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COVER ESSAY

From social taboo to “torch of freedom”: the marketing of cigarettes to women

Amanda Amos, Margaretha Haglund



Nice girls don't smoke

When the Irish born American femme fatale Lola Montez had her photograph taken at a Boston studio in 1851, neither she nor anyone else could foresee the future symbolic value of the cigarette as a sign of emancipation for women and the tragic development that we are now facing with women as the next wave of the tobacco epidemic. With the dress and hairstyle that she was wearing in the photograph Lola Montez could have passed for a lady, if it wasn't for the cigarette which stood out so effectively against her black gloved hand (fig 1). Used as the focal point of this picture, the cigarette was intended to be provocative. Ladies in 1851 did not smoke, and the very notion that women and girls might be experimenting with cigarettes was certainly not acknowledged publicly. Indeed smoking by women in North America and Europe had long been associated with loose morals and dubious sexual behaviour. As far back as the 17th century Dutch painters had used tobacco and smoking to symbolise human folly. The only women shown smoking in these paintings were either whores or procuresses.¹ Similarly in the 19th century women smokers were viewed as fallen women, with smoking the occupational symbol of prostitution.² Indeed cigarettes became a common prop in Victorian erotic photography.³ Only rebellious, bohemian intellectuals and artists such as George Sands dared challenge these social mores. So widespread was the social stigma attached to women smoking that as late as 1908 a woman in New York was arrested for smoking a cigarette in public,² and in 1921 a bill was proposed in the US Congress to ban women from smoking in the District of Columbia.⁴

It is therefore remarkable that within 50 years of the invention of the mass produced cigarette, smoking among women in North America and northern Europe has become socially acceptable and even socially desirable. This was due not only to the dramatic changes in the social and economic status of women over this period, but also to the way in which the tobacco industry capitalised on changing social attitudes towards women by promoting smoking as a symbol of emancipation, a “torch of freedom”. This message is still being promoted today by the tobacco industry around the world, particularly in countries



Figure 1 Lola Montez.

which have recently undergone or are undergoing rapid social change.

The development of mass produced cigarettes at the end of the 19th century had a profound effect on tobacco consumption and the place of tobacco in society. In comparison with traditional smoking methods, cigarettes were clean, easy to use, modern, and increasingly cheap. However, although cigarette smoking started to become more popular among men around the turn of the century, there was at the same time considerable opposition to cigarettes. Smoking was seen as a dirty habit that corrupted both men and women, and women's groups played an important role in the anti-tobacco movements in the US and Canada.²⁻⁴ The tobacco companies responded by employing modern marketing methods to help spread their message. Although attractive young women often featured in promotional materials such as advertisements, posters, and cards, their role was to entice male rather than female customers. There is little evidence that tobacco companies directly targeted women to any significant extent at this time or attempted to challenge the dominant social stigma attached to female smoking.

The first world war proved to be a watershed in both the emancipation of women and the spread of smoking among women. During the war many women had not only taken on “male” occupations but had also started to

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Figure 2 Lucky Strike ad.

wear trousers, play sports, cut their hair, and smoke.^{3,4} Subsequently attitudes towards women smoking began to change, and more and more women started to use the cigarette as a weapon in their increasing challenge to traditional ideas about female behaviour. In powder rooms and rest rooms many women sought fellow smokers eager to push the limits of accepted social conventions. Soon the cigarette became a symbol of new roles and expectations of women's behaviour. However, it is questionable whether smoking would have become as popular among women as it did if tobacco companies had not seized on this opportunity in the 1920s and 1930s to exploit ideas of liberation, power, and other important values for women to recruit them to the cigarette market. In particular they needed to develop new social images and meanings for female smoking to overcome the association with louche and libidinous behaviour and morals. Smoking had to be repositioned as not only respectable but



Figure 3 Lecture tour organised to give women lessons in smoking.

sociable, fashionable, stylish, and feminine. The goal was a potential doubling of the market. As described in 1928 by Mr Hill, the president of American Tobacco, "It will be like opening a new gold mine right in our front yard".⁵

She's gotta have it

One of the quickest ways to interest women in his product, Mr Hill believed, was to zero in on women's waists. The timing could not have been better as slimness was coming into fashion along with bobbed hair and short skirts. The president of American Tobacco saw the potential of selling cigarettes to women as a fat free way to satisfy hunger. The Lucky Strike campaign "Reach for Lucky instead of a sweet" of 1925 was one of the first media campaigns targeted at women (fig 2). The message was highly effective and increased Lucky Strike's market share by more than 200%. With the help of the father of public relations, Edward Bernays, American Tobacco made Lucky Strike the best selling brand for two years.

