Tobacco Packaging Design in China, Thailand, and New Zealand: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Packaging design has received much interest from the academic and industrial worlds. Numerous studies have shown that packaging significantly impacts purchase intent, product satisfaction, and repeat purchases. However, to some extent, tobacco packaging is not used to fulfil its consumer target's demands or increase the repeat purchase rate. By contrast, it has the official duty to discourage tobacco use, as it is a highly regulated business. Nevertheless, tobacco manufacturers do their best to find the last opportunity to advertise on tobacco boxes because the packet is their final or only marketing or advertising tool in many countries. Thus, tobacco packaging design could be the most challenging advertising practice in many nations because two contradicting advertising contents (persuasion and dissuasion) emerge in one medium simultaneously. In this paper, I comparatively content-analysed 65 popular cigarette brands from China, Thailand, and New Zealand to find out how tobacco companies use cigarette packaging to communicate with their customers. The results suggested that Chinese tobacco packaging is highly market-oriented and emphasises the use of traditional Chinese cultural elements. Conversely, tobacco packaging in Thailand and New Zealand focuses on health communication. But warning labels in the two countries are platitudes. The results also indicate that although policy factors have had a positive impact on tobacco packaging in terms of its discouraging function and contributing to tobacco control over the past decades, there is a need for policies to be tailored to the socio-cultural context. Efforts should focus on improving tobacco packaging from the perspective of smokers' psychology. This adjustment is deemed necessary due to the declining effectiveness of current tobacco packaging control policies in reducing smoking rates in recent years.

1. Introduction

In a global context of tobacco control, Philip Morris executive Mark Hulit, in May 1994, at the Corporate Affairs Conference in Manila, underscored that "our final communication vehicle with our smoker is the pack itself. In the absence of any other marketing messages, our packaging […] is the sole communicator of our brand essence" (White et al., 2012: 2). Tobacco packaging is widely recognised as the most important tool for tobacco marketing and advertising (Wade et al., 2010) or even the only direct link between consumers and tobacco companies in most countries (Hammond, 2010: 227). However, it is intriguing to note that this crucial aspect is not only about marketing

but also involves a nuanced interplay between persuasion and dissuasion, a point explored in detail in the subsequent discussion.

Tobacco companies seem to underline that "packaging has no role in advertising and promotion at all and that it has no impact on overall smoking rates" (Tobacco-Free Kids, 2018). However, many researchers indicate that tobacco packaging has a massive impact on both smokers and non-smokers due to its high level of public visibility (e.g., Dewhirst, 2004; Hammond, 2010; Wakefield and Letcher, 2002). For example, in China, cigarette packs are readily available in street shops, where tobacco advertising, in the form of posters, is prevalent (Parascandola and Xiao, 2019: 26). Although retail display bans have been implemented in some countries, such as Iceland, Thailand, Canada, etc. (Thomson et al., 2008), the cigarette pack per se may work as a kind of portable advertisement when smokers take their boxes out or share cigarettes with others (Wade et al., 2010).

Hence, in light of the strong correlation between exposure to tobacco marketing and subsequent tobacco use (McNeill et al., 2017), it is crucial for tobacco control initiatives to scrutinise the cigarette packaging employed by tobacco companies for advertising their products. This scrutiny may aid in comprehending how tobacco marketing influences usage motivations and contributes to overall product utilisation (Moran et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasises that analyses of tobacco packaging can reveal prevalent tactics and serve as a warning to regulators and practitioners regarding potential strategies that might appeal to youth or disproportionately target vulnerable populations, thus contributing to health disparities (WHO, 2003). Tobacco packs, as advertising, could be the most challenging advertising practice in many nations. On the one hand, the tobacco manufacturer/brand seeks to use its packs (this final advertising tool) to attract or encourage the consumer, ultimately promoting sales. On the other hand, selling tobacco is strictly regulated in many nations due to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) ratified by 181 countries under the WHO. The FCTC requires that tobacco packaging serves as a public service announcement (PSA) to discourage smoking. Hence, this creates a contradiction between the "encouraging" and "discouraging" aspects, making tobacco packaging design a hot potato or a contentious issue in many countries. Therefore, this duality creates a complex dynamic that warrants in-depth investigation and analysis. The complexity of tobacco packaging design is not only a result of conflicting objectives but is deeply embedded in

the socio-cultural fabric of each nation. Different nations grapple with this tension in distinct ways, reflecting political, economic, and cultural variations (Moodie et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding how policies are crafted and implemented in diverse settings is crucial for identifying best practices, potential pitfalls, and areas where adjustments may be necessary.

