

Tobacco Industry Smokers' Rights Publications: A Content Analysis

ABSTRACT

Objectives. This study was undertaken to identify the content of tobacco industry smokers' rights publications and to analyze their major themes.

Methods. Fifty-eight issues of smokers' rights publications from 1987 to 1992 were selected at random and analyzed. The number of publications per year, number of mentions (sentences) in different thematic categories per year, and number of mentions per category per publication were examined.

Results. The number of smokers' rights publications increased rapidly from 1987 to 1992. The number of mentions across all thematic categories increased over time, with the largest numbers appearing in 1990, 1991, and 1992. The category of Political and Social Action comprised the highest average number of mentions across years.

Conclusions. These publications appear to be consistent with past and present tobacco industry strategies to counter tobacco control efforts and negative public perceptions by attempting to refute scientific evidence about the health impact of environmental tobacco smoke. Additionally, they serve the industry goals of encouraging smokers to take action to protect their rights, mobilizing public opinion, and delaying societal rejection of smoking and secondhand smoke and acceptance of smoking restrictions. (*Am J Public Health*. 1995;85:1212-1217)

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Introduction

The evidence that environmental tobacco smoke endangers nonsmokers¹ has converted smoking from an individual to a social problem.^{2,3} The resulting restrictions on smoking have reduced cigarette consumption.⁴ The fact that most smoking controls have been enacted at the local level poses a particular problem for the tobacco industry because higher level (e.g., federal and state) interventions are more amenable to control through lobbying and campaign contributions, strategies the tobacco industry has used successfully in the past.⁵ Philip Morris and R. J. Reynolds now issue "smokers' rights" publications to recruit, inform, educate, and support smokers, whom they portray as victims of discriminatory smoking policies, social harassment, and ridicule, and to mobilize smokers to take social and political action.⁶

By 1978, tobacco industry research had clearly identified public concern about environmental tobacco smoke and the social acceptability of smoking as crucial issues to long-term industry survival⁷:

Nearly six out of ten believe that smoking is hazardous to the non-smoker's health, up sharply over the last four years. More than two-thirds of non-smokers believe it and nearly one-half of all smokers believe it. This we see as the most dangerous development to the viability of the tobacco industry that has yet occurred.^{7(pA-6)}

Accordingly, the industry researchers recommended:

The strategic and long run antidote to the passive smoking issue is, as we see it, developing and widely publicizing clear cut, credible, medical evidence that passive smoking is not harmful to the non-smoker's health.^{7(pA-7)}

Smokers' rights publications provide the tobacco industry with a controlled forum in which to make this case.

The first mention of a smokers' rights movement occurred in 1976, when *Tobacco Reporter*, an industry trade publication, reported that "R.J. Reynolds is planning to strike back at the increasing number of anti-smoking crusaders in the nation by launching its own smokers' rights campaign" through the firm's public relations division.^{8(p71)} According to William Hobbs, chairman of the board of Reynolds Tobacco,

[T]he publication will deal with the so-called public smoking issue, the latest tactic by anti-smoking groups in their effort to do irreparable damage to the tobacco industry. . . . If left unchecked anti-smoking "zealots" and "fanatics" could bring about an almost total ban on smoking.^{8(p71)}

In 1987, R.J. Reynolds began publishing *Choice* magazine, following Philip Morris' publication of *Philip Morris Magazine* in 1986.

Smokers' rights publications were, and continue to be, used by the tobacco companies as a primary medium for facilitating attitudinal and behavioral change around the issues of smoking and secondhand smoke, and emphasizing the need to take political and social action to protect smokers' rights. These publications are part of a strategy to protect

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TABLE 1—Smokers' Rights Publications Studied