Another important element in the company's campaign to change the image of smoking was to challenge the social taboo against women smoking in public. In 1929 there was the much publicised event in the Easter Sunday parade in New York where Great American Tobacco hired several young women to smoke their "torches of freedom" (Lucky Strikes) as they marched down Fifth Avenue protesting against women's inequality.^{2,5} This event generated widespread newspaper coverage and provoked a national debate. As Bernays reflected later, "Age old customs, I learned, could be broken down by a dramatic appeal, disseminated by the network of the media".⁶ Tobacco companies also needed to ensure that women felt confident about smoking in public and not run the risk of being ridiculed, as in 1919 when a hotel manager told a New York Times reporter that women "don't really know what to do with the smoke. Neither do they know how to hold their cigarettes properly. Actually they make a mess of the whole performance".⁵ While to some extent tobacco companies tackled this by using images of women smoking in cigarette advertisements, they also ensured that Hollywood stars were well supplied with cigarettes and often paid them to give endorsements in advertisements. Philip Morris even went so far as to organise a lecture tour in the US giving women lessons in cigarette smoking (fig 3). Within 20 years of starting to target women, over half the young women (16–35 years) in Britain, for example, had become smokers.⁷

Since starting to target women in North America and northern Europe in the 1920s and 1930s the tobacco industry has become more sophisticated in its marketing strategies, developing a diverse range of messages, products, and brands to appeal to different segments of the female market. As Lorraine Greaves has argued,³ such marketing messages, and the way that they have been reflected in and reinforced by the mass media, has led to

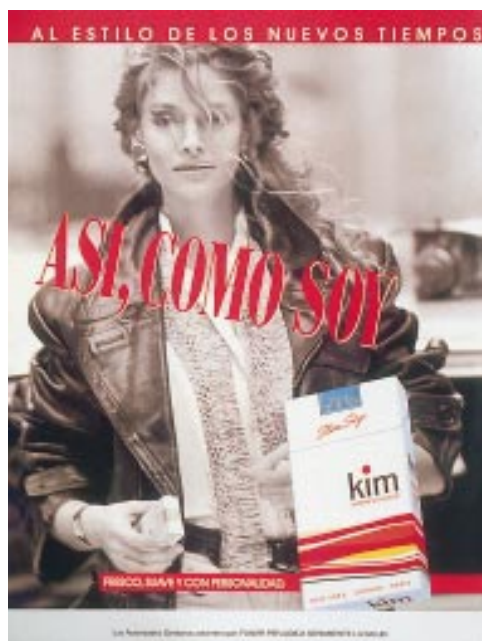


Figure 4 Spanish Kim ad.

the cultural meaning of women's smoking in these countries shifting from being a symbol of being *bought* by men (prostitute), to being *like* men (lesbian/mannish), to being able to *attract* men (glamorous/heterosexual). To this could also be added its symbolic value of being *equal* to men (feminism) and being your *own* woman (emancipation). However, despite this proliferation in messages and meanings it is striking how tobacco companies have continued to use imagery around emancipation, the cigarette as a "torch for freedom", as they attempt to develop new markets among women around the world.

It's so me

As in the earlier part of this century, companies are seizing the opportunities presented by often very rapid cultural, social, and political change to promote the "liberating" symbolic value of smoking to women. Thus in Spain after the fall of the Franco regime, ads for Kim in the 1980s promoted the slogan 'Asi, como soy' (It's so me) (fig 4). More recently West ads in Spain have shown women in traditionally male occupations such as fighter pilots. Smoking rates among Spanish women have increased rapidly, from 17% in 1978 to 27% in 1997.⁸ Rates in young women are still increasing with nearly half of all 18–24 year old women now smoking.

Some of the most blatant targeting of women has occurred in the former socialist countries of central and eastern Europe, which are now exposed to the commercial forces of "free" markets, and have the highest rates of female smoking in the world.⁹ Here cigarettes are promoted to women as a potent symbol of Western freedom, as in "Test the West". In Hungary it is "Lady's first" (sic), while in the Czech Republic young women are encouraged to join the men in their western male leisure pursuits (fig 5). Smoking rates among young women in these countries are increasing much more rapidly than countries where smoking took off earlier this century. In Lithuania, for example, smoking among women doubled over a five year period in the 1990s and increased by fivefold among the youngest groups (Stanikas T, personal communication, 1999). In Sweden, one of Lithuania's neighbours, where women started to smoke in large numbers in the 1950s, it took almost 20 years for the female prevalence to double. Indeed one advertisement for West even suggested that women smokers would risk experiencing



Figure 5 Hungarian Kim ad; Czech L&M ad.

