A Content Analysis of Unique Selling Propositions of Tobacco Print Ads

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**Objectives:** We describe the unique selling propositions (USPs) (propositions used to convince customers to use a particular brand/product by focusing on the unique benefit) of print tobacco ads. **Methods:** A qualitative content analysis was conducted of print tobacco ads (N = 171) selected from August 2012 to August 2013 for cigarettes, moist snuff, e-cigarettes, cigars, and snus to determine the content and themes of USPs for tobacco ads. **Results:** Cigarette ad USP themes focused on portraying the product as attractive; moist snuff ads focused on portraying product as masculine; cigar ads focused on selling a “high end product;” and new and emerging tobacco products (e-cigarette, snus) focused on directly comparing these products to cigarettes. **Conclusions:** Whereas traditional tobacco product ads used USPs focused on themes of enjoyment and pleasure (eg, attractive for cigarettes, “high end product” for cigars), new and emerging tobacco product ads offered the unique benefit (USP) of their product being a better and “safer” alternative to traditional tobacco products. Snuff’s USPs focused nearly exclusively on the masculinity of their products. Our results provide targets for potential tobacco regulatory actions that could be implemented to reduce demand for tobacco products by reducing their perceived unique benefits.

**Key words:** tobacco ads; unique selling propositions; content analysis; cigarettes; non-cigarette consumer products

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Although tobacco control efforts in the United States (US) have led to decreased cigarette smoking rates over the past several decades, this progress has slowed.1 One key factor contributing to this neutralization of tobacco control may be the increased availability and promotion of alternative smokeless tobacco products, including new and emerging products such as e-cigarettes and snus which may have contributed to the dramatic increase in the use and sales of smokeless tobacco products over the last decade.2,3 Although the consumption of traditional combustible cigarettes has decreased by 32.8% over the period of 2000 to 2011, consumption of non-cigarette combustible tobacco (eg, cigars) has increased 123.1% over this same period of time.4 The use of other tobacco products, including moist snuff and e-cigarettes has continued to rise as well over the past decade as well.5-7 These data demonstrate that although traditional cigarette use may be in decline, the use of alternative tobacco products is rising.

The increased use of alternative tobacco products may be directly tied to the volume and type of advertising used to promote these products. Each year the tobacco industry spends billions of dollars advertising and promoting its products in the US and abroad. For instance, the spending on advertising of smokeless tobacco rose from $435.9 million in 2012 to $503.2 million in 2013, according to the Federal Trade Commission.8 The majority of this increased expenditure has focused on the promoting of smokeless tobacco products, such as e-cigarettes (approximately $8 million) and snus (approximately $10 million).9 Data from 2010 to 2014 indicates that $796 million in total is spent on mag-
Within the context of tobacco ads, USPs would refer to the ways in which tobacco ads market their various tobacco products to consumers by making claims about the unique positive features and benefits of the product (e.g., features, benefits, safety, flavors). These benefit claims might influence consumers to try newer tobacco products such as snus and e-cigarettes as the market for traditional tobacco products becomes less appealing to certain tobacco users. With new and emerging tobacco products available, the tobacco advertising industry often has to compete with other tobacco products. As such, studying tobacco ads’ USPs could help determine how tobacco products are distinguishing themselves in the competitive tobacco product market. Understanding the USPs of tobacco ads could provide insight for tobacco regulatory actions on how to reduce the demand for tobacco products by targeting the USPs in tobacco ads.

Because the dramatic increase in both the advertising and use of alternative tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, represents a considerable public health concern, it is critical to improve understanding of how they are being effective in advertising and promoting to the US public. Understanding how these products are marketed to consumers may provide insight into how to regulate and improve tobacco control efforts by addressing tobacco companies’ claims regarding these products. For instance, data indicate that many smokeless tobacco products market their products as a viable, “clean” alternative to traditional cigarettes. This form of advertising may indicate the unique features and benefits (USPs) that these tobacco products offer. It also may be providing misleading information about smokeless tobacco products that could reduce the effectiveness of tobacco control efforts.

In line with these findings, the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) and the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) provide key policy recommendations while recognizing the potential for these newer tobacco products to alter tobacco use patterns in the US. For instance, they recommend some of the following policy changes: adding warning labels on products and their advertisements, prohibiting youth-directed advertising and sales, and prohibiting child-friendly flavors. On May 5, 2016, the US Food and Drug Administration finalized a deeming rule extending its authority to all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, cigars, hookah tobacco and pipe tobacco, among others. The new rule – in effect since August 8, 2016 – restricts youth access, including not allowing products to be sold to persons under the age of 18 years (both in person and online), requiring age verification by photo ID, not allowing the sale of covered tobacco products in vending machines (unless in an adult-only facility), and not allowing the distribution of free samples. This new FDA rule may help improve the clarity of communica-
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**METHODS**

**Sample and Selection of Tobacco Ads**

The ad sample used in the present study consisted of 171 unique print tobacco product ads that were placed in the following print materials between August 2012 and August 2013: consumer magazines, Sunday magazines, local magazines, and Hispanic-targeted magazines.

