Tobacco imagery on New Zealand television 2002–2004

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*Tob. Control* 2006;15:412-414
doi:10.1136/tc.2006.016048

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Considerable emphasis has been placed on the importance of tobacco imagery in the media as one of the 'drivers' of smoking among young people. Findings are presented from a content analysis of 98 hours of prime-time programming on New Zealand television 2004, identifying 152 scenes with tobacco imagery, and selected characteristics of those scenes. About one in four programmes contained tobacco imagery, most of which might be regarded as 'neutral or positive'. This amounted to about two scenes containing such imagery for every hour of programming. A comparison with our earlier content analysis of programming in 2002 indicated little change in the level of tobacco imagery. The effect of this imagery in contributing to young viewers taking up smoking, and sustaining the addiction among those already smoking, deserves more research attention.

Methods

In New Zealand (NZ), in 1994 there were about eight scenes with tobacco imagery in every hour of prime time viewing, and by 1999 this had fallen to about two such scenes. At the same time, there was a drop in the number of programmes containing anti-smoking messages from a third in 1994 to one tenth in 1999. The present study was designed to examine subsequent trends in the depiction of tobacco, and particularly cigarette smoking, on NZ television in 2002 and 2004.

Health professionals are increasingly aware of the role that tobacco imagery in the media might play in modelling smoking behaviour. For young people, this might include the 'normalisation' of smoking, and over-playing just how common smoking is. For older adults who are tobacco dependent, such imagery might serve as a barrier to quitting. To date, most of this research has focused on tobacco smoking in the movies, but there has been some analysis of tobacco imagery on television. For example, US research suggests about one 'smoking act' per hour of programming, while Japanese research indicates four smoking acts per hour and virtually no negative portrayals of smoking. In New Zealand (NZ), in 1994 there were about eight scenes with tobacco imagery in every hour of prime time viewing, and by 1999 this had fallen to about two such scenes. At the same time, there was a drop in the number of programmes containing anti-smoking messages from a third in 1994 to one tenth in 1999. The present study was designed to examine subsequent trends in the depiction of tobacco, and particularly cigarette smoking, on NZ television in 2002 and 2004.

Results

Tobacco imagery in 2004

Some 120 programmes, 875 trailers and 2581 advertisements were coded over the week's viewing. Of the 120 programmes, 25% (n = 30) had at least one scene containing tobacco imagery; nine of these programmes were news, current affairs or documentaries. The total number of scenes with any tobacco imagery was 152.

In 77% (n = 117) of the 152 scenes with imagery, at least one person was smoking. Tailor-made or roll-your-own cigarettes were depicted most often (n = 75), followed by cigars (n = 32) and a pipe (n = 1). In 29 scenes someone was talking about smoking, and in four scenes someone was shown offering another person a cigarette. Men outnumbered women smoking by nearly 3:1, and most of those shown (82%) were estimated to be 30 years or over. Relatively few young adults were shown smoking and only three
smokers appeared to be under the age of 20 years. Most smokers were judged to be white European. Of the 49 characters shown smoking tobacco in drama/action/comedy shows, all but seven were “support” (n = 20) or “extras” (n = 22). The cartoon comedy *The Simpsons* showed the most characters smoking with an average of five per episode. Smoking occurred in a variety of places including bedrooms, pool halls, shops, porches, beaches and even a courtroom. The only consistent finding was that smoking was depicted indoors twice as often as outdoors. Twenty-seven of the 152 scenes had other imagery including four scenes with a cigarette packet, seven showing an ashtray, and 12 with a cigarette lighter.

Table 1 shows some characteristics of the imagery. In the music programmes, we coded 253 separate music videos; only seven (3%) depicted uncrITICAL tobacco imagery, with two of these showing more than 15 such scenes each. The two sports programmes had no smoking imagery. Most of the imagery in the table, including depictions of smoking, was “neutral/positive” and appeared incidental to the story. However, 11 programmes containing 23 scenes (15.1% of all scenes with tobacco imagery) showed “critical” or anti-tobacco imagery or conversations. Half of these scenes were in news or current affairs programmes. These scenes included: a news item on the first New Zealander claiming compensation for ill-health caused by “passive smoke”; in a documentary, a woman referred to “having to give up smoking” before adopting a child; a news item made reference to the (then) forthcoming changes to the Smokefree Environments Act; a news report on the health effects of passive smoking; and in a drama, a woman was shown severely coughing while smoking. There were also instances where tobacco smoking was satirised. For example, in an episode of *The Simpsons* a husband refers excitedly to his pregnant wife “smoking for two”, implying the baby is smoking when the mother does.

Of the 2581 advertisements, seven were ads for the national NZ Quit programme, and one for a commercially available nicotine replacement therapy. Six of the 875 trailers contained uncrITICAL tobacco imagery; none had critical or anti-tobacco imagery.

**Changes in tobacco imagery 2002–2004**

We were able to compare scenes depicting tobacco imagery in 2004 and 2002 for channels TV1, TV2 and TV3. Overall there were 106 scenes in 2004 (1.5 per hour) and 93 in 2002 (1.3 per hour). In terms of those programmes more likely to be watched by young people, the number of scenes with tobacco imagery per hour of comedy/drama/movies was 2.1 in 2004, and 1.7 in 2002. In these types of programmes, scenes with positive/neutral imagery outnumbered those with critical imagery by 8:1.

**DISCUSSION**

One in four programmes shown on NZ prime time television contained at least one scene with tobacco imagery, typically a

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### Table 1 Tobacco imagery according to type of prime-time programme—2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of programme</th>
<th>Number of programmes</th>
<th>Programmes with any imagery (%)</th>
<th>Scenes with any imagery</th>
<th>Scenes with critical imagery (%)</th>
<th>Mean scenes per hour</th>
<th>Mean smokers per hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News/current affairs/documentary</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama action</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality TV</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examining alcohol advertising, Casswell\(^9\) emphasises its effects on individual consumption and more subtle effects on the prevailing social climate around alcohol. The same analysis could be applied to tobacco imagery. There is certainly good evidence that exposure to smoking in the movies is an independent risk factor for initiation of cigarette smoking among US youth.\(^{10}\) The tobacco industry is in no doubt that social climate and strong image building are important,\(^{11}\) and the role of television in developing positive attitudes towards smoking among young people deserves close examination. As most people shown smoking were over 30 years old, a final point is that tobacco imagery may help sustain smoking among adult smokers or make it difficult to stay quit, in the same way that alcohol advertising impedes recovery of those trying to stay sober or cut down on their drinking.\(^9\)

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Cancer Society of New Zealand, the Health Sponsorship Council and Lottery Health in completing this research. However, the opinions in this report are solely those of the authors. We wish to thank Dr Anthony Reeder of the Social and Behavioural Research in Cancer Group for his critical reading of the manuscript.

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Competing interest statement: We have no competing interests

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**The Lighter Side**

"I tried, believe me, but the nicotine patch was never enough for me. I had to get the nicotine patchwork quilt."

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