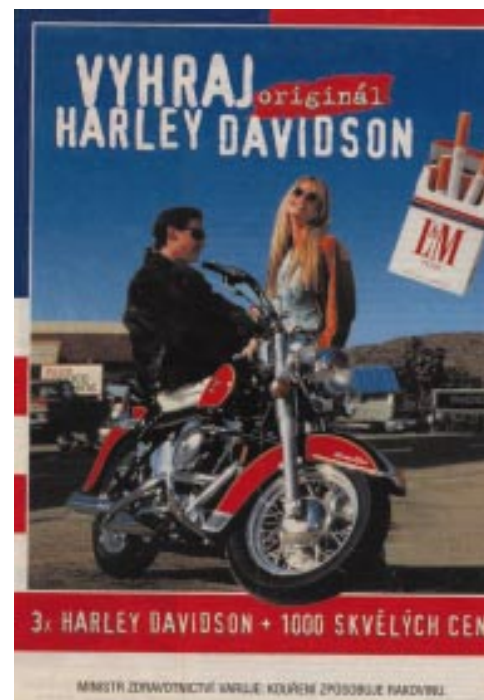




Figure 6 US Tareyton ad.

violence in order to defend their “right” to smoke (see cover). This startling and offensive message echoes one previously seen in the US in an ad for the brand Tareyton “the cigarette with the taste worth fighting for!” (fig 6).

In Germany in the 1990s young women have become a prime target for cigarette ads,^{10 11} many of which have promoted smoking as synonymous with western images of modern emancipated womanhood. It is therefore particularly worrying that between 1993 and 1997, rates of smoking among 12 to 25 year old women in former East Germany nearly doubled from 27% to 47%.¹² In contrast rates among young men showed a less steep increase from 38% to 45%, and there was little change in smoking rates among the same age group in former West Germany. In addition the desire to quit among 12–25 year old smokers declined from 62% to 42% over this period.

Back to the future

In many other countries around the world, particularly less developed countries, cultural and economic factors have prohibited women from taking up smoking in significant numbers.^{13 14} As in Europe, however, women are beginning to be targeted in countries where they are experiencing improvements in their economic, social, and educational status, with cigarettes being promoted as both a passport to and symbol of emancipation, independence, and success. A 1990 editorial in *Tobacco Reporter* noted the growth opportunities represented by women as “Women are becoming more independent and, consequently, adopting less traditional lifestyles. One symbol of their newly discovered freedom may well be cigarettes”.¹⁵ A more recent editorial in the same journal urged its readers to look for the positive in Asia where among other trends “an increasing acceptance of women smoking continues to generate new demand”.¹⁶ Thus we have seen in Japan Virginia Slims advertise-

ments urging women to “Be you” (fig 7 a,b), and telling Hong Kong women “You’re on your way”, while Capri ads have encouraged them to have their own opinions. Also in Japan, Capri advertisements have featured “real life” European female role models such as a dress designer “The dress I design represents my own way of life”, and Virginia Slims has shown a male and female rugby player together with the byline “the locker room are separate but the playground and the goal are common” (fig 7 c,d). A recent survey by the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare showed that smoking among women aged 20–29 years more than doubled between 1986 and 1999, from 10.5% to 23.2% (WHO, personal communication, 1999).

In South Africa Benson and Hedges have started to produce advertisements which feature young black women. One advertisement showed a young dark skinned woman in aerobics gear smoking a cigarette with a young black male. In another a black woman wearing traditional headgear was shown seated with a black man accepting a cigarette from a white man. The copy line was “Share the feeling, share the taste”. In India in 1990 the Golden Tobacco Company attempted to target women with a new brand, “MS Special Filter”.¹⁷ Advertisements featured Indian women in Western clothing and affluent settings, symbols of liberation for Indian women who are gaining financial and professional independence. However, following numerous protests the campaign fizzled out.¹⁸ In China the first ever brands to be developed by the Chinese tobacco industry are aimed at women.¹⁹

Not only do these advertising images and messages echo those seen in the 1930s ads in the US and UK, but so do other elements of the social marketing strategies. This was seen recently in Sri Lanka where, in a modern version of the 1929 New York Easter Parade march, the Ceylon Tobacco Company hired young women to drive around in “Players Gold Leaf” cars and jeeps handing out free cigarette samples and promotional items. These women also handed out free merchandise at popular shopping malls and university campuses.²⁰ In a country where only 1% of women smoke, this seemed to be part of a wider strategy to challenge the social taboo that respectable women in Sri Lanka should not smoke and certainly not in the street.