Publication	Description	Publication Sample/Library/Total Issues Published ^a						
		1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
<i>Philip Morris Magazine</i>	Emphasizes general-interest stories and features that promote the image of Philip Morris Corporation, smoking, and tobacco in general	3/3/4	2/4/4	2/4/4	4/6/6	3/5/6	1/1/4	1/2/4
<i>American Smokers Journal</i>	Appeared to replace <i>Philip Morris Magazine</i> in summer 1992; focuses on news- and science-oriented features that provide readers with information to discredit "deceptive anti-smoking efforts"							1/2/2
<i>Smokers' Advocate</i>	"Action-oriented" newsletter that provides information on pro-smoking successes and threats (mostly legislative), and encourages and motivates smokers to get involved and take action to protect their rights					1/9/10	3/10/11	8/12/12
(R. J. Reynolds) <i>Choice</i>	"Action-oriented" publication that provides tools for political participation		4/9/9	3/5/5	4/6/6	6/6/6	2/5/5	2/3/3
<i>American Smokers Alliance</i>	"Action-oriented" newsletter to inform and motivate smokers to take action on tobacco-related state legislation and local ordinances, as well as on workplace smoking restrictions and other tobacco control efforts				2/2/4	1/3/6	3/7/10	3/4/9
<i>Smoker's Rights Alliance</i>	"Action- and information-oriented" newsletter, which has not been published since 1989, when it was apparently replaced by the <i>American Smokers Alliance News</i> ; the original editor of <i>Smoker's Rights Alliance</i> became editor of <i>American Smokers Journal</i>			2/2/3	1/1/1			

Note. Because there was only one publication (*Philip Morris Magazine*) in 1986, we started our analysis in 1987.

^aFor example, 3/3/4 under 1986 for *Philip Morris Magazine* indicates that our sample included three issues, that there are three issues in our library, and that a total of four issues was published.

tobacco industry sales and profits. This study describes and analyzes the content of smokers' rights publications and investigates the assumptions underlying their major themes. Since messages change with the changing social and political climate, we also examined the variation in thematic emphasis over time.

Methods

Publications

Fifty-eight issues of several smokers' rights publications from 1987 through 1992 were analyzed for their thematic content (Table 1). The sampled publications were selected at random from a collection of 134 issues of such publications accumulated through inclusion on publication mailing lists and from tobacco control organizations around the United States. The audience for these publica-

tions appears to be the general public, primarily smokers, and distribution appears to be national. Regional publications such as *Smoker* and trade publications were excluded. From among the six publications included in our study, 20 issues were missing, leaving 85% of the total publications in print. Most of the missing issues (65%) were from *American Smokers Alliance News*. Efforts to obtain these issues by contacting the publisher were unsuccessful because the telephone was disconnected.

Derivation of Content Thematic Categories

Thematic categories were developed using content analysis methods described by Weber.⁹ Because of the need to define a standard measure for recording publication information, the recording unit was defined as a mention, and a mention was

defined as a sentence. Each mention was coded into one of four mutually exclusive and independent thematic categories: Perceived Threat, Undermining the Opposition, Creating Legitimacy, and Political and Social Action. These categories, the definition of which was based on a preliminary analysis, roughly correspond to Prochaska's¹⁰ stages of change (Table 2). A test of interrater reliability between the scores obtained by two independent raters produced an overall correlation of 0.89. Correlations for the four thematic categories were as follows: Perceived Threat: $r = 0.88, P < .01$; Undermining the Opposition: $r = 0.87, P < .01$; Creating Legitimacy: $r = 0.97, P < .01$; and Political and Social Action: $r = 0.92, P < .01$.

If a mention did not fit one of the thematic categories, it was coded as neutral. For example, *Philip Morris Magazine* contained several long, general-

TABLE 2—Thematic Coding Categories for Content Analysis of Smokers' Rights Publications

Category	Description	Stage of Change
Perceived Threat	Presents individual rights, choice, and freedom as the ideal; smokers' rights are threatened.	Precontemplation and contemplation
Undermining the Opposition	Undermines the tobacco control movement and refutes scientific evidence related to the health hazards of environmental tobacco smoke.	Ready for action
Creating Legitimacy	Creates legitimacy for the tobacco industry, smokers, smoking, and tobacco in general, thus encouraging readers to view these individuals and behaviors as targets of unfair discrimination.	Ready for action
Political and Social Action	Informs readers about existing political and social action that protects or threatens smokers' rights, and prompts them to take action to protect smokers' rights and freedoms.	Action

