Why People Smoke

European Network for Smoking Prevention, 2007

Smoking prevention has been on the agenda for health professionals and politicians, NGOs, Member States and the European Commission for several years now. Nevertheless, approximately one third of the adult population throughout Europe still smokes (this figure is lower in some countries, in others higher), despite the fact that people are fully aware of the risks of smoking and know that the rate of tobacco-related diseases and deaths is high. It is estimated that tobacco kills some 650,000 Europeans every year, i.e. one in seven of all deaths across the EU. A need still exists to understand better what reasons people have to continue to smoke. The main focus of this report is on the individual smoker, how nicotine affects the body and why the individual smokes. Issues such as how the body reacts to tobacco are also raised. Certain myths surrounding tobacco and the reality are compared. This publication also features a CD of additional material: a qualitative and quantitative study in five countries and a graphical summary of the overall results for the motivations involved in smoking.

Why People Smoke is available from the ENSP Secretariat. The cost of € 40 also covers postage and packaging.

Files

Why People Smoke - Introduction

pdf - 48 Kb

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Chapter 1

Background: Tobacco Industry and Tobacco Dependence

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Tobacco industry internal documentation from as far back as 1969 provides many insights into the reasons why people smoke. Determining why people smoke is of considerable interest to the industry as a powerful marketing tool: it is the key to targeting different consumer groups and designing the accompanying marketing campaigns. Aware that different features appeal differently to different people and observing the principle "know your market", the industry has designed and launched marketing campaigns directed at young people, women, as well as different ethnic and social groups.

Roughly speaking, factors influencing the uptake and continuation of smoking depend most crucially on various psychological and social factors, and of course a complex combination of these factors. These aspects are powerful in their own right, quite apart from the nicotine dependence involved in smoking, whose strong addictive powers have long since been proven.

Derivation of pleasure

In the first draft of the 1969 annual report to the Board of Philip Morris (which, incidentally, was rejected as being 'too technical'), it was recognised that the primary motivation for smoking is first and foremost to "obtain the pharmacological effect of nicotine" (1). The pharmacological effect of nicotine produces somatic sensations characterised by pleasure, a lift or relaxation; this is a vague, but pleasant subjective experience for smokers. Nicotine is the agent of this pleasurable body response, and cigarettes are the instrument of nicotine delivery. Naturally, the whole experience has varying nuances of sensations, which complement each other and further complicate these underlying reasons. On a physical level, the nicotine dependence quickly kicks in to make the body feel a need for these pleasurable sensations after a few smoking experiences and, on a psychological level, very simply put, the feeling is akin to a 'Pavlov's dog'-type experience, wanting more and more frequent pleasurable experiences as a type of reward throughout the day.

Stress-relief

In addition to pleasure, the somatic sensations created by smoking produce a feeling of relaxation. This seems to indicate that smoking fulfils some need in persons who are in need of stress-relief, for whatever reason. It has been noted that smoking is more prevalent in persons under stress: it is more frequently a habit among more arousable and more anxious persons than it is among more tranquil people, and those whose careers entail more pressure are more frequently smokers. It is a relief from the body's response to stress, which the smoker is seeking in his/her cigarette. These factors had already been noted in Philip Morris documentation from an early stage:

> *Smokers, by and large, are people who are more psychologically stressed than non-smokers. There tends to be more turbulence within the person, and there tends to be more turbulence impinging upon the person.* (2)

This psychological need for stress-relief in a smoker may be one element to explain why beginning smokers persevere with the habit, given that it is initially not a pleasurable experience for them, and force themselves to overcome initial feelings of disgust. Beginning smokers are aware that smoking can provide a relief from the stress in their lives and will pursue that stress-relief ignoring the now ubiquitous health warnings: they perceive their need for relief to be the greater need, thus outweighing the possible health hazards or at least putting such warnings to the back of their minds.