Women: the second wave of the tobacco epidemic

The World Health Organization estimates that the number of women smoking will almost triple over the next generation to more than 500 million (WHO, personal communication, 1999). Of these, more than 200 million will die prematurely from smoking related diseases. The biggest rise in female smoking will be in less developed countries, where the current rate of around 7% will increase to 20% by 2025. In Europe where in most EU countries girls now have higher smoking rates than boys, the gap between male and female smoking rates will continue to narrow.⁸ In some

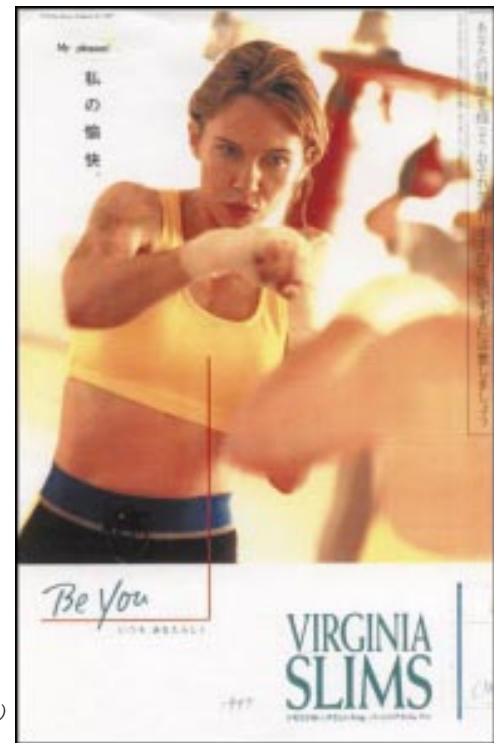
countries, such as has already happened in Sweden, women's rates may even overtake men's. Central to tackling this second wave of the tobacco epidemic is the need to implement comprehensive bans on tobacco promotion and marketing around the world. There is also a need at all levels to acknowledge women's tobacco use as a major health problem and to build international as well as national consensus around this issue. Building support for women centred tobacco control programmes through partnerships will be vital to achieve success. In particular there is a need to

work with and involve women's organisations which so far have shown little interest in this issue.²¹

The year 2000 will hopefully prove to be a major watershed in the history of women's smoking. In particular it will see the publication of several important reports, notably the US surgeon general's report on women and tobacco, and the report commissioned for the WHO International Conference on Tobacco and Health in Kobe on "Making a difference in tobacco and health, avoiding the tobacco epidemic in women and youth". These



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 7 Japanese ads for Virginia Slims (a, b, d) and Capri (c)

will provide both international perspectives on, and analyses of, the determinants of women smoking and a solid evidence base for future action. In Europe, the EU funded International Network of Women Against Tobacco (INWAT) Europe project will disseminate its expert report which considers the key elements of a women centred tobacco control strategy for Europe. Global INWAT, which has members from over 60 countries, plans to run workshops at the World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Chicago which aim to develop and strengthen networks and partnerships to support action on women and tobacco in countries around the world.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the 20th century few people could ever have imagined how such a stigmatised behaviour as female smoking would be transformed, with the aid of judicious marketing, into a socially acceptable and desirable practice. The challenge facing us as we enter the 21st century is to develop women centred tobacco control programs, which incorporate the social marketing methods so successfully used by tobacco countries, to stem the second wave of the tobacco epidemic particularly in second and third world countries. We should take heart that Edward Bernays, who played such an important role in the cultural transformation of female smoking, certainly felt that this was possible.⁵

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Note to readers

We hereby solicit your ideas and contributions for future covers of *Tobacco Control*. As with previous covers, we would like future covers to be colourful and creative—with a tobacco control theme. Original artwork, anti-tobacco posters, photographs, and cartoons may all be considered. Material with an international flavour would be particularly desirable. A cover essay will generally appear in each issue to provide appropriate background information and commentary on the cover.

Please send ideas and submissions (original or high-quality, camera-ready photographs) to the editor at the address on the inside front cover.—ED