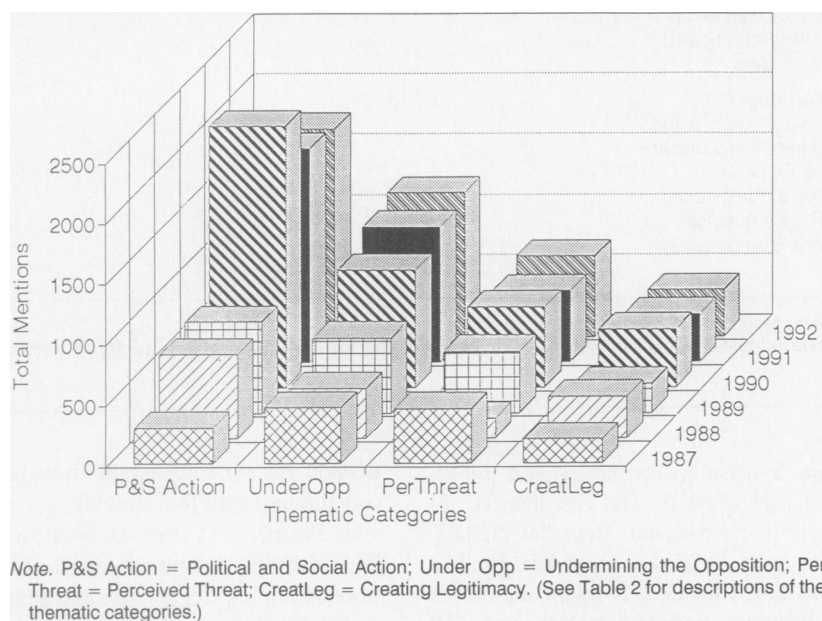


FIGURE 1—Mention intensity: total number of thematic category mentions per year and across all publications.

interest articles that were not considered, sentence by sentence (as mentions) in the quantitative analysis because they did not specifically address tobacco issues. Thus, articles about an endangered species or snow skiing, which may have encouraged the reader to view the tobacco industry as environmentally or sports minded, were excluded. Articles in *Philip Morris Magazine* dealing directly with smokers' rights

were coded on a sentence-by-sentence basis and included in the analysis.

Analysis of Thematic Category Mentions

Because publications were of varying lengths and were published at varying rates, the number of mentions were standardized so that total mentions could be compared across publications and

categories, and over time. Total mention intensity across all publications was computed by taking the total number of mentions per category in a given year in each publication, dividing it by the number of issues that year in the sample, multiplying the result by the total number of issues published that year, and summing across all publications (Figure 1).

The orientation for each publication was obtained by dividing the number of total mentions per category by the total number of pages in that publication in the sample. This yielded the average number of categorical mentions per page in each publication (Figure 2).

Results

The total number of issues of smokers' rights publications annually increased from 13 in 1987 to 30 in 1992 (Table 1). The prominence and subthemes of each of the four categories are discussed below.

Political and Social Action

The category of Political and Social Action had the greatest mention intensity of the four categories. The number of mentions increased dramatically over the study period, with the greatest number appearing between 1990 and 1992 (Figure 1). All publications except *Philip Morris Magazine* featured more mentions related to Political and Social Action than to any other category (Figure 2). Subthemes included speaking out for smokers' rights and taking action (e.g., letter writing, circulating petitions) and organizing; as well as examples of pro- and anti-smoking efforts, of positive outcomes associated with taking political and social action, and of the negative impact of not taking action.

Undermining the Opposition

This thematic category contained the second highest number of mentions, and mention intensity increased over the study period (Figure 1). This category consisted of three primary areas: refutations of scientific and medical evidence, discrediting of the tobacco control movement, and character attacks on tobacco control advocates and public health organizations.