In consideration of the above discussion, which delineates a paradoxical scenario wherein tobacco packaging design becomes a subject of intense debate, entwining conflicting aims of "encouraging" and "discouraging", this comparative research seeks to scrutinise the visual elements of tobacco packs in China, Thailand, and New Zealand. This investigation aims to find out how cigarette packs have been used to communicate visually with the consumer, how tobacco brands respond to FCTC, and what aspects have influenced the tobacco packaging design in these three countries. The reason for the country selection is that previous studies have indicated that the "tobacco economy" is decreasing in many developed countries but thriving in developing countries (Datte et al., 2018), which reflects a trend that the wealthier a nation is, the less reliant it is on the tobacco economy (thus, the tobacco industry is more tightly controlled). As such, New Zealand (a developed country), China (a developing country with a high GDP), and Thailand (a developing country with a relatively low GDP) have been selected to make the comparison highly meaningful.

2. Literature Review: Tobacco industries in China, Thailand, and New Zealand

This subsection will first analyse the tobacco industry in China through three aspects: (1) tobacco cultivation, (2) tobacco production, and (3) tobacco trade systems.

Currently, tobacco cultivation accounts for tiny portions of agricultural activities in both Thailand and New Zealand. Thus, I will only focus on these two countries regarding their tobacco production and trade systems, respectively. Furthermore, since smokers significantly contribute to the tobacco industry, the general demographic picture of smokers and smoking prevalence in the three nations will be illustrated accordingly.

2.1. The Tobacco industry in China

Tobacco is widely planted in China except in the areas of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Tibet (Leng and Mu, 2020), and it is a major source of income for many rural

households. The purchase of raw tobacco materials and the production of tobacco products in China are fully controlled by the China National Tobacco Corporation (CNTC). CNTC is a state-owned enterprise, which means that tobacco production in China is entirely at the mercy of the Chinese government (the State of Council, 12 September 2014). The Chinese tobacco trade system comprises distribution points and point of sale (POS) sub-systems (Wang, 2006: 141). In 2000, POS in China were about five million (*ibid*); however, it is unclear how many cigarette POS are now operating in China. However, a report by the Chinese Association of Tobacco Control indicates that around 65 per cent of POS display cigarette advertising and about 58 per cent of POS do not demonstrate signs prohibiting the sale of cigarettes to minors (People's Daily Online, 5 September 2019).

CNTC is the largest tobacco producer globally, accounting for approximately 45 per cent of all tobacco produced worldwide (Cerantola and Ciurcanu, 22 June 2021). As of 2019, there are over 316 million smokers in China, accounting for roughly 30 per cent of all smokers and 40 per cent of all tobacco use worldwide (Parascandola and Xiao, 2019: 21). Of these smokers, 99.6 per cent are male (Wang and Xiao, 2021: 938). Despite the health risks associated with smoking, more than 70 per cent of Chinese adults are exposed to second-hand smoke every week (Madewell, 2018). This is presumably due to the belief that smoking is an essential socialising means (Leng and Mu, 2020) and a way of releasing pressure (Cheng et al., 2015). Cigarette sharing and gifting habits are deeply rooted in Chinese daily life culture as they are believed to uphold Confucian collective ideals (Chan et al., 2003; Qin et al., 2011; Leng and Mu, 2020).

2.2. The tobacco industry in Thailand

Established in 1939, the Thailand Tobacco Monopoly (TTM) had exclusive control over practically all domestic tobacco production, distribution, and sales for the following 50 years (MacKenzie et al., 2017). Thus, before 1989, the TTM enjoyed a position in Thailand's tobacco industry analogous to China's CNTC by virtue of their shared status as state-owned enterprises.

During the 1980s, the TTM's dominance in the market suffered from two main external threats. First, as noted by MacKenzie et al. (2016), there was a significant increase in the illegal tobacco trade in the mid-1980s, which occupied around 3-7 per cent of the market, flooding the nation with foreign brands such as Marlboro (MacKenzie et al., 2016).

Second, in the 1980s, the US Trade Representative (USTR) threatened some Asian countries, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand, with trade penalties unless they lifted cigarette import restrictions. Thailand's appeal to the USTR led to arbitration by the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), which in 1990 concluded that import limits violated Thailand's treaty duties (MacKenzie et al., 2017).

