

# Brand appearances in contemporary cinema films and contribution to global marketing of cigarettes

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## Summary

**Background** The appearance of a cigarette brand in a cinema film gives the brand a certain distinction through its association with the characters and general tone of the film. Through the worldwide distribution of films, brands are promoted globally. We assessed the tobacco-brand appearances in a 10-year sample of contemporary films.

**Methods** We viewed the contents of the top 25 US box-office films for each year of release, from 1988 to 1997 (250 films in total). We compared the prevalence of brand appearances for films produced before a voluntary ban on paid product placement by the tobacco industry (1988–90) with films produced after the ban (1991–97). Tobacco-brand appearance was defined as the screen appearance of a brand name, logo, or identifiable trademark on products or product packaging, billboards, store-front advertising, or tobacco promotional items. We defined actor endorsement of a brand as the display of a brand while being handled or used by an actor.

**Findings** More than 85% of the films contained tobacco use. Tobacco brands appeared in 70 (28%) films. Brand appearances were as common in films suitable for adolescent audiences as they were in films for adult audiences (32 vs 35%), and were also present in 20% of those rated for children. Prevalence of brand appearance did not change overall in relation to the ban. However, there was a striking increase in the type of brand appearance depicted, with actor endorsement increasing from 1% of films before the ban to 11% after. Four US cigarette brands accounted for 80% of brand appearances. Revenues outside the USA accounted for 49% of total revenues for these films, indicating a large international audience.

**Interpretation** Tobacco-brand appearances are common in films and are becoming increasingly endorsed by actors. The most highly advertised US cigarette brands account for most brand appearances, which suggests an advertising motive to this practice.

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## Introduction

The visual presentation of brands in cinema films is generally thought of as a form of advertising,<sup>1,2</sup> which is pursued by companies because it influences people to purchase or use a product. Brand placement in films has become a preferred method for companies to raise brand awareness and develop favourable associations with their products for an international audience. Case reports suggest that this practice can be effective in promoting sales.<sup>3,4</sup> Increasingly, brand placement in films is part of an integrated international marketing plan for corporate products, such as the deal between beer, spirits, car, and mobile-phone manufacturers, plus a credit-card company in the film *Tomorrow Never Dies*. In total, these companies spent almost US\$98 million worldwide in advertisements associated with the release of this movie, which also featured their products.

Although there have been several studies of tobacco use in films,<sup>5–11</sup> we identified only one mention of tobacco-brand appearances in films. Stockwell and Glantz<sup>10</sup> assessed a random sample of five of the top 20 box-office hits for each year from 1985 to 1995, and noted that brand appearances declined after 1990, although these findings were not supported by any data. Moreover, if brand appearances are fairly uncommon, trend analysis by sampling only five movies per year would be difficult.

We investigated the frequency of tobacco-brand appearances in the top 25 US box-office hits per year for 10 years (1988–97). We aimed to assess trends in relation to a tobacco-industry ban on payments for brand placement in films, and to estimate the size of the international audience for films with cigarette-brand appearances.

## Methods

### Film sample

We selected the top 25 box-office hits in the USA for every year from 1988 to 1997 (250 in total) obtained from the website [www.worldwideboxoffice.com](http://www.worldwideboxoffice.com) on March 1, 1998 (accessed on Dec 14, 2000). We analysed the content to assess the association between exposure to tobacco use in films and smoking behaviour in a sample of US adolescents.

In addition to describing brand appearances, we assessed whether the frequency and type of brand appearance had changed since the tobacco industry incorporated a ban into its voluntary advertising code on payments for brand placement in films in 1989. Since it takes about 1 year for movies to be released after the production stages, we thought that many of the films released in 1990 would have been produced before the ban. Therefore we classified films released in 1988–90 as released before the ban and those produced in 1991–97 as released after the ban.