Throughout the study period, discrediting the tobacco control movement was the dominant strategy for undermining the opposition. Since 1987, attacks on the integrity and legitimacy of significant tobacco control health agencies, individuals, programs, and policies have steadily increased. In 1991 and 1992, publications

intensified efforts to portray the tobacco control movement as corrupt and manipulative for personal gain. Beginning in 1990, there was strong emphasis on the economic impact of excise taxation and on the importance of tobacco farming and production, and claims that businesses are losing revenue as a result of smoking controls were made consistently during the study period. At the same time, the notion of majority public support for smoking/tobacco tolerance and accommodation was conveyed repeatedly.

Efforts to refute scientific evidence made up the second most common area of mentions. These mentions focused primarily on the issue of environmental tobacco smoke and on the Environmental Protection Agency's report on secondhand smoke.¹ Discussions of environmental tobacco smoke and attempts to refute its negative health impact on nonsmokers increased steadily from 1987 to 1991, dropping off slightly in 1992.

Perceived Threat

This category, which comprised the third highest number of mentions, included four primary messages about tobacco control efforts: they represent an infringement on personal rights or a form of government intrusion; they undermine American values; they result in smoker discrimination/victimization; and they result in unfair treatment of smokers. Mentions in this category increased over the study period; however, their focus shifted.

Between 1987 and 1989, the major focus of mentions in this category was the unfair treatment of smokers, followed by issues related to government intrusion and job discrimination against smokers. In 1990, smoker discrimination and unfair treatment were the dominant themes. In 1991, mentions related to job discrimination and unfair social treatment remained prominent while those related to government intrusion increased sharply. Finally, in 1992, invasion of privacy, infringement on smokers' rights, government intrusion, and unfair social treatment were the dominant themes. Throughout the study period, messages that characterized the tobacco control movement as undermining American values and freedoms were conveyed consistently, and strong language (e.g., "violation of human rights," "hate spreading," "bigotry," "massacre on smokers") that portrayed smokers as