TTM has been facing competition from global tobacco giants like Philip Morris International (PMI), American British Tobacco (ABS), and other transnational tobacco companies (TTCs); TTM has seen its domestic market share shrink gradually (Vateesatokit, 2003; MacKenzie et al., 2017). However, to fight against imported cigarettes, Thailand can establish non-discriminatory tobacco control laws without violating the GATT (MacKenzie and Collin, 2012; Chantornvong and McCargo, 2001). Meanwhile, tobacco control supporters caught the chance and effectively mobilised public health concerns over cigarette imports, garnered broad community support, and "made the issue of foreign cigarette imports a matter of national pride and 'face'. Thus, when Thailand was forced by GATT to open up the cigarette market, the anti-tobacco coalition was able to push for various measures as a quid pro quo" (Chantornvong and McCargo, 2001: 49). This may be the most crucial reason Thailand is regarded as "a country with substantial success in tobacco control over the past two decades" (Vathesatogkit and Charoenca, 2011: 228).

The smoking prevalence in Thailand was about 50 per cent in 1991 (MacKenzie et al., 2017), roughly 15 per cent higher than China's in the late 1980s. But the current smoking prevalence in Thailand is 22.8 per cent, which is almost 4 per cent lower than the rate in China now (Macrotrends, 2022). Like in China, Thailand's smoking population is predominantly male, with an adult smoking prevalence of 39.4 per cent-41.8 per cent among men and 1.9-2.5 per cent among women (Aungkulanon, 2019). Apart from the tobacco advertising ban on mass media and new media, Thailand was the first Asian nation to implement a complete ban on tobacco advertising displays at POS (Chantornvong and McCargo, 2001); hence, cigarette packs in this nation are not highly conspicuous in public, as opposed to the prevalent visibility observed in China.

2.3. The tobacco industry in New Zealand

Tobacco manufacturing is managed and controlled by state-run companies in China (100 per cent by the CNTC) and Thailand (70 per cent by the TTM); however, a privately

owned company, British American Tobacco (BAT), is the leading company in New Zealand. After a series of restructuring, the market shares of tobacco in New Zealand are described as "BAT (80 per cent), Imperial (16 per cent), and Philip Morris (4 per cent)" (Thomson and Wilson, 2003: 10), and these three are all private corporations.

Undeniably, the tobacco industry significantly contributes to New Zealand's national economy, but the national government has an unshakeable commitment to tobacco control. For instance, in December 2021, the government announced that residents born after 2008 would never be allowed to purchase tobacco products in their lifetime; the NZ Health Minister, Dr. Ayesha Verall, said, "We want to make sure young people never start smoking". (BBC, 9 December 2021). Besides, in New Zealand, the tobacco packaging design is highly regulated under the Smoke-Free Environments Regulations 1999; it has been found that pictorial warnings are effective in educating New Zealanders about the knowledge that smoking harms (Hoek et al., 2010). Presumably influenced by New Zealand's health communications in terms of quitting smoking, even most current smokers (65 per cent) have voiced support for more significant national efforts to control the tobacco industry (Edwards et al., 2013).

According to van der Deen et al. (2014), the smoking prevalence in New Zealand was about 15 per cent in 2013, much lower than those in China and Thailand. The smoking prevalence is expected to drop down to less than 5 per cent by 2025: "New Zealand is one of [the] four countries that has [have] a government with a smoke-free national goal" (*ibid:* 71). In New Zealand, smoking rates are currently much higher among men (15.6 per cent) than women (2.25 per cent), similar to the situations in China and Thailand.[1] In New Zealand, smoking appears to be heavily influenced by personal or familial economic factors; the smoking prevalence remains markedly high among Māori people, accounting for 45.7 per cent (Thomas and Glover, 2010).

2.4. Smoking prevalence in the three countries

Although Thailand and New Zealand have achieved more effective tobacco control than China, smoking rates in these countries have only slightly decreased over the past six years: see Chart 1, which is based on relevant reports (e.g. Aungkulanon et al., 2019;

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[1] Retrieved from: Tobaccoatlas.org/country/new-zealand on 26 November 2021.

