Author's response to reviews

Title: Young smokers and non-smokers perceptions of typical users of plain vs. branded cigarette packs. A between-subjects experimental survey

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Comments to reviewers BMC - plain packs

Thank you for your helpful comments. We have incorporated the suggestions into the manuscript where it was possible. Below we have explained in detail how we have responded to the comments.

Response to reviewer 1:

Major Revisions

No. 1: In response to your suggestion to provide a more comprehensive review of recent studies, several new references and more details were added on p. 4 both in the section about plain packs generally, and in the section about descriptors. Thank you for your suggested works.

No 2: References for the claim of a negative norm climate was added on page 3.

No 3: To explain better why the chosen packs were chosen, the following amendment was included in the text (methods, first section): "All varieties included in the study were purposely selected from leading international and Scandinavian brands to reflect key dimensions of interest in terms of brand descriptors and imagery. This included the selection of brands and variants that featured different colour or flavour descriptors, and the inclusion of packs that featured different brand imagery, e.g. different colours, as well as packs in different sizes (10s and 20s)."

The reference for the market share data was moved to the end of the description of market shares.

In relation to the smuggling sentence: it is well-known that there is a black market for cigarettes. However, no information about the size or composition of that market is available, and we agree that it is speculative. We have removed this sentence from the article.

A more detailed explanation of why 6 packs were left out is provided. This information was moved from the beginning of the methods section to "design".

No 4: As variant descriptors were not part of the PP regulations discussed in
Norway at the time of this study we thought it was interesting to include them in their existing form, not least because it would increase the knowledge about the effects of such minor adjustments to the plain pack.

No. 5: The study is based on a survey that was carried out before the Australian plain pack was enforced, and before consensus on the best design of plain packs had been reached. Had it been done today, it is likely that the packs would have looked more like the Australian. The choice of grey as the colour for the plain packs were mostly based on a common-sense considerations such that no existing pack had a similar colour, and that grey is a very neutral colour, in our view considered to be boring by many.

No 6: The design of the current study was to a large extent inspired by the work by Hammond and others, and originally intended to be part of an international comparative study. The items included in the survey were chosen with this in mind. Also, as some time has elapsed since this study was planned and the data collected, we did not have all the information that is available today regarding these questions. We agree that this is unfortunate, but it is nothing we can rectify at this stage. However, in any future research it would be important to include also other items, and to try to find aspects that would resonance better even with boys.

Re. Use of positive attributes: As one important goal with this study was to inform policy makers about potential outcomes of plain packaging in Norway, and as positive attributes have been found to have an impact on the susceptibility to smoke, we decided that those were the types of attributes most relevant for us. Again, it is possible that in future research one would wish to focus also on other aspects.

No. 7: a global sum-score makes it possible to carry out a linear regression analysis, using global score as the dependent variable, and condition as one of the independent variables. Any systematic differences between the scores given by those in the plain and branded versions are then reflected in the condition-coefficients. The phrase "to facilitate a global linear regression analysis" was included in the main text (top p. 9) to clarify this point.

Re the division between none/some pos. characterisations: The text was altered to give some more justification: "The background for applying this strict criterion was that descriptive inspection of the data revealed that the majority of the respondents gave zero or one positive user characterisations for each pack. While the proportion who gave no positive user characteristic ranged from 34.5 to 60.1 per cent among boys, and 40.1 to 79.2 per cent among girls, the corresponding proportions who gave one positive characteristic ranged from 16.4-47.2 per cent and 11.1-19.8 per cent for boys and girls respectively. Consequently only a relatively small proportion of the respondents assigned 2 or more positive characterisations to each pack."

It is true that the smoking variable "smoked in last 30 days" covers many different smoking behaviours, and if the sample had been larger, it would have been
possible to separate occasional smokers from daily smokers. However, with the current sample this could not be done, not least because the smoking groups would be quite small.

No. 8: Unfortunately you have not had access to the annotations (a, b, c) in table 3 (now table 2), and it is understandable that you struggled with reading it. The star signs in the first two columns indicate a significant difference compared to the following column. For the last column, star signs indicate a significant difference with the first column. In effect, there was a significant difference between the scores in plain and branded for one item among boys, several differences between branded and plain and branded and plain+descr. for girls, and only one significant difference between plain and plain+descr. (girls: slim). (NB: new tests were done after a suggestion from reviewer 2, resulting in fewer significant differences than in the previous manuscript).