Details regarding the data collection method are detailed in prior publications. The final search resulted in a total of 1122 tobacco product ads. Of these, 588 were cigarette ads, 272 were e-cigarette ads, 139 were moist snuff (excluding snus) ads, 87 were cigar ads, 32 were snus ads, and 4 were miscellaneous tobacco-related ads (excluded from analysis). Among the remaining 1118 ads, 171 were determined to be distinct ads as outlined in prior research as being “distinct if it differed from other advertisements by text or image and not by color alone.” The final sample consisted of the following content: 70 cigarette ads, 44 snuff ads, 27 e-cigarette ads, 22 cigar ads, and 8 snus ads. All of these ads contained at least one USP per ad.

A database was created in which each ad was identified with a unique ID, the slogan/headline of the ad, and the product name, parent company, brand name, and magazine in which the ad was published. Results summarizing the frequencies of the ads according to product type are published elsewhere.

**Qualitative Content Analysis**

**Coding procedures.** In this study, the unit of analysis was individual tobacco product ads. Two members of the study investigative team coded all the ads for number of USPs and evidence for USPs. USPs were operationalized as, “unique selling propositions to the customer that convince them to try/use the product, or switch brands. These can be both direct and implied.” All coders identified each USP by writing out the specific unique points that the ad made to encourage customers to try or use the product. All key points represented independent thought units or main ideas. Finally, coders recorded evidence for the USP, which consisted of identifying the supportive words or pictures in the ad to back up the USPs listed. The evidence referred to the justification or relationship to the argument made. These judgments could be based on explicit or implicit factors. An example of an implicit USP would be the following: a cigarette ad is selling the idea the “X cigarettes endorse a fun time with friends” (USP #1), which is backed up by the ad depicting friends laughing and having a good time. An example of an explicit USP would be the following: an e-cigarette ad is selling the idea that “e-cigarettes are a great alternative to traditional cigarettes” (USP #2), which is justified by the argument, “Smokers finally have a real alternative.” Table 1 presents the operationalization of coded variables and includes a list of coding categories and definitions. It should be noted that the resulting USPs reported in Table 1 include both USPs of specific...
branded (compared to other brands) as well as USPs of tobacco products that might distinguish them from other tobacco products.

In Phase 1 of coding, coders read all ads and noted initial reactions to them according to tobacco product type. In Phase 2, analysis team members transferred key findings and summary of findings into an analysis template created for all ads, organized by each tobacco product type. In Phase 3, members met to share their individually coded thoughts, reflections, and observations, and collectively determined a set of findings for each tobacco ad. These findings for ad USPs were then organized into major categories as divided by tobacco type. This occurred as an iterative process until full consensus was reached (indicating inter-rater agreement) and all unique ads had been coded and synthesized into a summary of findings categorized according to tobacco product types. In Phase 4, coders reviewed the findings produced for each tobacco product type and generated higher-order descriptive and interpretive themes that represented prominent findings observed across all ads. The salience of these findings were assessed in the following 2 ways: (1) consideration of whether both analysis team members reached similar conclusions regarding tobacco product type, and (2) the degree to which thematic findings recurred across multiple ads.

RESULTS

The final sample consisted of 171 unique tobacco product ads including. Qualitative content analysis of the ads revealed several broad USP themes.
for each of the categories of tobacco product (Table 2). When discussing prevalence of themes, more than one USP theme and sub-theme could be coded for a single ad, providing for totals that sum to over 100% in some instances. As such, frequency data (rather than percentage) are provided below.

### Cigarette Ads

Three USP themes emerged for cigarette ads (Table 2, N = 70 ads). The first and most common theme (occurring 128 times) was presenting the attractive features/characteristics of cigarettes. In this theme, cigarettes were presented as having many attrac-
tive features. For instance, ads claimed that: (1) cigarettes come in a variety of flavors; (2) cigarettes are pleasurable; (3) cigarettes offer a unique tasting experience; (4) smoking cigarettes provides an “experience;” (5) cigarettes are natural (implying safe); (6) cigarettes create inspiration and creativity; and (7) smoking cigarettes provides a “new experience.” The second USP theme of cigarettes was, “Cigarette smoking makes you have a good time,” occurring 63 times across cigarette ads, and highlighted the social benefits of smoking. Specifically, cigarettes were shown to be: (1) fun in any setting, (2) romantic, and (3) fun with friends. Thus, cigarettes were portrayed as not only desirable but connected to having a good time. The final theme of cigarette ad USPs was providing incentives for buying cigarettes; this theme occurred 12 times and provided monetary prizes and bundle incentives.

