BRIEF REPORT

Tobacco imagery on New Zealand television 2002–2004

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Considerable emphasis has been placed on the importance of tobacco imagery in the movies 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.

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 overplaying 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,¹ but there has been some analysis of tobacco imagery on television. For example, US research suggests about one “smoking act” per hour of programming,² while Japanese research indicates four smoking acts per hour and virtually no negative portrayals of smoking.³ 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.⁴ 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.

METHODS

In NZ there are several free-to-air television channels, including national and regional channels, and Maori television (Maori are the indigenous people of NZ). The three main national channels are TV1 and TV2 (both state owned) and TV3 (privately owned). For one week in June 2004, we video recorded all television programming (including movies) shown on the three major channels (TV1, TV2, TV3) and C4, from 6.00 pm to 9.30 pm. We included C4, which is primarily a music video channel aimed at 15–29 year olds (Television Broadcaster's Council: www.c4tv.co.nz). This amounted to 98 hours of television. In August 2002, we recorded 73.5 hours of programmes from channels TV1, TV2, and TV3 over the same time period in the evening. Consequently, we were able to examine changes in the

amount and nature of tobacco imagery over a two-year period. Copies of the coding forms are available on request.

The primary units of analysis were scenes containing tobacco imagery. We defined a scene as a relatively discrete set of camera shots relating to a set piece of “action” within a programme, an advertisement or trailer.⁴ Termination of a scene was usually signalled by the camera cutting away to a new location, to new actors or a new staged action piece. While this was relatively unproblematic, the identification of discrete scenes was harder in documentary and news programmes, where, for example, there was an interview with someone who was a smoker. Here we adopted a more conservative approach so that a five minute uninterrupted interview would constitute one scene.

Tobacco imagery was defined quite broadly from the depiction of characters smoking, someone talking about tobacco, or someone being offered tobacco, to vending machines, signs billboards and posters, packets of cigarettes, ashtrays, cigarette lighters, and any other related tobacco product including nicotine replacement products. The imagery was identified as “neutral/positive” where smoking was shown in the context of people having a good time or relaxing, or there was talk of the positive effects of smoking, or simply an ashtray was shown with a lighted cigarette in it. Imagery was defined as “critical” where there was an explicit message depicting the negative effects of tobacco—for example, someone shown coughing while smoking, or talk of the health effects of smoking, or talk of the positive effects of quitting.

The coding was carried out primarily by one of the authors (JK). Because the tapes were coded for all instances of substance use (that is, alcohol as well as other drug use), there were multiple viewings of each programme and repeated viewings of each coded scene. We did not formally assess rater reliability. However, half of the programmes were viewed by both JK and RM to achieve agreement and consistency in coding. Furthermore, in instances of uncertainty, both coders reviewed relevant scenes to reach agreement.

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 any 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 imagery 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 table 1, 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

What this paper adds

There has been little research on the amount and nature of tobacco related imagery on commercial television. This is especially so in New Zealand. As part of a comprehensive study of substance use depicted on television, we examine tobacco related imagery in scenes shown over a week's viewing in 2004.

We found that about one in four programmes have tobacco related imagery, most of which is neutral or pro-smoking. Comparison with earlier New Zealand data suggests there has been little change in the amount of such imagery on New Zealand television over the last 10 years.

male support or extra, 30 years or over, smoking a cigarette. Nine-tenths of this imagery was either neutral or positive in terms of the depiction of tobacco, and carried the implication that there are no health consequences from tobacco smoking. This stands in notable contrast to the 120 scenes depicting illicit drug use over the same week's viewing, in which three-quarters of all imagery was shown in a context of adverse health and social effects. There were only a handful of advertisements for the national Quit programme and commercial aids to quit, amid some 2500 or so advertisements for other products. The quit message seems buried in a clutter of other advertising and programming. There has been little change in the depiction of tobacco imagery on NZ television from 2002 to 2004 following a large decrease in imagery that occurred after the mid 1990s.⁴ While comparison with this earlier NZ research is somewhat problematic, it does appear that the amount of imagery on youth-oriented programmes has remained relatively stable since 1999.

A 2001 survey of 652 year 11 students in Dunedin, NZ⁵ found that 43% reported watching ≥ 3 hours of television on an average school day, while 40% reported watching 1–2 hours. For those viewing 3–4 hours of television per night, our findings indicate they may see some 40–50 people smoking per week's viewing. Those programmes with more depictions of imagery critical of tobacco (for example, news) are likely to be those watched less by young people. Furthermore, the frequent depictions of tailor-made or roll-your-own cigarettes are consistent with what young New Zealanders report smoking.⁶ In visual media, cigarette smoking often serves as a “narrative device”.⁷ Smoking a cigarette may imply a character under stress or depressed, hard-bitten or otherwise unconventional—for example, Denzel Washington's character Alonzo Harris in the movie *Training Day*, one of four movies coded during the week's programming in 2004. There is evidence that older adolescents are aware to some degree that cigarette smoking is written into the storyline for this purpose.⁸ So, is television an important determinant of youth attitudes towards cigarette smoking?

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

Type of programme	Number of programmes	Programmes with any imagery (%)	Scenes with any imagery	Scenes with critical imagery (%)	Mean scenes per hour	Mean smokers per hour
Music	38	13.1	46	4.3	1.6	1.8
Comedy	17	41.1	36	11.1	4.0	3.2
News/current affairs/documentary	32	28.1	39	33.3	1.4	1.1
Drama action	21	33.3	23	14.8	1.2	1.0
Reality TV	10	20.0	8	0.0	0.8	0.8
Sport	2	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	120	25.0	152	15.1	1.6	1.5

Examining alcohol advertising, Casswell⁹ 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

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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."