No. 9: A reference to female design of packs were included, and the text slightly rewritten in response to your comment. Furthermore, some references to other studies are introduced in the discussion of the gender differences:

"The idea that females are more influenced by pack design, either because of a larger array of “female” designs, or due to other factors, is not novel within this research field, and some of the previous research in fact included only girls [16, 27, 29, 30]. However, the results regarding the significance of gender on associations made between pack designs and perceived attributes, can also be said to be conflicting. Recently, no significant gender differences were found in a study of young adults’ evaluation of different tobacco brands [14], while another study found a gender difference related to a particularly feminine pack, but no gender difference in the associations between plain pack colour and appeal [42]."

Reg. the possibility of running separate analyses for smokers and non-smokers: Due to the sample size, a separation into boy smokers and non-smokers and girl smokers and non-smokers were not possible. As boys and girls were shown different packs, it was also not unproblematic to join the genders together. In the bivariate analyses, smoking status was therefore not taken into account. However, as smoking status was entered as a separate variable in the regression models, this aspect was at least touched upon in the paper.

Minor revisions
No. 11: Yes, figure one was mislabelled. This has been corrected.

No. 12: The measures used to estimate perceived health risks etc. were designed for this study, but as a result of discussions with people involved in the ITC, and based on suggestions from them. The "more warnings" measure was poorly translated in the previous manuscript, and we have changed it to "more information about health consequences", which is closer to the original wording.

No. 13: No bearing was included with "does not possess the attribute" because this was a very large group for several of the attitudes. Consequently, to leave them out resulted in a high number of missing, making a small sample even
smaller. We decided that even though "no bearing" is not the same as "does not possess", it does indicate a lack of positive attitude, and as our main interest was to look for changes in positive attitudes, it was better to join them together than to lose so many respondents.

No. 14 and 15: Decided to remove table 1, and adjusted the text to include information about the test used there: "There were significantly more boys in the group exposed to plain pack versions who thought that smoking helps smokers stay slim (Chi square, p<0.01), but otherwise there were no significant differences between groups regarding these attitudes."

No. 16: All annotations are present in our version. We will make extra sure that they are still there after downloading the revised paper. The order of boys/girls are changed to boys first, to fit better with text. The 1.4 score for girls "slim"-attitude in plain condition is not significantly different from the 1.3 in branded, but is significantly different from the 0.9 score in plain w descr., as indicated by star-sign on 0.9-score.

Response to reviewer 2:

Minor essential revisions

No 1: Table 1 was removed after a suggestion by the other reviewer. We feel that this implies that the sentence about boys who thought smoking helped smokers stay slim now is more suitable for the methods section (p 8).

No 2. The order of columns in (new) table 1 was altered so that the percentage 1+ positive characteristics comes first, and the OR after, as you suggested. The Ns apply to the OR. However, your comment led us to check the results again, and it then became clear that there were some errors regarding the score from boys and the ORs in the table. These have been rectified, and we have also checked the other results in the manuscript to make sure that they were ok - which they were.

No 3: C.I.s were provided in table 1.

Discretionary revisions

No. 1: The title was changed to "Young smokers' and non-smokers' perceptions of typical users of plain vs. branded cigarette packs. A between-subjects experimental survey"

No. 2: The references to the Norwegian considerations about plain packaging are altered. In the abstract, the sentence: "In Norway, the health authorities are considering introducing plain packaging within the next four years" is removed, and "including Norway" is added to the previous sentence.

On page 5, the sentence about the Norwegian considerations are rewritten into: "Norway have ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control where article 11 states that the authorities “should consider adopting measures to restrict or prohibit the use of logos, colours, brand images or promotional
information on packaging other than brand names and product names displayed in a standard colour and font style (plain packaging).”

No. 3: We have included "young adults" as you suggested.

No. 4: In our view, repeated measures analyses are not suitable with our data. We compare answers given by different people, and have not asked single individuals to rate both branded and plain packs.

No 5: The results in table 2 were re-tested using Anova, and not t-tests as before. Some previous significant differences are no longer significant, so the text had to be adjusted accordingly.

No 6: The size of the sample, as well as the design of the study (different pack selection for each gender) made it difficult to separate smokers from non-smokers in the bivariate analyses. Group sizes became small, and tables too big. However, smoking status was included in the regression analyses (and did not affect the outcome for boys, only for girls). (see also comment to reviewer 1).