

Combatting the Big Tobacco Hydra in Sport: Another Case of Alibi Marketing Through False Flag Advertising

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Abstract

There are ongoing covert tactics being employed by Big Tobacco to contravene bans on advertising of tobacco products in an increasingly regulated environment. The power of alibi marketing should not be diminished with emerging markets in developing countries. This letter briefly describes challenges we face worldwide by Big Tobacco, Big Vape and their marketing strategies.

Keywords: false flag advertising, alibi marketing, tobacco tactics, Big Tobacco

"He is most free from danger, who, even when safe, is on his guard."

Publilius Syrus (1st Century BC Roman writer and poet)

As a result of the actions of campaigning anti-tobacco advocates and whistle-blowers, alongside the legal requirements of the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) in the USA, many people in the health and medical fields are significantly better informed about the devious tactics and strategies of the tobacco industry than they would otherwise have been [1-6]. Therefore, we are fortunate to have direct evidence of Big Tobacco's targeting of various minorities, including women [7], children [8], ethnic and racial minorities [9], and the LGBTQ community [10].

More recently, evidence has emerged of other covert tactics that have been used by tobacco companies to continue to market their products in an increasingly regulated environment [11], the most notable of which is alibi marketing [12]. This apt phrase was developed to describe the use of a more covert barcode logo to market Philip Morris's Marlboro cigarettes on the Scuderia Ferrari team's Formula 1 racing cars, after overt sponsorship was banned in line with recommendations of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) [12]. It should be noted that similar tactics have been used by the alcohol industry to pro-

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mote their products, notably in France, where the Loi Evin law prohibits alcohol advertising on television [13-16]. Interesting, as of February 2019 Philip Morris's Marlboro brand have been announced as sponsors to Ferrari, with their branding set to appear both on uniforms and racing cars under the new slogan of 'Mission Winnow', which has been argued has similar font use as the traditional Marlboro branding [17]. Both also use red and white primarily in their logos and advertising. Phillip Morris have argued that as a slogan/logo it doesn't promote smoking, more so an ideology that you can transform your lifestyle via the use of smoke-free alternative offerings.

It has also been announced that British American Tobacco (BAT) will again sponsor Formula 1 racing with McLaren, the first time since their departure in 2007; this time with the aim of showcasing some of its 'reduced risk' products such as their electronic vaping products, Vype and Vuse [18]. Where traditional advertising has been banned re sponsorship, these tactics by 'Big Vape' can be seen to take over this lucrative business. With this return of Big Tobacco / Big Vape to covert advertising to Formula 1 racing, this leads us to question what can regulators do to stop this?

Big Tobacco has been likened to the hydra from ancient Greek mythology [19]. As each head is severed two more sprout in its place. This analogy has been used to describe how Big Tobacco continually adapts to regulation through both innovation and the ability to exploit loopholes in legislation. Therefore, in order to forewarn tobacco control advocates and prime their awareness, an account from the UK's Hansard House of Commons reports is outlined [20]. Although the incident under examination is historical in nature, a scan of the academic literature did not yield any reference to this phenomenon. It is hoped therefore that by bringing it to the attention of a wider audience another tactic in Big Tobacco's arsenal of illicit tobacco marketing strategies can be identified and prevented into the future. The following incident was recounted by Mr. George

Foulkes, Labour MP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (later Baron Foulkes of Cumnock PC) on 30th June 1983:

"Silk Cut cigarettes... were advertised on the track side at the Bislett athletics meeting in Oslo on 28 June, posing as Silk Cut Master Class Holidays. The manufacturers knew that because Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett were competing in Norway, the event would be shown on British television. Thankfully, due to a protest following reports from Britain, the case was investigated by a law professor in Norway. He concluded that the advertisements were in conflict with the Norwegian Tobacco Act. Following that, the National Council on Smoking and Health informed the Ministry of Health, which supported the professor's view that the advertisements were illegal... The Chairman of the National Council on Smoking and Health said: "We at the National Council on Smoking and Health do not blame the organisers because this brand is not marketed in Norway and they were unaware that Silk Cut was a cigarette"[20]

This incident is particularly stark because of how blatant it was. Comparison of video from the 1982 European Championship athletics races in Bislett (Oslo) [22, 23] with video from the 1983 Bislett Games there [21] clearly demonstrates the iconic serif block style capitalisation of SILK CUT at both events. However, by 1983, in a lazy and rather farcical attempt at subterfuge, the phrase Masterclass Holidays was appended onto the end of the advert.

