Author's response to reviews

Title: A qualitative exploration of young adult smokers' responses to novel tobacco warnings

Authors:

Janet Hoek (janet.hoek@otago.ac.nz)
Anna Hoek-Sims (anna_hoek-sims@gmail.com)
Philip Gendall (philip.gendall@otago.ac.nz)

Version: 3 Date: 10 June 2013

Author's response to reviews: see over
Reviewer's report:
Nothing further from my original review.
Thank you.

Reviewer's report:
Overall Comments: Authors were very responsive to reviewers’ comments and the paper has been revised accordingly. In particular, the addition of Tables 1 and 2 addressed many concerns regarding lack of description of the sample, recruitment methods and for more properly contextualizing the findings. Authors also added information about the development of the bloodshot eyes image and participant reactions. Specific requests for more Information, e.g., how social smokers were identified, New Zealand’s tobacco control context, were added and improve the paper. The discussion section has been expanded with regard to all reviewers’ critique about the scope and implications of the findings to include review of other literature (e.g., disgust), additional points of analysis and context.

No further revisions are suggested.
Thank you.

Reviewer's report:
The revised paper is very different to the original. Indeed I don’t think I have ever read a more changed submission. Many of the changes have improved the manuscript, but others have created new problems.

We provided a comprehensive response to suggestions made during the first review round. We note that the majority of comments below were not made during the first review round and so do not relate to changes between the first and second MS versions, but to elements present in the first version.

P3. 1st para. I don’t think the use of up-stream and down-stream works recommend deleting this distinction.

We disagree and believe noting the wide range of interventions governments have used to deter smoking initiation and increase cessation attempts provides important contextual information. This background highlights the residual tobacco marketing that still occurs, despite policy and other interventions, and directs attention to the measures we examine. However, we have removed the terms up-stream and down-stream.

2nd para. There is nothing “Despite” in the relation between the above measures and pack imagery, reword this sentence.
We have modified the beginning of this paragraph and clarified the tobacco industry’s exploitation of regulatory loopholes.

3rd para. Refs 27 and 28, do not show, reduced brand appeal, but only the other things attributed to them.

We have inserted a reference to Hammond’s (2011) review, which supports the statement made about brand appeal.

The sentence starting “However, while…” this needs to be qualified with a “may” regarding effects on young smokers, certainty of effect has not been demonstrated. Continuing on what is an argument is presented as fact, and needs redrafting.

We have inserted the word “may” as suggested, but note we had used the word “reportedly” to qualify this point.

Last sentence of this para. I would add reduce progression to addicted use, something pack warnings are more likely to do than prevent initiation.

We have inserted a conditional reference to progression to addicted use.

The introduction needs material on rationalising and self-exempting beliefs and needs to make reference to the existing literature on this. There is nothing new in what is reported, except to show how such beliefs are part of a plausible argument as to the reasons why the health effects are less effective than they might be.

We had already noted smokers’ tendency to exempt themselves from risk but have extended this discussion.

I found the rational [sic] for the eye one completely different to what I thought it was trying to do. I don’t see any link to bloodshot eyes in the image.

We have acknowledged the ambiguity surrounding this image in the discussion; Dr Freeman raised this question in her first review and was satisfied with our response to it in the revised MS (see p.19).

P9 1st para. The explanations of the last two quotes seem unnecessary.

We have deleted the two sentences explaining these quotations.

2nd para should it be “smokers” in the first line? Given that self-exempting or rationalising beliefs are well documented, I wonder if all this para is necessary.

We have clarified this sentence to explain how some participants obliquely considered the possibility of becoming long-term smokers.

P11 Invulnerability to health risks. I am not sure this is the best heading.
We disagree and believe the heading appropriately summarises key elements of participants’ responses. As we explain, participants either exempted themselves from risk or diminished the importance of those symptoms they had experienced.

The second sentence. Make it explicit that this is what they were designed to do, I am not sure that the intended interpretation would always have been spontaneously self-generated. Did any of the warnings need to be explained to the participants?

We have clarified this sentence; we had also included additional comments on the “eye” image in the second MS version, including the fact some participants found it difficult to understand. We did not provide participants with a common understanding of each warning image and its intended meaning but instead focussed on exploring their interpretations of the images, even when they found these unclear.

P12 top. “Because” sentence implies universality of this response, I suspect it was not. Young adults, particularly those that don’t exercise much sometimes do not notice any impacts of smoking on respiratory function.

We have clarified this sentence to make it clear that the comments relate to those participants who did recognise the symptoms.

2nd para. Confirms my view that the image is not about what was intended.

This paragraph is largely unchanged from the first MS version. As noted above, we responded to first round review suggestions by discussing in more detail the difficulty some participants had in understanding this image.

3rd para. Seems overstated. You provide no evidence that they all recognised the symptoms depicted. How can you be sure it wasn’t just that they are disgusting images?

This paragraph is largely unchanged from the first MS version. We do not claim the participants recognised the symptoms presented; in fact, in the previous paragraph we discuss the difficulty many had in interpreting the eye image and our comment: “they found the images graphic and uncomfortable, and most disliked looking at them” acknowledges that participants found the images disgusting. We believe the existing text already addresses the point made.

P13ff Social stuff

The examples are convincing that smokers are aware of the smell and the social ostracism. However, I see nothing much to say that having it on packs, as distinct from being a focus for discussion would make much difference. Do they really need to be reminded if it is so salient already? That you were getting some of the same temporal inversion again suggests it is not enough to drive them to quit (as it cant be as they are still smoking). Can the issue of telling people what they already experience be canvassed a little more.

We found the smell image elicited high levels of dissonance from smokers and made their concerns more salient. Because of these reactions, we believe the images merit further testing to estimate their likely effects on quitting. As we wrote in response to Dr Freeman’s comments: “We agree young adult smokers are already aware of the after-smell of smoking and many attempted to disguise this smell; however, the messages reminded them of this problem, questioned the adequacy of their precautions, and created a dissonance they found unsettling. Although
participants used strategies to reduce a smell they themselves found offensive, few had
confronted the possibility this strategy was ineffective and most tried to avoid thinking about this
problem. Nevertheless, the question about whether this approach would be more effective than
novel, more shocking warnings is ultimately an empirical one, and we draw explicit attention to
this question in the discussion."

We noted that a minority engaged in temporal inversion, but as no warning message is likely to
be a “silver bullet” we do not see the minority response as negating the overall potential this
message could have. We have extended the discussion of salience to address the reviewer’s
point.

Toxins P16ff

Here there appears to be more evidence of a role for these as warnings. But the conclusions
seem to argue against any benefit as many of the same self-rationalising statements were also
elicited.

We agree.

Presented in this new, and I think better way, the quotes and summaries presented do not seem
to me to make a particularly compelling case for the conclusions. This I think they are overstated.
1st para. I think the arguments are overstated. The first sentence is distorted: The size of the
sample is unrelated to the issue of congruence. It is however, relevant to the issue of novelty.
The authors need to explain what new things they have found, or more correctly possibilities that
have been either completely ignored or undervalued that emerge from this study.

We have modified the first sentence and commented in more detail on the findings we believe
are novel.

2nd para. How many were social smokers. This idea is new and should not be new here. Please
indicate in the results how many social smokers there were and the general basis for suggesting
they respond differently

We had earlier introduced discussion of social smokers, so disagree this is a new point to raise in
the discussion. We provided details of participants’ smoking status (social or daily) in Table 1.

We explained how we examined differences between social and daily smokers in our response
to Dr Grana’s suggestions: “We have inserted more details about participants’ tobacco
consumption. We used self-definitions of social (occasional) and daily smokers but did
collect data on smoking frequency, which we have now included in the table outlining
participants’ characteristics. Because we used a qualitative approach and so had fewer
research participants than a quantitative study would have had, we only commented on
differences between daily and social smokers when these were very marked (i.e., shown by
most members of one group and few or none of the other). We have noted alongside each
quotation participants’ gender, age and smoking status to help readers understand why and
how we identified differences between groups.

The issue of capacity to find excuses for avoiding a hard task is an important one, and while not
new is one worth stressing and reminding people of. I would increase the prominence of this
idea.

We have provided more details, as suggested.
Conclusions. Some of the statements are I think too strong given the limited evidence. I personally was not convinced, but intrigued by the possibilities. Please tone it down a bit.

We have inserted qualifying comments as suggested.

Finally, the authors should acknowledge the possibility that it was the novelty and presence of the warnings used that may have made them seem more effective. With time they may develop ways of psychologically avoiding these as well.

Also the possibility that the two short term effects pictures in fact are not really evoking short term effects, but generalised concern about harms.

We had already acknowledged the first point on page 22 (last sentence of top paragraph reads: “Nevertheless, given some participants’ difficulty in interpreting more metaphoric messages, further work is required to test alternative executions and assess whether message novelty, immediacy or salience is the best determinant of effectiveness”)

We have noted the possibility of general concern about smoking harms as suggested.

Title: A qualitative exploration of young adult smokers’ responses to novel tobacco warnings

Version: 2 Date: 28 May 2013
Reviewer: Ahmed Fathelrahman

Reviewer’s report:
A qualitative exploration of young adult smokers’ responses to novel tobacco warnings This work benefited greatly from the reviewers’ comments and suggestions and became far good and suitable for publication.

Discretionary Revisions
I do not have much to add, except, I noticed that all participants were mild to moderate smokers and none of them is heavy smoker. Maybe, it is expected that fewer number of young adults would be heavy smokers. Do you expect smokers who smoke more and who may experience more immediate negative health consequences such as shortness of breath and redness of the eyes would be affected more by the studied warning labels?

Thank you for raising this interesting question. According to the latest New Zealand Health Survey, only 9% of smokers are “heavy” smokers (defined as smoking more than 20 cigarettes per day). Given this figure, the fact we have few heavy smokers among our participants is unsurprising as the proportion of heavy smokers is likely to be even lower among young adults. We would like to test the warnings (and variations on these) among older smokers, who appear to be more responsive to health warnings in general.