

Smokers' sensory beliefs mediate the relation between smoking a light/low tar cigarette and perceptions of harm

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Abstract

Background: The sensory belief that 'light/low tar' cigarettes are smoother can also influence the belief that 'light/low tar' cigarettes are less harmful. However, the 'light' concept is one of several factors influencing beliefs. No studies have examined the impact of the sensory belief about one's own brand of cigarettes on perceptions of harm.

Objective: The current study examines whether a smoker's sensory belief that their brand is smoother is associated with the belief that their brand is less harmful and whether sensory beliefs mediate the relation between smoking a 'light/low tar' cigarette and relative perceptions of harm among smokers in China.

Methods: Data are from 5209 smokers who were recruited using a stratified multistage sampling design and participated in wave 3 of the International Tobacco Control (ITC) China Survey, a face-to-face survey of adult smokers and non-smokers in seven cities.

Results: Smokers who agreed that their brand of cigarettes was smoother were significantly more likely to say that their brand of cigarettes was less harmful ($p < 0.001$, $OR = 6.86$, 95% CI 5.64 to 8.33). Mediation analyses using the bootstrapping procedure indicated that both the direct effect of 'light/low tar' cigarette smokers on the belief that their cigarettes are less harmful ($b = 0.24$, bootstrapped bias corrected 95% CI 0.13 to 0.34, $p < 0.001$) and the indirect effect via their belief that their cigarettes are smoother were significant ($b = 0.32$, bootstrapped bias-corrected 95% CI 0.28 to 0.37, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the mediation was partial.

Conclusions: These results demonstrate the importance of implementing tobacco control policies that address the impact that cigarette design and marketing can have in capitalising on the smoker's natural associations between smoother sensations and lowered perceptions of harm.

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