As noted above, long-established tactic of Big Tobacco has been to exploit market segmentation to develop distinct customer groups [7-10]. This segmentation includes an international dimension, with certain brands being marketed in particular jurisdictions, but not in others. It was this aspect of segmented marketing that facilitated the illegal advertising outlined above [24]. This form of alibi marketing may be best described as false flag advertising. False flag is a military term often used in a covert operations designed to deceive. In such scenarios the deception creates the appearance one party being responsible for an activity, often allowing the true responsible party to remain unknown [25].

It is perhaps no surprise that this marketing

ploy was conducted for Gallagher's Silk Cut cigarettes. The advertisers associated with this brand became adept at anticipating and innovatively avoiding tobacco marketing regulation [26]. Their adverts became a well-known classic series [27], which over time actually utilised the Government's anti-smoking warning as a crucial constituent of its tobacco marketing strategy:

"The surreal and high-quality photographic images focused on package recognition and challenged the viewer to interpret the visual clues, working on the theory that the more you are forced to use your imagination, the more you will remember. As veteran advertising professional John Hegarty pointed out, 'ironically, sometimes the only words on the Benson & Hedges advertisements tell you not to smoke!' ... they...excluded even an image of the packet from the picture. In many of their advertisements, the viewer's first clue that the advertisement was for cigarettes was from the government health warning. Advertisers were using the health warning to their advantage" [26, 28].

The false flag advertising outlined above and the inventiveness of tobacco marketing gives rise to serious concerns. Despite increased regulation, the danger still posed by tobacco use on a global scale is significant. With approximately one billion smokers, tobacco related illness is the world's leading preventable cause of mortality and morbidity. It is estimated that tobacco related diseases currently kill in excess of seven million people per year [29-33]. The negative impact of Big Tobacco on the economic health of individuals, families, communities and whole countries is also notable [33, 34], as its adverse effects on the environment [35-41].

Stricter tobacco advertising controls in countries such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia and within the European Union has led Big Tobacco to focus its attention on countries with lighter regulation throughout Africa, South and Central America, Asia and the former USSR [42-46]. This is important as opportunities for false flag advertising and alibi marketing across international frontiers in our increasingly globalized and televised world

would appear to be bountiful. This is evident in the transnational nature of many major sporting events, particularly those in relation to rugby, soccer, cricket, golf, boxing, athletics, baseball and Grand Prix racing.

There are a number of agencies and publications that monitor and report on the marketing and promotion strategies used by the tobacco industry. These include the Tobacco Free Initiative of the World Health Organization [47], and the Industry Watch section of the journal Tobacco Control [48], as well as the newer TobaccoTactics project of the Tobacco Control Research Group in the Department for Health at the University of Bath [49]. However, passive learning from the experience and observations of others is not enough. Tobacco control advocates need to be eternally alert for the perfidious activities of Big Tobacco. This includes keeping a close watch on industry activities including alibi marketing and false flag advertising. Only through such perceptual vigilance, combined with networking, dissemination, publication and activism will it be possible to adequately respond to an industry that spends more than a million US dollars on advertising per hour in the USA alone [29].

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Resumo

Estas multe da sekretaj taktikoj uzataj de "Granda Tabako" por kontraŭi malpermesojn al reklamado de tabakvaroj en ĉiam pli reguligita medio. La potenco de alibi-merkato ne devas esti malpliigita kun ekaperantaj merkatoj en evolulandoj. Ĉi tiu artikolo mallonge priskribas defiojn tutmondajn de "Granda Tabako", "Granda Vaporo" kaj iliaj merkataj strategioj.

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