### Content analysis

We defined tobacco-brand appearances as the appearance of a brand name, logo, or identifiable trademark on



Figure 1: Examples of actor endorsement and tobacco-brand appearances for Marlboro cigarettes (A: *My Best Friend's Wedding*, B: *The Last Boy Scout*, C: *Men in Black*, and D: *Volcano*)

products or product packaging, billboards, store-front advertising, or tobacco promotional items. We defined them as brand appearances because we have no evidence that payments made by the tobacco industry prompted placement in the film (brand placements). Tobacco-brand appearances were coded as actor endorsements when a major or minor actor was using tobacco, or as background appearances when the product's presence on screen was unrelated to characters' behaviour. We distinguished types of appearance because use of tobacco by an adolescent's favourite actor has been associated with the smoking behaviour of the adolescent.<sup>12,13</sup> Actor endorsement links the brand with a film star and could have a greater effect on smoking behaviour than a background-brand appearance. Additionally, the film industry makes this distinction in negotiations for brand placement. For example, in the film *Mr Destiny*, Walt

Disney Studios charged advertisers \$20 000 for showing a product, \$40 000 to show a product and have an actor mention the product name, and \$60 000 for an actor to be shown using a product.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, reports by lawyers who broker agreements between companies and the film industry show that background brand placement does not generally gain large fees, but if the product constitutes an important element in the story line or is featured prominently during one or more scenes, a substantial fee (possibly several hundred thousand US dollars) may be paid by the manufacturer for the placement.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 shows examples of actor endorsement and background tobacco-brand appearances for Marlboro cigarettes taken from our sample of films.

Two coders analysed the film. Each film was initially viewed in entirety twice by a coder to identify every appearance of tobacco use or imagery. The appearances were viewed multiple times to code details about the context of the use or imagery. For each film, the coder recorded the number of times a tobacco brand appeared, what brands were shown, and whether each appearance was an actor endorsement or a background appearance.

To assess reliability between the two coders in the content analysis, we randomly selected 10% of the films to be coded for analysis. However, because brand appearances were seen in only 28% of the films, this sample was not large enough to assess reliability. Therefore, all films identified as having a brand appearance by a coder were independently reviewed by the coding supervisor to confirm the appearance of the brand. Of the 202 appearances of brands originally identified by the coders, 44 (22%) were excluded because the identification of a brand could not be confirmed. The remaining 158 appearances were coded based on the degree of certainty with which the brand could be identified. We used a three-point index for coding (2=logo or trademark clearly visible; 1=package or advertising design unmistakably represents brand, but the logo or name not visible; 0=package or advertising design suggests brand, but there is some uncertainty). 71 appearances (45%) were coded as 2, 66 (42%) as 1, and 22 (14%) as 0. These 22 appearances were excluded to use the most conservative measure of tobacco brand appearance. This omission reduced the number of films originally identified by the coders as containing a brand appearance from 88 to 70.

We obtained values for worldwide box-office revenues from the website [www.worldwideboxoffice.com](http://www.worldwideboxoffice.com) in June, 2000. This website compiles data from several other sources, including entertainment industry trade magazines and film studios to estimate revenues earned through worldwide distribution of films in cinemas, but does not include revenues from video sales or rental. The site provided data on total revenues (in and outside the USA) for 181 of the 250 films.

## Results

Only a few films in this sample were rated for general audiences, the rest had parental guidance warnings (US PG, PG-13 film code) or were restricted to audiences aged 17 years or older (US R film code). The films represented several genres, mainly comedies, dramas, and action adventure. Most of the films were set in the contemporary period (from 1990 to present, table).

