

'People Love Players': Teenagers, Romance and Cigarette Marketing in Post-war Britain

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Introduction

British cultural historians have tended to analyse the marketing of cigarettes in Britain at a visual level, picking out themes featured in advertisements directed at particular sections of the cigarette market (Tinkler, 2006; Hilton, 2000). When investigating the post-war history of tobacco, these historians have understandably focused on the importance of smoking's relation to health. In these accounts, advertising generally plays a secondary role to narratives about medical discoveries, public health initiatives and government interventions. To date, there is little sustained analysis of the production and changes in cigarette advertising in post-war Britain. Historians have discussed the surface appearance of campaigns and activities, rather than the creative and business decisions which influenced the formation of specific advertising campaigns. Using the tobacco manufacturer John Player and Sons (Players) as a case study, this paper highlights the role of post-war market research in defining young people as the most important segment within the cigarette market. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Players and other firms began featuring young people regularly in their advertisements. Players targeted teenagers by using romantic and love themes in its advertising, which was emblematic of the emotional appeals featured in British cigarette advertisements at this time more broadly. The 'People Love Players' campaign and its kind became a focus for concerns about smoking and health and the power of advertising in post-war Britain. Advertising controls were first introduced in 1962, marking the start of a protracted effort to shackle the marketing of cigarettes in Britain. This paper employs an historical methodology and uses tobacco industry business documents from different archives to study a specific marketing strategy. It is part of a broader study into the ways Players marketed its products between 1955 and 1981. (The study is run in conjunction with Nottingham City Council's museum and galleries service.)

Established in Nottingham in 1877, Players made use of marketing techniques such as packaging, trademarks and advertising from its outset. In 1901 the company became a subsidiary of Imperial Tobacco, which was formed as a result of several British tobacco manufacturers merging to fend off the aggressive expansion of the American Tobacco Company in Britain. Despite Imperial's formation, Players retained control over its production, selling and marketing functions. Matthew Hilton has argued that the company's use of mass advertising in the interwar period led to its Medium Navy Cut (MNC) brand 'obtain[ing] a central place within the iconography of British popular culture' (Hilton, 2000, p. 128). The post-war period was a time when Players looked to modernise its marketing methods. The company introduced a brand manager system and began employing a variety of leading British advertising agencies instead of the solitary agency it had used previously. This was a period in which the company embraced marketing as a managerial ethos, using market research to help set objectives for individual brands which its production, distribution and promotional activities then looked to achieve. Such an ethos reflected a general trend amongst British consumer goods companies generally at this time, whereby marketing objectives started to be the primary motive behind a firm's activities as Robert Fitzgerald has detailed (Fitzgerald, 1995). Significantly for this paper, Imperial and Players began commissioning large market research studies during the post-war period; the findings of these would direct Player's marketing strategies. More generally, the 1950s witnessed a deepening of the competitiveness of the British cigarette market. Having previously been dominated by Wills of Bristol, another Imperial branch, the market was now more fluid and involved Wills, Players and Gallaher jockeying for market share. In the mid-1950s, Players gained leadership of the market thanks to the popularity of its MNC brand, but by the late-1950s, Gallaher had the greater sales due to the success of its Senior Service brand.

Motivation Research

Stefan Schwarzkopf has highlighted how cigarette manufacturers, including Players, were amongst the few British companies to form 'Long-term, profitable relationships' with the market researcher Ernest Dichter (Schwarzkopf, 2010, p. 224). Dichter championed motivation research, an approach which borrowed techniques from psychoanalysis such as depth interviews and free association in an effort to understand consumers' subconscious desires. Motivation research was practised generally by British market research organisations in the post-war period, and Imperial and Players commissioned several large-scale motivation research studies which went on to inform Players' marketing activities in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, Research Services Limited (RSL) carried out a 'Cigarette Smoking Motivation Study' in 1956. 775 men, both smokers and non-smokers, aged between 16 and 54 were interviewed to ascertain their smoking habits and attitudes. In conclusion, the study's report stated:

The maintenance and stability of the cigarette market depend in large measure on the constant recruitment of youth (age 15 to 23, roughly) to the cigarette smoking habit[...] past this age the increments to the ranks of smokers (at least among men) are almost negligible. It would seem therefore that a large share of cigarette advertising should be directed at this age group. (Davis, 1956)

The report recommended that cigarette advertising should feature 'convivial youthful models in gregarious situations (with the same sex and the opposite sex), so as to establish a positive situation between smoking and the successful mastery of social skills and anxieties arising from shyness, awkwardness, feelings of inferiority, etc.' (Davis, 1956).