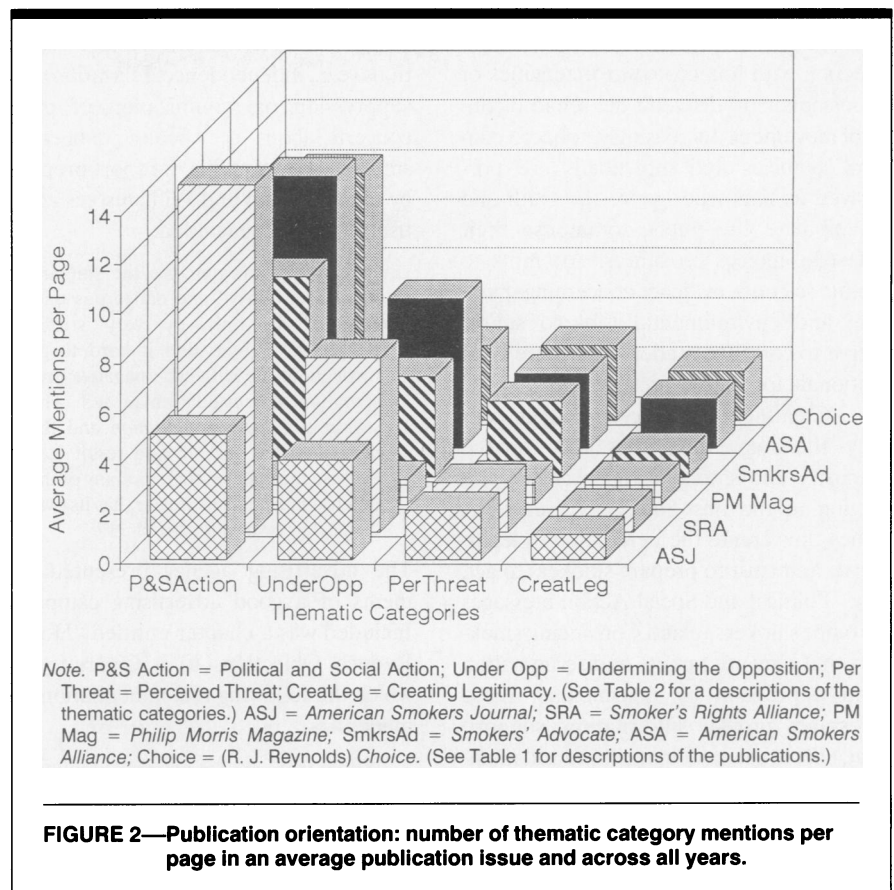


FIGURE 2—Publication orientation: number of thematic category mentions per page in an average publication issue and across all years.

being exploited and persecuted was widely used.

Creating Legitimacy

The number of mentions in this thematic category was low relative to the other categories but was steady throughout the study period (Figure 1). Mentions focused on smoker support and protection offered by the tobacco companies and smokers' rights groups; the need for accommodation, tolerance, common sense, and courtesy as a rational alternative to government intrusion, rights infringement, and restrictive nonsmoking policies; and the tobacco industry's community service and support of athletic, cultural, and social events.

Discussion

Smokers' rights publications clearly present images and messages designed to legitimize smoking, influence attitudes and behavior, and make smokers more aware of, and active in, pro-smoking political activity. Their themes appear to move smokers toward social and political action by giving readers skills, strategies, and information to facilitate a behavioral change from nonparticipation to involve-

ment in the smokers' rights movement. Publications provide readers with concrete messages, stories, and images they can use in their decision-making processes. The growing number of publications and the increase in mention intensity over the study period correspond to increases in tobacco control efforts as well as in social and political pressure against smoking and the tobacco industry.

To shift the focus away from smoking as a health issue and to elevate smoking to an issue of personal liberty and choice, Perceived Threat messages present smoking as an individual right and describe the negative impact of excessive government intrusion. Essential messages are that smokers are targets of discrimination and harassment, and that the tobacco control movement is a threat to the ideals of personal freedom.

Undermining the Opposition messages attempt to convince the reader that there is no basis for tobacco control action and policies that threaten their rights, and that the individuals and groups behind the tobacco control movement are neither legitimate nor trustworthy. Contemptuous language (e.g., "hysteria," "extremist," "smoker bashing," "class hatred,"

“victimization,” “alarmist,” “zealous,” “warfare,” “anti-smoker”) is used in connection with tobacco control activities or nonsmokers to discredit the tobacco control movement. Increasingly, tobacco control agencies and individuals are portrayed as liars who ignore the truth and manipulate the public to impose their lifestyle choices on others. Attempts to refute scientific evidence concerning smoking and environmental tobacco smoke serve to convince readers that there is no rationale for smoking restrictions.

Creating Legitimacy messages convey the impression that the tobacco industry and smokers’ rights groups are acting in the best interest of smokers. They thus create the perception of legitimacy and trust to prepare smokers to act.

Political and Social Action messages prompt smokers to act. Convincing smokers that they are targets of discrimination and oppression by nonsmokers, these messages provide information, support, and encouragement to facilitate and maintain smokers’ direct political and social involvement in “smokers’ rights issues.” Smokers’ rights groups, on the other hand, stand ready to support and assist smokers in their fight to retain their individual rights.

Smokers’ rights publications appear to fit into a broad tobacco industry public relations campaign designed to help the industry maintain its financial viability through the continued social acceptability and sale of cigarettes, and internal industry documents confirm that such a strategy is being implemented. In the early 1980s, the Federal Trade Commission subpoenaed documents from Brown and Williamson that suggest that, as early as 1969, this tobacco company had a plan to confuse the public about the health effects of smoking by attacking available scientific evidence on active smoking and creating controversy.¹¹ As one of the company’s planning documents states:

Doubt [about the dangers of smoking] is our product since it is the best means of competing with the “body of fact” that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing controversy. If we [Brown and Williamson] are successful at establishing a controversy at the public level, then there is an opportunity to put across the real facts about smoking and health.^{11(p5-11)}