217 (87%) films contained at least one occurrence of tobacco use; 70 (28%) contained at least one brand appearance and 33 of these contained more than one appearance (range 1–14). Tobacco brands were identifiable while actors with major or minor roles were

Characteristic	
<b>MPAA rating</b>	
G	11 (4%)
PG	64 (26%)
PG-13	75 (30%)
R	100 (40%)
<b>Genre</b>	
Action adventure	48 (19%)
Animation or children's fantasy	21 (8%)
Comedy	79 (32%)
Drama	56 (22%)
Horror	9 (4%)
Mystery	20 (8%)
Science fiction	17 (7%)
<b>Time-period setting</b>	
Before 1930	25 (10%)
1930–64	12 (5%)
1965–89	47 (19%)
1990–present	151 (60%)
Future	9 (4%)
Unable to determine	6 (2%)
<b>Contained tobacco use</b>	
No	33 (13%)
Yes	217 (87%)
<b>Tobacco-brand appearance</b>	
No	180 (72%)
Yes	70 (28%)

MPAA=Motion Picture Association of America; G=General audiences, all ages; PG=Parental guidance suggested for children; PG-13=Parents strongly cautioned that some material might be inappropriate for children; R=Restricted, people younger than 17 years require accompanying adult.

### Characteristics of 250 films

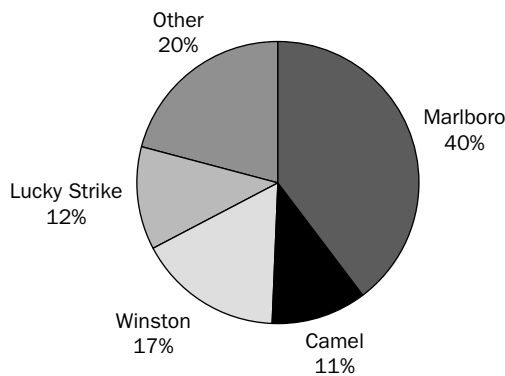


Figure 2: **Tobacco brands depicted in films**

using tobacco in 20 (8%) films. All actor endorsements involved display of the product. Background tobacco-brand appearances were more common than actor endorsements, and were seen in 59 (24%) films. Of these background appearances, 56% involved a display of products, 40% involved a display of logos on clothing or advertising, and 4% involved a verbal mention of tobacco brands.

137 tobacco-brand appearances were seen in 70 films that contained at least one brand appearance. Although 27 tobacco brands were depicted, four cigarette brands accounted for 80% of appearances (figure 2). Brands did not generally appear for smokeless tobacco, loose tobacco, or cigars.

The frequency of brand appearance in films rated for adult audiences compared with adolescent audiences did not differ (35 vs 32%). Popular adolescent-audience films with tobacco-brand appearances included: *Ghostbusters II*, *Home Alone 2 (Lost in New York)*, *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*, *Kindergarten Cop*, *Men in Black* (figure 1), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (figure 1), *The Nutty Professor*, and *Volcano* (figure 1).

Figure 3 shows the percentage of films containing actor endorsement, background appearances, or both, before and after the voluntary ban on payments for brand placement in films. The overall frequency of brand appearances was similar before and after the ban, but the type of brand appearance depicted changed. The proportion of films with only actor endorsement increased from 1% before the ban to 6% after. By contrast, the proportion of films containing only background-brand appearances declined after the ban. No film contained actor-endorsed and background-brand appearance before the ban, but 5% contained both after the ban.

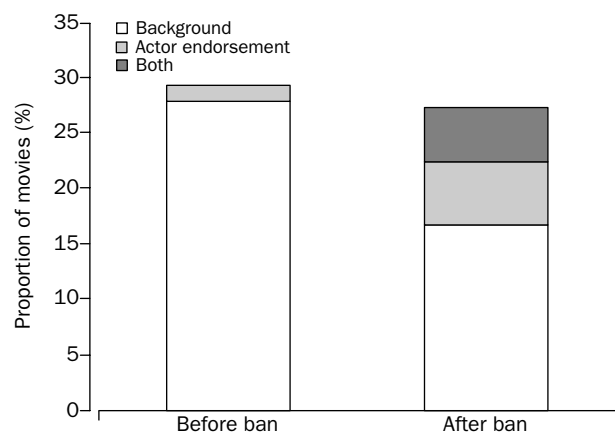


Figure 3: **Films containing actor endorsement, background appearances, or both before and after voluntary ban**

Of the 70 films with at least one tobacco brand appearance, we obtained data on US and international box-office revenues for 48 (69%). For these films, revenues outside the USA accounted for 49% of the total revenues earned. The appearance of tobacco brand imagery was not associated with US box-office revenue or the proportion of total revenues earned through international distribution.