CGATS, 2018; Ministry of Health NZ, 2021) on smoking prevalence in these three countries. The three countries have progressed in tobacco control over the past three decades. However, smoking prevalence has declined slowly in China, where the smoking rate fell by less than 8 per cent between 1984 and 2018. Smoking prevalence has also slowed in the last five years in the three countries, which suggests the challenges faced in tobacco control. The effectiveness of tobacco packaging regulations established under the FCTC framework, as evidenced by their contribution to reducing smoking prevalence, highlights the potential impact of comprehensive and standardised packaging policies (McNeill et al., 2017). The gradual decline in smoking prevalence observed over the past three decades in China, and more recently in Thailand and New Zealand, underscores the necessity of investigating the tobacco packaging design in these countries. This exploration aims to discern the reasons behind the slow decline in smoking rates in China, despite its adoption of the FCTC framework for tobacco packaging design. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the challenges hindering further reductions in countries that have achieved notable success in tobacco control in recent years.
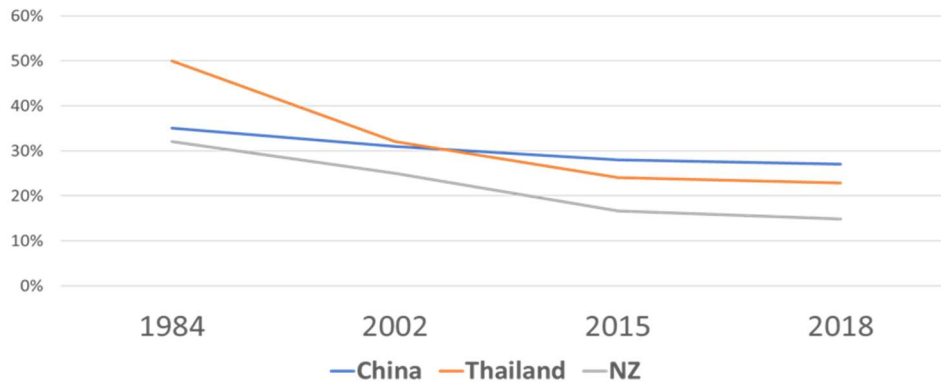

Chart 1. Smoking prevalence in the three countries (the 1980s—2018).

2.5. Criteria on warning labels for tobacco products in China, Thailand, and New Zealand

These three countries have all ratified the FCTC. However, the criteria mandated by the FCTC are ambiguous. According to the WHO (2003: 10), health warning labels on cigarette packs should be "(iii) large, clear, visible and legible, (iv) should be 50% or more of the principal display areas but shall be no less than 30 % of the principal display areas". This gives member countries some degree of autonomy in implementing these

guidelines. In addition, Thailand and New Zealand have adopted plain packaging regulations prohibiting the display of logos, images, or promotional text on cigarette packs, except for brand names displayed in certain ways. These two countries' policies and regulations also require cigarette packs to have a specific colour with mandatory warning texts and pictures displayed.

In mainland China, warning pictures have never been used on cigarette packs; only one simple and short warning sentence is placed at the bottom of the packet (Qin et al., 2011; for more details, please see Figure 1). According to the CNTC (29 November 2019), currently, there are four different warning sentences applied on tobacco packaging in China: (1) "Do not smoke in smoking-free places"; (2) "Discourage young people from smoking"; (3) "No smoking for primary and secondary school students"; (4) "Smoking is harmful to your health". The tobacco manufacturer only needs to ensure that the font size is at least 4.5mm in height and that the area occupied by the warning words should not be less than 35 per cent of the package's display space.

Fig. 1. An example of Chinese tobacco packaging design.

Thailand ratified the FCTC in 2003. It was the first Asian country to join FCTC and implement pictorial warnings on tobacco packs. Sinsuwarn and Sthapitanonda (2019) noted that as of 8 December 2019, all cigarettes sold in retail must be plain packaged: plain packaging prohibits all design features such as colours, artistic typefaces, images, logos, etc. (Cohen et al. 2020). Figure 2 is an example of the plain packaging. In Thailand, at least 85 per cent of the display space has to be used to illustrate visual health warnings on the front and rear of the pack. Misleading packaging and labelling are prohibited, including words and phrases like "light" and "low tar" (Tobacco-Free Kids, 2021).
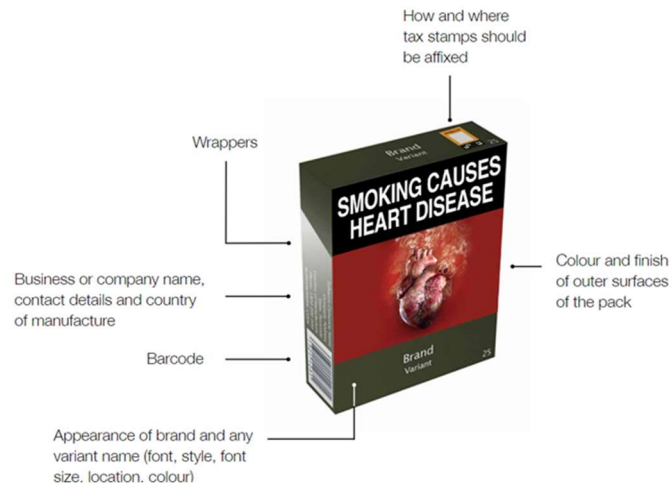
Fig. 2. Plain packaging (WHO 2018, 7).

