies, then photographed and double-coded, by three independent coders, for the presence of various marketing appeals.

Two hundred sixty-two unique cigarette packs were purchased. Of these, 24 contained outer packaging, and 12 (50%) outer packs were of a box/tin style, as opposed to sliders; 10 (42%) of the outer packs presented limited-edition descriptors. Seven (29%) presented Mexican national appeal imagery or descriptors, such as the image of a 'lucha libre' (wrestling) mask, and 4 (17%) indicated they could be used as an ashtray.

A common theme for outer packaging was to announce a packaging change; 10 (42%) outer packs advertised a change to the appearance of the primary pack (Figure 1).

Product information on the outer packaging differed from the primary pack in several cases. One Pall Mall outer pack conveyed higher levels of tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide compared to what was stated on the primary pack. Two Marlboro outer packs had zeroes for tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide – misleading information not on the primary pack. A Winston outer pack advertised a different flavor than what was presented on the primary pack. Most outer packs (63%) also directed people online, such as the company website, and/or QR codes.

In Mexico, outer packaging demonstrates a range of marketing appeals and could be a way for tobacco companies to counteract current HWL regulations

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Figure 1. Examples of cigarette outer packaging, Mexico, 2021



A) Outer packaging (right pack) advertising a rebranded product with a double capsule being sold at the same price. It reads: 'New/ New York, now with double capsule at the same price'. B) Example of a tin outer packaging with national appeal (mask of Mexican freestyle wrestling). C) Inside of packaging represented in B, which celebrates 150 years of Lucky Strike, leading consumers to scan the QR code to 'find out more'. It also reads: 'In 150 years, we have witnessed great stories, such as the one from the first masked fighter'. D) Example of a tin outer packaging with national appeal (long live Mexico September 2021) and a statement advertising the tin's use as an ashtray ('Mexico always clean. You can use this can as an ashtray'). E) Outer packaging (right pack) advertising the coming arrival of a rebranded product with a new design but with the same taste. It reads: 'coming soon ... new image, same taste'. F) Example of a box outer packaging with a fold-out (right pack) that contains more space for marketing. The box leads consumers to scan a QR code to 'learn more' and advertises the product as menthol. It reads: 'menthol tobacco + menthol capsule'.

that help limit marketing and advertising space on packaging. They may also mislead consumers on content emissions. Packs designed as metal tins also present the opportunity to be kept as collectors' items, and advertising their use as ashtrays encourages consumers to keep them, extending exposure to cigarette promotional messaging. These packs are the same price as without the tins, such that the tin is a free gift with each purchase. These findings stress the importance of plain and standardized packaging, including eliminating outer packaging, to protect consumers from appealing marketing and misleading claims.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created.

PROVENANCE AND PEER REVIEW

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DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors.