

Warning images for cigarette packs do not make a strong enough emotional impact

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One of the supposedly negative anti-smoking images proposed by the European Commission, which participants in the study perceived to be "pleasant".

The warning images Brussels proposes to include on tobacco packages in order to reduce consumption do not make the desired impact on smokers because they only find some of them really unpleasant. So, if the European Commission wants to improve the efficacy of its anti-smoking

campaigns, it should produce a new set of images that make a stronger emotional impact.

These are some of the conclusions of research conducted in the Department of Personality, Evaluation and [Psychological Treatment](#) at the University of Granada by Miguel Ángel Muñoz, Luis Ciria y Jaime Vila Castelar, to assess the [emotional impact](#) of the tobacco-warning images on cigarette packs proposed by the [European Commission](#).

University of Granada researchers have conducted two complementary studies on the same topic. In the first—published in *Tobacco Control*—they recorded the subjective opinions of 597 participants, grouped into six age ranges: 13-14, 15-16, 17-18, 19-20, 21-22 and over 23 years. The participants were shown the European Commission's proposed set of 35 tobacco-warning images.

Measuring impact with physiological tests

In the second study, recently presented at the "I Iberian Conference on the Clinical Physiology of Health and Sport (I Congreso Ibérico de Psicología Clínica de la Salud y el Deporte), researchers used objective physiological tests to measure the efficacy of these images. In a sample of 50 subjects aged between 19 and 23 years, they analysed variables like perspiration, movement of the zygomatic muscle (which reflects smiling) or of the corrugator muscle (located between the eyebrows).

They also studied the subjects' head movement on seeing the images. "When movement is backwards, it means there is an avoidance response, in other words, the person moves away because the image is unpleasant," says Miguel Ángel Muñoz, principal researcher. If the head movement is forwards, that means we perceive the image as pleasant. Movements are measured with a [polygraph](#) which can detect small changes in body tension.

Results from this second study corroborate those of the first: the tobacco-warning images proposed by Brussels do not make an impact strong enough to provoke an avoidance response that would make people distance themselves from the stimulus, in this case, the cigarette pack. "Most of the photos are perceived as unpleasant but they don't make a strong enough impact on the subject," says Dr Muñoz.

What's more, not only are some of the images not perceived as negative—"people actually see them as positive. So, they could have the opposite effect by motivating people to approach the stimulus, that is, tobacco." This is what happens with one photograph showing the folded hands of an elderly woman, or another with an ultrasound scan image of a foetus.

Less explicit photos

Dr Muñoz says that as the problem affects several EU countries one possible solution "would be to use less explicit photos on [cigarette packs](#)—photos that might have nothing to do with smoking—and that are related to the feelings we want to arouse in people". In this way, if we want to transmit a sense of asphyxia "we can illustrate the idea with a person with a bag over their head, and if we want to make people feel disgust, we can include a photo of insects, say".

In view of the results of the two studies, the University of Granada researchers propose that "the tobacco-warning images proposed by the European Commission should be reviewed because they do not achieve the desired level of impact in the population. Furthermore, their use was approved in 2003. As they have been in use since then without being changed, people have become accustomed to them, which this contributes to their failure to achieve the desired level of impact," he concludes.

Provided by University of Granada

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