Certainly, Philip Morris was aware of the above factors as far back as 1969, noting the following:

> *1. Cigarette smoking is more often a habit among more responsive, more arousable, more anxious people than among the less responsive or more tranquil people.*
> *2. More cigarette smoking is to be found among people whose life careers expose them to pressures and crises.*
> *3. A smoker smokes more during the more stressful moments of his day or during stressful periods of his life.* (3)

Psycho-social factors

However, clearly the motive for smoking must be more deeply rooted than merely deriving pleasure or stress-relief from smoking, as most people's initial experience with smoking is not pleasurable at all: so there must also be a psycho-social motive in order to provide motivation to overcome the initial unpleasant experiences of smoking. It would be too simple if it were only the derivation of pleasure; further important psychological and/or social factors have to come into play. The same 1969 Philip Morris annual report quoted above goes on to explain:

> *To account for the fact that the beginning smoker will tolerate the unpleasantness we must invoke a psychosocial motive… Smoking a cigarette for the beginner is a symbolic act. The smoker is telling the world, "This is the kind of person I am." Surely there are many variants on the theme, "I am no longer my mother's child," "I am tough," "I am an adventuress," "I'm not a square." Whatever the individual intent, the act of smoking remains a symbolic declaration of personal identity.* (4)

Typically such a symbolic act of assertion of the individual's taking control of his or her own life and destiny occurs in youth, when the adolescent is going through far-reaching physical and psychological changes and feels acutely the pressure to imitate his or her own peer group, the desire not to stand out from the crowd in any negative way. Conversely, the act of smoking may be of a more assertive nature: it may be an act of rebellion against parents and the older generation. Such an act of rebellion frequently serves to tell the world that the individual is in charge of his or her own destiny, by making his/her own choices (i.e. to smoke or not to smoke). These aspects are reflected in tobacco industry advertising, which cleverly stress individuality, self-determination and liberty on a subtle and subliminal level.

Youth culture

As indicated, smoking frequently appeals to youth for a variety of reasons. The tobacco industry knows that most tobacco consumers take up smoking during their teens and try to quit (some successfully, some unsuccessfully) in later life. If, as a result of the massive public health drive in recent years, a certain percentage of its consumers cease to be consumers by successfully quitting smoking, the industry must ensure that its customer base at the very least remains on a steady level for purely commercial reasons: it makes good business sense. Advertising is a powerful tool, particularly when directed at young minds, as young people have been found to be much more responsive to advertising than older consumers.

Tobacco advertising encourages young people to take up smoking and serves to reinforce the social acceptability of the habit among adults and children alike. Industry advertising has

consistently played to and exploited certain aspects of youth culture in a very successful way: the young image, fashionable and trendy messages, an independent and slightly rebellious nature.

Philip Morris had identified the importance of the young smokers' market to its *Marlboro* brand back in May 1975. In a document marked 'Confidential' Philip Morris states:

> *It has been well established by the National Tracking Study and other studies that Marlboro has for many years had its highest market penetration among younger smokers. Most of these studies have been restricted to people age 18 and over, but my own data, which includes younger teenagers, shows even higher Marlboro market penetration among 15-17 year-olds. The teenage years are also important because those are the years during which most smokers begin to smoke, the years in which initial brand selections are made, and the period in the life-cycle in which conformity to peer-group norms is greatest.* (5)

The industry is acutely aware that it needs to pander to young persons' emotional needs in order to sell its products. The uptake of smoking is recognised as being a rebellious activity, even a risky one. New smokers tend to smoke well-known and popular brands, as peer group conformity is a key characteristic of this group (6). While conformity is an essential element for new smokers, it has been noted that this key element, which was vital in the uptake of smoking, changes slightly with the onset of smoking. Smoking preferences therefore shift. E. Devlin et al. noted in their 2003 study *Tobacco Marketing and Young People*:

> *Once young smokers have entered the market and become regular smokers, their emotional needs change and there is a desire for brands that are different and allow them to express their independence and individuality.* (7)

The key messages which appeal to initiated young smokers are: (1) rights of passage, (2) distinctive and different charisma, (3) in-the-know, (4) trendy lifestyle and (5) youthful image. They want brands that are designed specifically for them and that reflect their needs and lifestyles. The industry has a clear understanding of the changing needs of young people and has developed brand marketing strategies accordingly. Young people are above all image-conscious and are influenced much more by marketing and advertising than older groups are.

Quoting industry documents E. Devlin et al. state by way of conclusion:

> *These documents highlight that young people smoke primarily for emotional reasons – smoking is an 'image style statement' and has the potential to 'add to credibility' and young people choose those brands that will provide recognition within their peer group.* (8)

Indeed, these statements demonstrate that the tobacco industry has undertaken considerable research into understanding young people's life-styles, needs and values and what they are looking for in certain brands in order to meet these needs.

Gender-specific characteristics

The tobacco multinationals have in fact conducted extensive research into female smoking patterns, as opposed to male smoking patterns, and have intentionally modified product design to appeal to the female target group. Statistically speaking, women are more likely to consume "light", slimmer and longer cigarettes. In fact, women use nicotine more as a means of reducing stress and of controlling body weight than men do. It has also been established that the association between smoking and depression is more pronounced among women than it is among men. Many studies demonstrate that marketing strategies for female brands have reinforced the association of smoking with certain attributes such as liberation, glamour, success and a slim figure.

An internal British American Tobacco document dated 2000 noted that men and women smoke for very different reasons: with males a key aspect associated with smoking was 'satisfaction' (i.e. the effect of nicotine delivery), while women smoked more for 'sensory pleasure' (i.e. taste and enjoyment) (9). Add to this the fact that women tend more to smoke in emotionally stressful

situations and as a means of relieving 'nervous irritation', while men tend more to smoke in order to relieve boredom and fatigue (10). In 1976 British American Tobacco concluded that women were even more motivated to smoke, smoked more for reasons of insecurity and exhibited more neurotic traits (11). Thus we see some very different motivations for smoking emerging – information which is useful for product design and marketing strategy.

Carpenter et al. note in the introduction to their study that:

> *…the tobacco industry has conducted extensive research on female smoking patterns, needs and product preferences, and has intentionally modified product design for promotion of cigarette smoking among women. Cigarette manufacturers responded to changing female trends by focusing on social and health concerns as well as promoting dual-sex brands that also featured traditional female style characteristics.* (12)

In a memo entitled *The Female Smoker Market*, Lorillard recognised that it was working women who are the most loyal smokers, as opposed to women who are home-makers, which reflects the aspect of cigarettes as a form of stress-relief:

> *A cigarette positioned for the working woman, to relax and steady her nerves when the tension is mounting by serving a socially acceptable tranquilizer, deserves investigation.* (13)

The top reasons for female smoking have been defined by tobacco industry documents as follows: (1) weight control, (2) femininity and thinness, (3) peer pressure and popular acceptance, (4) neuroticism, (5) health, (6) alternate flavours, (7) social acceptability, (8) cosmetics, (9) smoking enjoyment, (10) confidence and (11) sensory perception (14).

Weight control

The cowboy image of the *Marlboro Reds* advertisements is a quintessentially American male role model: rugged and freedom-loving against the backdrop of the 'Big Country'. But the industry has also successfully exploited product marketing specifically targeted at young women's preoccupations with their weight. This in another indication of the importance of female smokers to tobacco companies' economies. Indeed, whole brands have been targeted entirely at women smokers, and especially young women, in an attempt to boost smoking uptake.

Philip Morris launched its brand *Virginia Slims* in 1968 and marketed it to young, professional women. By using the word 'slim' in the brand name, marketing was suggesting to the twenty-something woman a slim, svelte image very firmly embedded in the typically female preoccupation with weight control.

Indeed the significance of the weight control element for continued smoking has been acknowledged in industry documents. Lorillard wrote in June 1973 in: *The Female Smoker Market*:

> *Several reasons have been proposed to explain why more women than men are either unwilling or unable to stop smoking… One is the greater concern women have that if they stop smoking they will gain weight. This fear undoubtedly prevents many women from desiring to stop smoking.* (15)

In conclusion, it can only be stressed that the reasons why people smoke are manifold, complex and interlinked. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the tobacco industry has funded studies to research these reasons to tailor-make its marketing to the target groups it knows will respond well to such marketing, by exploiting their weaknesses and tastes.

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