In New Zealand, tobacco companies have been forced to feature pictorial health warnings on product packaging since 2008. Currently, the graphic warning should occupy at least 30 per cent of the front and 90 per cent of the back of all cigarette packs (Hoek et al., 2010). In 2016, the NZ government passed plain packaging legislation to reduce the smoking rate further, so all cigarette brands in the country are plain packaged (Figure 3). Furthermore, in this country, tobacco companies are required to rotate two sets of seven warnings every 12 months,[2] because it has been found that although health warnings have a powerful initial effect, smokers may develop a tolerance for paint-by-numbers warning images (Hoek et al., 2010; Borland et al., 2009). Considering the gradual decline in smoking prevalence in New Zealand, this raises queries about the actual visual content of these warnings.

[2] Retrieved from: tobaccolabels.ca/countries/new-zealand/ on 1 December 2021.

Fig. 3. Tobacco packaging design in New Zealand. **Source:** Ministry of Health NZ, 2021.

3.1. Materials and Methodology

As we have seen, in Thailand and New Zealand, tobacco packaging design is highly "standardised". In the tobacco industry in Thailand, the market is dominated by TTM (70 per cent), which currently sells 16 brands; PMI is ranked second and occupies roughly 28 per cent of the total tobacco market (Tobaccofreekids, 2017). One recent survey conducted by Statista shows that there are currently 15 most consumed brands in Thailand.

In New Zealand, there are currently 19 mainstream cigarette brands in the market, and generally, each brand comes in two or more flavour/tobacco variations with a total of 91 choices. These "sub-brands" are often differentiated by colours, such as Marlboro Red, Bule, and Green (Discountvape, 2022). One survey by Statista Research Department recently observed the 14 most consumed brands in New Zealand.

According to cnxiangyangwang.com, China currently boasts 102 cigarette brands, but these brands are not merely stand-alone entities; they function as brand-holding companies that possess an extensive portfolio of sub-brands, totalling more than 900 brands.

Therefore, based on the published reports, I only collected some best-selling brands from Thailand and New Zealand. Since tobacco packaging is more elaborately designed in the Chinese market (Qin et al., 2011) and the CNTC offers a wide price range for cigarettes (generally, from ¥2 to ¥100; Li et al., 2015), I categorised the chosen Chinese brands into three different grades: low-priced, mid-priced, and high-priced brands. Table 1 gives the details of the price categorisation.

Brand levels	Price (¥)
Low-priced	2-25
Mid-priced	26-59
High-priced	70-100

Table. 1. Price categorisation of cigarette brands in China.

In aggregate, 65 popular brands were selected in my research. Specifically, 15 most consumed brands were collected from Thailand (Statista Research Department, 2021a); 14 brands were collected from New Zealand (Statista Research Department, 2021b). As for the sample from China, cnxiangyan.com is one of China's best and largest news portals for tobacco products; this website lists about 100 popular cigarette brands in the current Chinese market. On the basis of the previously mentioned sampling criteria, I randomly selected the 36 most popular Chinese brands and divided them into three groups consisting of 12 brands each.

3.2. Coding

Building upon previous research on tobacco packaging (e.g. Stead et al., 2013; Hammond, 2010; Brown et al., 2019), I identified the following design elements: colour themes, typeface for the written brand name, logos/commercial-related visuals, textual warnings, and pictorial warnings. Two rounds of coding were conducted to analyse the above-mentioned executional text/visual elements on the cigarette box. Since I did not begin my study with a priori hypotheses and/or conjectures, grounded theory was applied to uncover ideological nuances, because this theory is especially appropriate for "discovering theories, concepts, hypotheses and propositions directly from data" (Taylor and Bogdan, 1989: 46).

4. Results

4.1. Colour themes

Since Thailand and New Zealand implement the plain packaging design, the colour themes of cigarette packs are onefold. In detail, Thai brands all use black packs, while the NZ brands apply dark brown/green (or dark greenish brown) packs. In China, most (40 per cent) of those chosen brands use gold as the subject colour, followed by red (20

per cent). Also, there is a tendency that the more expensive the brand, the more they tend to use gold to decorate their tobacco boxes: 98 per cent of the high-end brands (¥70-100) adopt gold colour. The mid-priced brands most often apply red colour (63 per cent).