The late 1950s were a time when young people were growing in importance as a market segment more generally. RSL's Managing Director Mark Abrams published a pamphlet titled *The Teenage Consumer* in 1959 which detailed the spending habits of unmarried individuals aged between 15 and 25 (Abrams, 1959). This information was valuable for businesses. For example, the advertising agency Mather and Crowther (M&C), when proposing a new advertising campaign for Player's MNC, quoted Abrams' data. The agency was unequivocal in asserting the importance of the under-25 market for Players. According to M&C, teenagers were 'THE WHOLE OF YOUR FUTURE MARKET!' (M&C, 1959)

'People Love Players'

M&C devised a campaign which targeted young people by picturing youthful-looking heterosexual couples enjoying MNC cigarettes together in suitably idyllic settings. Copy or a voiceover indicated the young lovers' burning desire for one another and emphasised the role Player's cigarettes had in completing their intimate moment together. The campaign's slogan was 'People Love Players'. The campaign was launched in 1960 and the advertisements were circulated widely, with MNC being the most heavily advertised brand in 1960 and 1961 in terms of press and television advertising expenditure. The advertisements were representative of a wider trend in cigarette advertisements which saw emotion being used to appeal to young people. For example, Wills advertised its Strand brand as a cure for loneliness, Strand's slogan reading 'You're never alone with a Strand'.

The campaign was heavily criticised in several quarters of British society. Readers of *The Guardian*, referencing Vance Packard's 1957 expose on advertising and market researchers such as Dichter (Packard, 1991), condemned it as an example of the 'corrupting' influences of 'The Hidden Persuaders' (Holbrook, 1960). Politicians campaigning for tighter control of tobacco raised the campaign in the House of Commons as an example of the 'constant emphasis on snobbery, vanity and sex' characteristic of cigarette advertisements (HC Deb, 1961). The landmark report by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), *Smoking and Health*, published in 1962, criticised 'Advertisements with romantic allusions' for 'being addressed increasingly to young people who may not yet be addicted to the habit or attached to any particular brand' (RCP, 1962, p. 8). The RCP stated that such advertisements should be stopped and recommended that government introduce legislation to prevent or restrict cigarette advertising. The RCP's report received wide publicity in the British media and the Independent Television Companies Association (ITCA) took action. After discussions with the tobacco industry, it produced a set of voluntary guidelines which prevented specific advertising appeals appearing in televised cigarette advertisements. These included 'Advertisements that strikingly present romantic situations and young people in love, in such a way as to seem to link the pleasures of

such situations with the pleasures of smoking' (ITCA, 1962) . The industry extended the remit of the code to cover its press advertisements, and the depictions of young couples disappeared from MNC advertisements and were replaced with more prosaic imagery.

Conclusion

The 'People Love Players' campaign was a tipping point for British society in terms of its attitudes to cigarette promotion. The outcry occasioned by and reaction to the advertisements represent a coming together of the growing concern over the dangers smoking posed to health and fears about the pernicious reach of advertising, especially for vulnerable groups like the young. The strength of the condemnation led to the first controls on cigarette manufacturers' marketing activities in Britain and began a chain of restrictive measures which limited the ways companies could promote their products. Over time, manufacturers adapted to such controls and were able to publicise their products through alternative means, such as gift schemes and sport sponsorship. This is not to say that cigarette manufacturers stopped appealing to youth, and contemporary reviews of tobacco documents have revealed that the 'recruitment' of a new generations of smokers has been a persistent strategy of the tobacco industry (Hastings and MacFadyen, 2000). Never again, however, would cigarette advertisements in traditional media appeal so brazenly to young people in Britain.

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