**Moist Snuff Ads**
For moist snuff ads, 2 major USP themes emerged (Table 3, N = 43 ads). First, the most prevalent
theme (occurring 78 times) of moist snuff was, “Snuff use is masculine.” Sub-themes included: (1) snuff is a no-nonsense product; (2) use of “dry” humor in general; (3) snuff is masculine/meant for male consumers; (4) use of “dry” humor in sports; and (5) snuff is for outdoor activities. The second USP theme to emerge from moist snuff ads was incentivizing the purchase of moist snuff products in which monetary awards were offered; this theme occurred a total of 6 times. Only one brand of moist snuff was included in the present analyses (“Grizzly”), limiting generalizability across brands.

**E-cigarette Ads**

A total of 4 USP themes emerged for e-cigarette ads (Table 4, N = 27 ads). The first, which was also the most frequent to occur (a total of 48 times), compared e-cigarettes to traditional cigarettes and highlighted the positive characteristics of e-cigarettes that make them superior to and a better alternative to conventional cigarettes. Sub-themes included: (1) e-cigarettes are a great alternative to traditional cigarettes; (2) e-cigarettes produce no smoke, odor, or ash; (3) e-cigarettes provide freedom to smoke anywhere; (4) e-cigarettes are great for quitting traditional cigarettes; (5) e-cigarettes are empowering and help you assert independence; (6) e-cigarettes provide a superior taste experience compared to traditional cigarettes; and (7) e-cigarettes are cheaper than traditional cigarettes. The second USP theme advertised e-cigarettes as being, “better compared with other e-cigarette brands,” and occurred 29 times in e-cigarette ads. This USP theme indicated that e-cigarette ads of-
DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that a common theme for advertising tobacco products was to highlight the attractive features and characteristics of the product (e.g., pleasurable). This theme was prominent among cigarette, e-cigarette, and snus ads. Cigar and moist snuff ads contained more targeted USP themes. Cigars ads, for instance, focused on promoting cigars as “premium,” “sophisticated,” and “for special occasions” whereas moist snuff ads marketed their product almost exclusively by appealing to the masculinity of the product. A key finding of the present study is that more newer, smokeless tobacco products (e.g., e-cigarettes and snus) were marketed as good harm reduction alternatives to conventional combustible tobacco products (predominately cigarettes). This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that smokeless tobacco products may represent harm reduction alternatives to traditional cigarettes.9,24-25

As evidenced by results from the current study, the USPs of smokeless tobacco products could be potentially misleading. By making claims that these alternative tobacco products allow one to “Rise from the ashes” of traditional smoking or offer a “real alternative” for smokers, the current advertising practices may potentially reduce the likelihood that current smokers quit using tobacco.26 The fear of dual use is mounting, and scholars have cautioned about the rise of snus and e-cigarettes to promote dual use and inhibit cessation.9,39

Policy efforts could target these USP advertising claims by requiring warning labels on products and their advertisements (e.g., health risks) and prohibiting advertising and flavors directed to youth and children.38 These recommendations in policy change targeting advertising could complement the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA)
deeming rule not only to prohibit sale of all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, cigars, and pipe tobacco to minors under 18 years, but also to prevent misleading claims by tobacco product manufacturers, evaluate the ingredients of tobacco products, and communicate their potential risks.29

Despite the strengths of this study, there are some limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn. First, only print ads appearing in magazines were included in the present analysis. As such, the present findings cannot be generalized to all promotion and advertising strategies of tobacco companies (online, direct to consumer, etc). Future studies should examine if these themes are consistent across other advertising mediums (eg, online, etc). A second limitation of the present study is that it did not examine whether there were differences in advertising targeting older adults versus youth and young adults or men versus women. As indicated by the themes emerging for moist snuff, for example, it appears that there may be differences in the USPs according to the target audience. Future research should examine how these advertisements differ based on target audience of the readership for each magazine to illuminate differences in USPs utilized according to the target audience. A third limitation is that although we included both explicit and implicit claims in our coding, we did not distinguish between these 2 types of claims. As such, we cannot determine which claims were made most frequently for each tobacco product type. Future research should examine this to determine which claims are of the highest priority to target. Finally, the present study is descriptive in nature. As such, we could not determine which themes are most effective at increasing sales and consumption of particular tobacco products.

Despite these limitations, the present study highlights similarities and differences between the USPs of print advertising for smokeless tobacco products and traditional cigarettes. Due to the volume and variety of advertising for various tobacco products, future research should examine the effectiveness of each strategy as well as their influence on whether individuals believe products are safer than cigarettes or are more willing to try them. Findings from the present study do highlight some of the unique selling propositions of tobacco ads, which could provide a framework for which components of ads tobacco regulatory policies might benefit most from targeting.

**Human Subjects Statement**

All necessary ethical safeguards have been met to ensure the confidentiality and proper informed consent of all patients involved in the research. All institutions’ IRBs have approved the methods used to collect data reported in the present manuscript.

**Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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