4.2. Logos and commercial-related visuals

In Thailand and New Zealand, tobacco packs do not contain branding graphics like logos, trademarks, and other promotional visuals. The font size of the brand name's logotype is small and placed at the bottom or the top of the cigarette pack. By contrast, with Chinese cigarette brands, logos and brand names are placed at the pack's most prominent place, making them the most salient visual elements. Specifically, the chosen Chinese cigarette brands' logos usually resonate with their brand names. For example, a brand named 熊猫香烟 ('*Xiongmao Xiangyan*' in pin'yin; '*Panda Cigarette*' in English) uses the image of pandas as its logo (Figure 4). It has been found that these Chinese brands use the following elements as their logos or promotional visual elements: (1) traditional totems/motifs (36 per cent); (2) landmark buildings (24 per cent); plants (21 per cent); animals (14 per cent), landscapes (7 per cent).
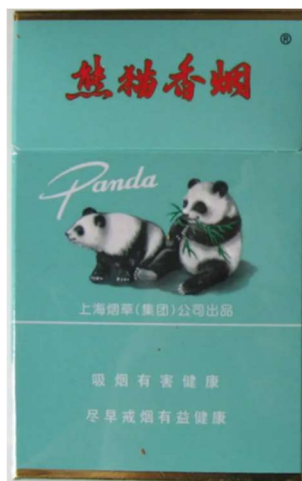

Fig. 4. Panda Cigarette.

4.3. Typefaces for the written brand names

Although the plain packaging legislation does not prohibit the brand name from appearing on cigarette boxes, it requires standardising the form in which the brand name is written. Hence, the chosen Thai and NZ brands all write their brand names in a standard or plain typeface and font. Conversely, although many Chinese brands were

selected, I have hardly identified any two brands that use the same or similar typefaces to write their brand names. The chosen Chinese brands use various artistic typefaces to display their brand names, but the written warning is highly standardised. See the following picture, which demonstrates some examples of Chinese cigarette brands.

Fig. 5. Chinese cigarette brands, from left to right: Huanghelou, Suyan, and Xiongmao.

4.4. Visual warnings

In Thailand and New Zealand, all the chosen cigarette brands display pictorial warnings. Thai brands tend to feature the following visual elements for the purpose of health communication: (1) diseased organ/body parts (66 per cent); (2) the patient's distressed or despairing facial expression (20 per cent); (3) sick kids/babies (7 per cent); (4) some visual metaphors that suggest illness (7 per cent). In New Zealand, the chosen brands apply similar themes of waring images as the Thai brands, but the symbolic visual element suggests illness was not observed. In detail, 58 per cent of the observed warning images are diseased organs and/or body parts; 14 per cent are the patient's distressed or despairing facial expression (14 per cent), and 28 per cent represent sick kids/babies. By contrast, the chosen Chinese brands do not use pictorial warnings at all.

4.5. Text warnings

Although Chinese cigarette brands do not use waring images, written warnings are applied to demonstrate the risk of tobacco use. In aggregate, "Smoking is harmful to your health" is the one used most frequently, accounting for 50 per cent. The use of the following two sentences, "Quitting can improve your health" and "No smoking in

public", are used in similar proportions (25 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively). However, "smoking forbidden for junior students/No cigarettes sold to minors" only accounts for 5 per cent.

In Thailand, a substantial majority (94 per cent) of these selected brands tend to demonstrate what specific adverse effects smoking can have on people. They use the following fixed sentence to exhort smokers: "Smoking causes so-and-so [such as mouth-, lung-, eye-, etc.] illnesses/cancers". The use of "Smoking harms your unborn babies" accounts for only 6 per cent.

Similarly, most New Zealand brands tend to advertise what diseases smoking can cause since "Smoking causes so-and-so illnesses/cancers" is used in 71 per cent of cases. Another 22 per cent of warnings do not tell people what diseases smoking can cause; they simply tell smokers that "smoking harms your so-and-so body parts". Finally, the use of "Smoking harms your unborn babies" accounts for 7 per cent.

5. Discussion

In aggregate, the cigarette packaging design in Thailand and New Zealand is highly standardised or homogeneous, as the governments of the two nations have adopted plain packaging legislation. This demonstrates the two countries' commitment to tobacco control because many previous studies consistently suggest that standardised or plain packaging can reduce the appeal of cigarettes (e.g. Drovandi et al., 2019; Hammond, 2010; Stead et al., 2013; White et al., 2019). By contrast, the packaging of Chinese tobacco brands is highly market-oriented because the tobacco business is one of the nation's most significant revenue generators and a vital component of the economy (Leng and Mu, 2020). The presented study reflected that although countries with less developed economies are more dependent on the tobacco industry (Datte et al., 2018), some national tobacco control policies and trade bills can also have a massive impact on a country's tobacco control effectiveness. For example, compared with Thailand, China is a developing country with higher GDP, but the smoking rate decreased more slowly than that in Thailand. When the tobacco market of Thailand was quite isolated, the country's smoking rate was much higher than China's. However, since the Thai tobacco market was compulsorily opened to the outside world due to GATT, it faced endless competition from foreign brands. Hence, Thailand implemented non-discriminatory tobacco control laws without violating the GATT (MacKenzie and

Collin, 2012). In addition to policy reasons, excessive consumer-oriented tobacco packaging has contributed to the perennial high smoking rate in China.

