

What messages do young adult smokers believe will be effective in cessation advertising?



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Background

Achieving New Zealand's Smokefree 2025 goal requires reductions in the stubbornly high young adult (YA) smoking rate of around 30%. A two-phase qualitative research explored the language YAs use to talk about smoking, quitting, and being smokefree. The findings informed development of novel cessation message themes targeting this priority group.

Phase One | Exploratory in-depth interviews

We interviewed 16 current smokers and recent quitters, aged 18-31 years, to understand the role of tobacco in their lives, and their perceptions of the benefits and advantages of smoking and quitting. The dataset was analysed thematically.

Perceptions of Smoking

POSITIVES: Building relationships, constructing identity, managing interactions and daily routines, and controlling stress and moods

NEGATIVES: Addiction, shameful and dirty, expensive, premature aging, poor fitness, bad for children, an obstacle to future success

OTHER: Smoking is a phase associated with young adult life-stage, intend to quit at life-stage transition (e.g. to workforce or family)

Perceptions of Quitting

POSITIVES: Regain health and fitness, become 'clean', avoid judgement, gain time and money, become responsible and 'grown up'

NEGATIVES: Stressful and hard, need to change 'everything', link to alcohol and fun, fear of missing out and isolation, loss of routine

OTHER: Needs to be a personal choice, requires appropriate support services, want positive messages about benefits of quitting

Phase Two | Qualitative message evaluation

Phase one data were reviewed for potential cessation themes; the 11 most unique propositions were used to create draft print advertisements. The themes tested included smoking as an obstacle to success, financial control, social and physical unattractiveness, health gains, risk of dying, encouragement to quit, and tobacco industry de-normalisation. The credibility and relevance of these messages were evaluated in three group interviews with seven participants aged 19-29 years.

- The two messages that resonated strongly with participants both tapped into their desire to control their futures (A and B). These encouraged reflection about personal ambition in a manner that respected the audiences' independence and intelligence.
- Many YA, particularly females, are concerned about smoking having a detrimental effect on others' perceptions of them. The smell of smoking is unmistakable, immediate, and is difficult for smokers to avoid or mask, making this theme a potentially effective cessation strategy (C).
- The tobacco industry wants to position itself as a defender of smokers' freedoms, and the last message exposed their duplicity (D). YA in NZ do not think about the industry, de-normalisation messages addressing choice and control may help reduce smoking's appeal.

A - Smoking as an obstacle that removes choice and control

Makes distant intention to quit salient, encourages personal reflection, respects YAs' autonomy over quit decision.



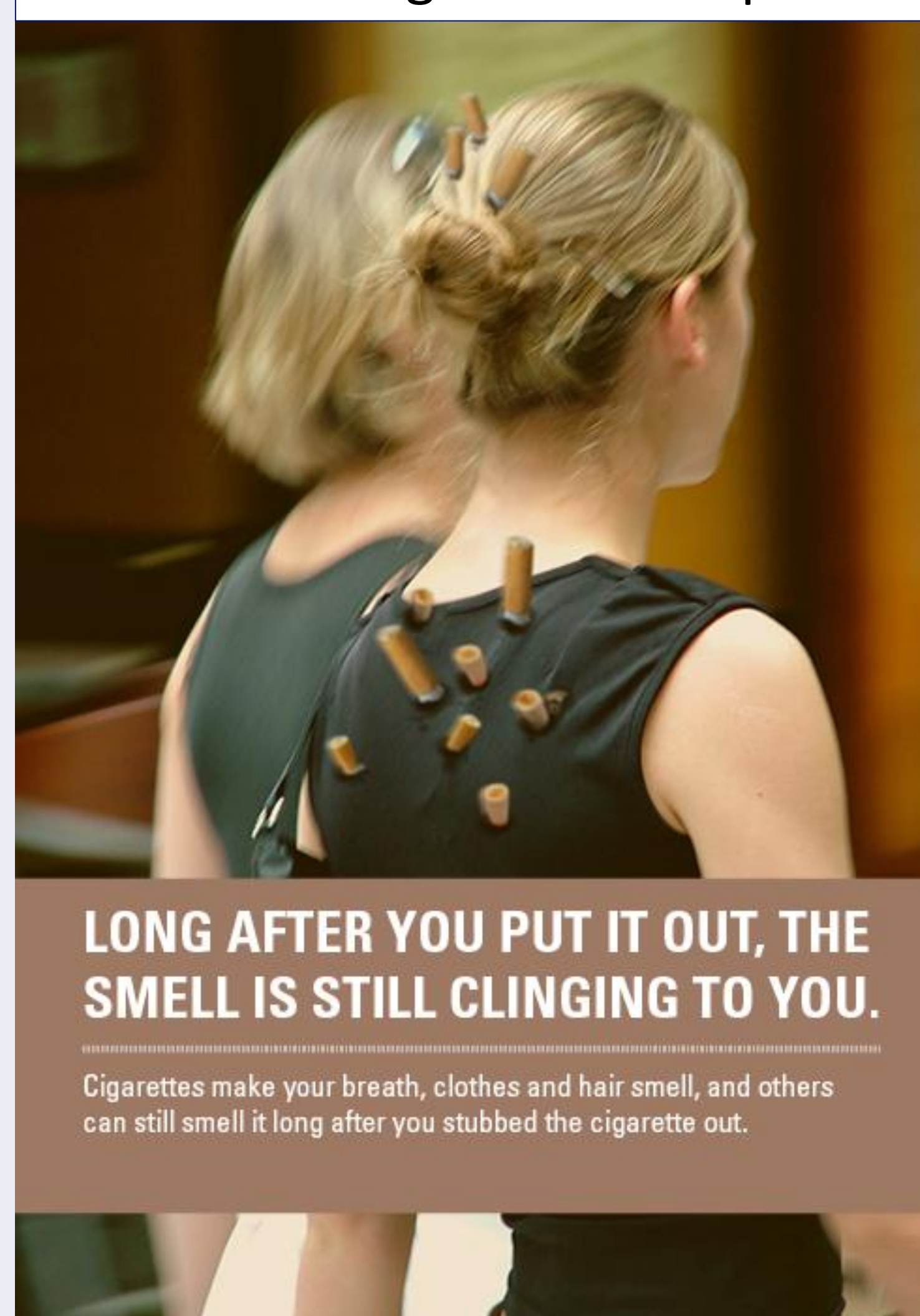
B - Financial freedom

Few YA consider the total cost of smoking. This message prompted consideration of financial trade-offs. Its content can be easily adapted, making it versatile.



C - Smoking spoils identity

YA are aware that non-smokers dislike the smell of smoke. This message raised the spectre of social rejection, which is an immediate negative consequence.



D - Industry manipulation

Highlights the industry's role in creating and sustaining addiction, which YA do not usually consider. Industry seen as deserving government regulation.



Conclusions

- Young adult smokers place a high value on self-determination, and react negatively to advice they interpret as didactic.
- Cessation messages must respect YAs' desire to choose whether, when and how to quit.
- Messages highlighting the role of addiction and the benefits of regaining control appear likely to be more effective than instructions to 'quit now'. Themes that tap into immediate concerns such as financial freedom and social attractiveness were also seen as more effective.

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