## Discussion

Cigarette-brand appearances are common in popular films. The brands that appear most frequently are also the most highly advertised in the USA, which suggests a concordance between the advertising goals of the tobacco industry and the actions of the film industry. Whether or not a financial exchange takes place between the industries, the result is the same: US cigarettes are being marketed to a global audience through cinema films.

Tobacco companies publicly ended direct financial payments for tobacco brand placement in films in 1989, and the top 13 tobacco firms incorporated limits on such payments into their tobacco marketing procedure. Article 7 of this procedure reads: "No payment, direct or indirect, shall be made for the placement of our cigarettes or cigarette advertisements in any film produced for viewing by the general public".<sup>16,17</sup> Tobacco firms stopped brand placement to avoid Federal regulation. In the USA, at Congress, a bill was introduced that would have made it unlawful in the USA for the manufacturer, packager, or distributor of tobacco products to pay or cause to be paid to have any tobacco product or any tobacco product trademark to appear in any film, music video, television show, play, video arcade game, or other form of entertainment.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the regulations on brand placement, we were unable to identify a downward trend in the frequency of tobacco-brand appearances in films. This finding contrasts with the findings of Stockwell and Glantz,<sup>10</sup> who believe that there was a downward trend in brand appearances after 1990. Moreover, our frequency suggests that background-brand placement scenes are being replaced by actor endorsements. Because actor endorsement normally gains payments from companies,<sup>19</sup> this increasing trend suggests an advertising motive behind the appearance of tobacco brands in films.

Several possibilities could explain continued tobacco-brand appearances in films. First, the tobacco industry might continue to pay directly or through in-kind payments for placement of its brands in films. This possibility would be consistent with evidence of regular violation of the Cigarette Advertising Code by the tobacco industry since its inception in 1964.<sup>20</sup> Richards and colleagues<sup>20</sup> also suggest that amendments to this code have been used to avoid further regulatory oversight on some occasions; a motive is inferred by the timing of the voluntary ban on payments for tobacco-brand placement with attempts in US Congress to regulate the practice of product placement. Second, it might be in the film industry's interest to provide free advertising for tobacco companies. However, how they could do this for one industry without undermining their ability to obtain paid product placements from others is difficult to imagine. Third, brands that are available on the film set could be used without much forethought. For example, because actors use the product on the set the likelihood that it will appear in the film might increase. However, modern films are edited down to the millisecond, and unwanted brand appearances would probably be edited out. Finally, directors might use brand imagery to increase a sense of realism or to convey character traits.

Tobacco-control advocates are concerned about the depiction of tobacco use on screen because of the potential effect it could have on adolescents starting and carrying on smoking. The concern is the same for populations in countries where US tobacco products are heavily marketed, and where people are receptive to the advertising message, for whom films present a seductive, affluent, imaginary world. Through tobacco use on screen, receptive individuals associate stylised, branded smoking behaviour with other elements of US culture. Actor endorsement of a cigarette brand associates a type of person with that brand. As viewers assimilate these images in the context of developing their own smoking identity, their attitudes toward tobacco use become more favourable. Cross-sectional studies show an association between on-screen smoking in an adolescent's favourite movie actor and his or her own smoking behaviour.<sup>12,13</sup> In respect of these concerns, a ban on tobacco-brand appearances in films seems little different from other advertising restrictions commonly imposed on the tobacco industry, such as bans on billboard advertising.

#### Contributors

James Sargent headed the project and wrote the paper. Jennifer Tickle supervised the coding of the films and confirmed all brand appearance episodes. Michael Beach contributed to the design of the study, and did the statistical analyses and graphics. Madeline Dalton and Bridget Ahrens contributed to the design of the study, developed the film content-analysis database, and extracted pertinent information. Todd Heatherton developed and did the content analysis. All investigators had critical input into the writing of the paper.

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