In detail, the chosen Chinese brands tend to use gold colour to decorate their packs; the more premium the brand, the more it tends to be packaged in gold. One possible reason is that visual communication theorists have suggested that yellow-gold is one of the most eye-catching colours (Han, 2013; Hall, 2021); since China does not ban the POS display, a more skriking colour is more likely to attract the attention of consumers when they are in the physical shop. High-priced brands are often packed in gold because gold is a chief symbol of prestige and social status in China (Bunker, 1993); according to Li et al. (2015: 28), "most consumers of very expensive cigarettes may use them as a type of 'status good', that is, to signal that person's economic and social status to others, rather than for normal everyday consumption". Besides the gold colour, the red colour has also been widely applied by various Chinese cigarette brands because red is a festival colour in China (Zhang, 2022). Zhang's (2022) interviewees indicated that red-coloured packs are suitable for many kinds of social occasions in China, especially for Spring festivals and weddings. Conversely, the colour themes of cigarette brands in Thailand and New Zealand are dull. The viewers widely read this design as uncool, unattractive, unpopular, unfashionable, etc. (Hoek et al., 2012; Moodie et al., 2011).

With regard to the warning and promoting visuals, all the selected Chinese brands use logos and place them in the most prominent positions, but none use warning images to display the risk of smoking. In China, tobacco brands tend to apply visuals with local cultural references. For example, traditional Chinese totems and local landmark buildings have been most frequently used (36 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively). Compared to Chinese cigarette packaging design, commercial visuals are not utilised on cigarette brands in Thailand and New Zealand. Instead, cigarette brands in the two countries all demonstrate visual warnings. This is because the FCTC does not oblige all countries to use picture warnings, which provides flexibility for the tobacco packaging design in China.

The themes of these pictorial warnings are broadly similar in Thailand and New Zealand, with disgusting images showing the adverse effects of smoking on people's health. Also, the written warnings comply with their visual warnings, mainly demonstrating the health risks that smoking poses to the smoker while ignoring the harm it causes to others. Despite these efforts, the gradual decline in smoking rates in

both countries over the past five or six years raises concerns about the diminishing efficacy of these warnings. Smokers, according to previous studies, are more motivated to quit when considering collective interests such as childbirth (e.g. Míguez and Pereira, 2021; Azagba et al., 2020; Kim and Park, 2022), marriage (Chung and Kim, 2015; Tillgre et al., 1996; Takagi et al., 2014), and the presence of children (Lin, 2010; Lin et al., 2020). This may imply that the effectiveness of warning messages on tobacco boxes could potentially benefit from a more comprehensive approach, expanding beyond health-centric warnings to include messages that resonate with smokers' intrinsic motivations related to family, relationships, and collective well-being. This insight highlights the potential for more effective anti-smoking packaging design that addresses a broader spectrum of individual and societal factors influencing smoking behaviour.

Similarly, in regard to the written warning, Chinese cigarette brands tended to highlight the risk of smoking to the individual, since the use of "Smoking is harmful to your health" (50 per cent) and "Quitting can improve your health" (25 per cent) occupied the major proportion. However, the negative impact of smoking on others was not significantly addressed, as the use of "No smoking in public" accounted for 20 per cent. The limited attention given to the adverse effects of smoking on others, as indicated by the relatively low usage of "No smoking in public", suggests that the communication strategy employed by Chinese cigarette brands may be predominantly centred on the personal health consequences of smoking. Therefore, this observed emphasis on individual health risks in written warnings on Chinese cigarette packaging implies a potential gap in addressing the broader societal impact of smoking. On the other hand, this may reflect that when Chinese tobacco manufacturers were permitted to employ four distinct cessation slogans under the supervision of the CNTC, they favoured emphasising warnings related to individual health rather than the broader consequences of smoking on others or the collective. It illustrates how Chinese tobacco manufacturers navigated the government's compulsory mandate to include a warning message, opting for cautions they deemed to have a lesser impact on their business while ensuring compliance. Also, the use of "smoking forbidden for junior students/No cigarettes sold to minors" accounted for merely 5 per cent. The dangers of cigarettes for young people were grossly overlooked. Zhang's (2022) qualitative research, indicating that the beautiful packaging of the China Tobacco brand has a massive appeal to children and adolescents, further accentuates the risks associated with the

current packaging design. Therefore, this oversight suggests a potential disconnect between regulatory efforts and the need to protect vulnerable populations, particularly adolescents and minors, from the harmful effects of smoking.