The 1981 Federal Trade Commission report¹¹ also described tobacco industry marketing documents in which were clearly

indicated two major marketing themes used to promote cigarettes: image associations (e.g., independence, relaxation), and suppression or minimization of public concern about the health dangers of smoking. For example, a report prepared by one of Brown and Williamson’s advertising agencies concluded:

[M]any smokers perceive the smoking habit as a “dirty” and dangerous one, engaged in only by very stupid people. . . . People find it hard to go throughout life with such negative presentation and evaluation of self. The saviors are the *rationalization* and the *repression* that end up and result in a defense mechanism that, as many of the defense mechanisms we use, has its own “logic,” its own rationale.^{11(p2-16)}

The advertising agency presented elements of a good advertising campaign. Included was a chapter entitled “How to Reduce Objections to a Cigarette,” in which the following recommendation was made:

[S]ince there are not any real, absolute, positive qualities and attributes in a cigarette, the most effective advertising is designed to “reduce objections” to the product by presenting a picture or situation ambiguous enough to provide smokers with a rationale for their behavior and a means of repressing their health concerns about smoking.^{11(p2-16)}

While the strategies contained in this document were specific to Brown and Williamson and active smoking, the Federal Trade Commission indicated that “other cigarette companies also have developed advertising strategies designed to cause repression of consumer health concerns about smoking.”^{11(2-18,2-19)}

Smokers’ rights publications are a major medium through which the tobacco industry now applies the same principles to the environmental tobacco smoke issue as it did to the smoking issue. These publications are like advertising but are potentially more powerful: they present concrete messages, personal stories, and examples that are all designed to maintain uncertainty and controversy about the health effects of active and passive smoking, ensure that awareness remains vague and general, and minimize concern on the part of smokers, thus making it easier for them to deny the dangerous effects (to themselves and others) of their behavior. Publication themes also provide smokers with a rationale for smoking by creating the impression that smoking is socially acceptable and even logical, despite undeniable evidence of its dangerous effects.

All these factors reinforce the desirability of smoking and help increase the likelihood that smokers will take political action to protect their rights and maintain their addiction.

Our study was subject to certain limitations. First, although we made a comprehensive search from known resources, some editions are absent from our collection of publications. Second, the subjective nature of a qualitative analysis and content interpretation, such as the one conducted here, should be noted as a potential source of bias. However, our systematic method of coding, developing, and defining thematic categories helped control for this possible bias.

Smokers’ rights publications are a powerful tool for presenting smoking as a rights issue, making smokers aware of the need to protect their rights, discrediting the tobacco control movement, refuting scientific evidence about environmental tobacco smoke, creating legitimacy for the tobacco industry and smoking, teaching smokers how to be politically active to protect their rights, building a constituency of smokers’ rights groups, giving smokers a rationale for their behavior, and providing support for smokers. These efforts are consistent with past and present tobacco industry strategies to maintain high cigarette profits both by mobilizing public opinion in their favor and by delaying shifts in societal perceptions and attitudes about the acceptability of smoking, environmental tobacco smoke, and attendant controls on tobacco use. □

Acknowledgment

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New HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service Available from CDC

The CDC National AIDS Clearinghouse, a national HIV/AIDS reference, referral, and distribution service, recently announced a new HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service for people living with HIV disease, their families and friends, and health care providers. The service was developed through a coordinated US Public Health Service effort to provide timely, accurate information about federally approved treatment guidelines for HIV/AIDS. The service provides answers to questions about treatment of HIV disease and recently approved drug therapies, copies of federally approved

HIV/AIDS treatment guidelines, and referrals to other appropriate information resources. The staff includes both English- and Spanish-speaking reference specialists; all are health professionals trained to answer questions concerning HIV disease.

To obtain information from the service, call (800) HIV-0440 ([800] 448-0440); TDD/deaf access (800) 243-7012; Monday-Friday, 9 am to 7 pm, EST. All calls are completely confidential. Or write to PO Box 6303, Rockville, MD 20849-6303; fax (301) 738-6616.