Tobacco packaging warnings, both visual and textual, in Thailand and New Zealand, focus primarily on the physical health risks associated with tobacco. This approach was indeed effective in promoting quitting in the early stages of its design, but data shows that smoking prevalence had declined slowly in the two nations over the last six years or so; there is a possibility that warning labels that tend to advertise health risks have lost their effectiveness for recalcitrant smokers. In China, smoking rates have declined very slowly over the past three decades, probably due to the country's excessively fine or overly decorated tobacco packaging and inefficient health risk warnings.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study examined cigarette packaging design in China, Thailand, and New Zealand. This research illustrates the complex interplay between economic interests, global/national policies, cultural symbolism, and visual communication in the realm of tobacco packaging and control. Recognising these dynamics is essential for developing nuanced and effective tobacco control strategies tailored to diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts.

The adoption of plain packaging laws in Thailand and New Zealand signifies a dedication to minimising the attractiveness of cigarettes, which is consistently supported by previous research. Conversely, the highly market-oriented packaging of Chinese tobacco brands highlights the country's reliance on the tobacco industry as a crucial source of revenue. The case of Thailand, opening its tobacco market due to GATT, illustrates the impact of global trade policies on a nation's tobacco control effectiveness. Thus, by comparing Thailand and China, this study indicates that while countries with less developed economies may depend more significantly on the tobacco industry, international trade agreements can substantially affect a country's capacity to regulate tobacco use.

Also, the study found that the overly decorative packaging has also contributed to China's perennially high smoking rate. The finding has shed light on the packaging design of Chinese cigarette brands and its possible reasons. The use of gold and red colours in Chinese tobacco packaging, driven by symbolic and cultural considerations, has implications for smoking rates. High-priced brands employing gold packaging as a

status symbol and red, a festival colour in China, has also been widely applied by various Chinese cigarette brands, suggesting that tobacco packaging serves as more than just a vessel for cigarettes. These results highlight that understanding the symbolic role of packaging in cultural contexts is vital for crafting targeted and effective tobacco control interventions in terms of tobacco packaging design. On the other hand, since Thailand and New Zealand adopted plain packaging laws, cigarette brands in these nations have been observed to use dull colours, which have been primarily perceived as unappealing by consumers. Future research could explore the effects of packaging design on smoking behaviour in different cultural contexts and evaluate the effectiveness of plain packaging laws in reducing smoking rates.

Additionally, this study has highlighted the differences in warning label design and promotion visuals of cigarette brands in China, Thailand, and New Zealand. Chinese cigarette brands primarily use logos and local cultural references in their packaging, but do not utilise warning images to convey the risks of smoking. This is due to the lack of specificity in the FCTC guidelines regarding warning labels on tobacco packages, and the corresponding packaging regulations introduced by CNTC align with this ambiguous framework, allowing for considerable flexibility. However, China's tobacco packaging deliberately selects packaging that is more inclined to promote tobacco use rather than discourage tobacco use, while having the flexibility to choose otherwise. This may reflect the fact that, at the national level, the government is currently supportive of the tobacco industry. In contrast, in response to plain packaging laws, cigarette brands in Thailand and New Zealand are highly standardised, which consistently display graphic images showing the harmful effects of smoking on people's health and comply with written warnings that emphasise the health risks to smokers. Nevertheless, given the slow decline in smoking rates in these two countries, there is a need for further research to examine the effectiveness of warning labels and explore new ways to promote smoking cessation. This research suggests that the current health-focused warnings, primarily centred on individual risks to the smoker, might be insufficient to further discourage tobacco use in these two nations. This study, therefore, underscores the interplay between governmental policies and industry practices, offering a nuanced understanding of the dynamics shaping tobacco packaging decisions. Future studies could also investigate the impact of different warning label designs on smokers' attitudes towards smoking and their willingness to quit in various cultural contexts.

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Moreover, this study provided insight into the written warning labels of Chinese cigarette brands, revealing their focus on individual risks of smoking and the benefits of quitting whilst neglecting the negative impact of smoking on others. The use of "No smoking in public" may be an attempt to appeal to China's collectivistic culture and promote awareness of collective interests, thereby reducing tobacco consumption. However, the dangers of cigarettes for young people are greatly overlooked, which is concerning given that Chinese cigarette packaging has a strong appeal to young people due to its visually attractive design. Consequently, there is a pressing need for further research into the impact of tobacco marketing on the younger generation and for greater promotion of the harms of smoking to others, particularly within families. Future studies could explore innovative approaches to warning label design that better target the harmful effects of smoking on individuals and society. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the impact of tobacco control policies and underscores the importance of promoting public health initiatives to reduce tobacco use.

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