

The cigarette box as an advertising vehicle in the UK: A case for plain packaging

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To study tobacco advertising in the United Kingdom between 1950-2003 and to evaluate the role of the cigarette box in advertising. **Method:** Tobacco company advertisements (n=204) were coded for content and meanings used to promote the product. **Results:** There was a significant shift over time from cigarettes being displayed to the cigarette box only. Changes in advertising and the meanings evoked were unrelated to changes in smoking behaviour. **Conclusions:** It is argued that the cigarette box has absorbed the meanings associated with smoking and has become an effective vehicle for advertising. It is also argued that this can only be minimised with plain packaging.

Keywords: advertising, content analysis, plain packaging, smoking, tobacco

1. INTRODUCTION

There is currently much debate concerning the impact of branded cigarette boxes on the uptake and maintenance of smoking. In April 2012 the United Kingdom government launched a consultation on the introduction of plain packaging for all tobacco products which met with high levels of public support (Action on Smoking and Health, 2012a). It is argued by the proponents of plain packaging that even though tobacco companies have been restricted in their sources for advertising, the cigarette box has become iconic to each manufacturer and remains a vehicle for advertising and an object through which smokers express their identity (Action on Smoking and Health, 2010). In light of these debates, the current paper explores changes in advertising since 1950 in the UK and the strategies used by tobacco companies to promote their product, with a focus on the use of the box and the meanings associated with smoking.

The possibility of branded cigarette boxes functioning to encourage smoking has been explicitly addressed in health interventions, most notably by the Australian government which introduced compulsory plain packaging for tobacco products in December 2012. 'Plain packaging' requires the removal of branding including colours, imagery and logos and only allows the brand name to be printed on the cigarette box in a standardised font. In July 2013, the UK government announced a delay in implementing a plain packaging policy until the impact of the implementation of the Australian policy is known. Yet, recent research by Wakefield and colleagues (2013) has found that the introduction of plain packaging there has resulted in smokers perceiving their cigarettes as less satisfying and of lower quality than previously. The study also found that smokers were more likely to have thought about quitting in the last week and now rated quitting as a higher priority in their lives. The researchers argued that the early results suggested that plain packaging is having an effect and is associated with making smoking less appealing.

Across its history, cigarette advertising – like the advertising of any product – has been oriented towards increasing the appeal and consumption of the product. Advertising *per se* has been defined as ‘any form of paid communication by an identified sponsor aimed to inform and/or persuade target audiences about an organization, product, service or idea’ (Fennis and Stroebe, 2010: 2). There has been much work undertaken within psychology to understand how advertising functions. According to Fennis and Stroebe (2010), it operates in a complementary way on a societal/collective level, facilitating competition between brands, and on an individual level, endeavouring to persuade audience members. Persuasion can be seen here as ‘any change in beliefs and attitudes that results from exposure to a communication’ (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986: 5). There are several standard theories of persuasion that can be applied to advertising, including the cognitive response model (Greenwald 1968; Petty et al., 1981), dual process models (Chen and Chaiken, 1999; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) and the information processing model (McGuire, 1969). Ultimately persuasive advertising leads to the consumer forming positive associations about specific products or brands which promote consumption.

The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control , an initiative of the World Health Organization (WHO), has defined tobacco advertising as ‘any form of commercial and non-commercial communication with the aim or direct or indirect effect of promoting a tobacco product, including advertising which, while not specifically mentioning the tobacco product, uses brand names, trademarks, emblems, or other distinctive features of tobacco products’ (World Health Organization, 2001: 4). Although tobacco advertising has been pervasive in the Western world and far-reaching in its scope (Wakefield et al., 2005), since the 1990s tobacco companies have been increasingly restricted in their potential advertising outlets. For example, in line with the UK Broadcasting Acts of 1990 and 1996, they were prevented from advertising on television and radio and since the Tobacco

Advertising and Promotion Act in 2002, which came into effect in the UK in 2003, they have been unable to advertise via billboards or in print. Furthermore, from 2005 they were banned from advertising through either direct mail or sponsorship. Since this time, tobacco companies moved their focus to 'point of sale' advertising to promote their products (Action on Smoking and Health, 2012b). This, however, has now also been limited following research demonstrating that adolescents were particularly susceptible to this approach and laws have been implemented in the UK meaning that since April 2012 large stores can no longer have tobacco products on display (MacKintosh et al., 2012). These measures will be extended to smaller stores from 2015.

With potential advertising outlets having been systematically limited over the past 20 years in the UK, the cigarette box has been left as the last significant vehicle for the promotion of smoking. Indeed, cigarette packaging has been recognised as a prominent form of tobacco marketing in the UK (Hammond et al., 2013). Research by Ford and colleagues (2012) has suggested that branded packaging is key at the point of sale and post-sale, influencing the perceived attributes of the product, and that it is an important promotional tool for advertisers. Furthermore, this research has suggested that the introduction of plain packaging for tobacco products in the UK would further restrict the capability of the tobacco companies to influence consumers through promotional activities using their boxes. Indications are that plain packaging of tobacco products leads to a significant reduction in the positive associations with smoking such as glamour and sophistication (Hammond et al., 2013). The current research explores the associations with the cigarette box that were formed through its use in advertising which may have been carried forward by the box itself since the advertising ban.

Supporters of the call for plain packaging argue that, in line with the WHO definition cited earlier, cigarette boxes are a form of advertising and have been described as the principal way in which tobacco companies now advertise their products (Hammond et al., 2012), functioning as 'silent salesmen' (Mitchell and Studdert, 2012). In support of this, research has highlighted a series of changes made by tobacco companies to the packaging used, including changes in size, design and whether the price is printed on the packets. Such changes have been argued to illustrate the use of the cigarette box to attract attention and promote the products they contain (Moodie and Hastings, 2011). Likewise, a review of internal tobacco industry documents indicated that, following increasing legislation that has limited the possibilities for advertising, tobacco companies themselves view the packet as being crucial for creating a brand image and enhancing the impact of their brand where cigarettes are on sale (Wakefield et al., 2002). Furthermore, research indicates a rise between 2002 and 2006 in the number of adolescents who were aware of changes to the design of cigarette packets, suggesting that this age group may be vulnerable to this source of information (Action on Smoking and Health, 2010). This is of particular concern given that there are currently around 150 000 smokers aged 11-15 in the UK with two thirds of smokers starting before the age of 18 (Action on Smoking and Health, 2012b). It is also argued that the compulsory introduction of plain packaging would remove this final outlet for the tobacco companies and that non-branded packaging would lower the appeal of cigarettes and cause a subsequent decrease in both smoking uptake and maintenance (Moodie and Ford, 2011; Thrasher et al., 2011).

In contrast, the tobacco industry has argued that packaging has no impact on the consumption of their products. For example, an online campaign entitled 'Hands off our packs! Say no to plain packaging', run by the Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco (Forest, undated), has advanced several reasons why plain packaging should not be endorsed. First, it is said that plain packaging will have no impact on smoking prevalence. Secondly it is said that to suggest

that consumers select their cigarette brand on the basis of colour is an insult to their intelligence. Thirdly, it is contended that, by removing the use of branding and trademarks for tobacco products, plain packaging will 'eliminate the well known advantages trademarks create in a free market society' (Phillip Morris Limited, 2008: 31).

In this debate about the impact of branded cigarette boxes and the (proposed compulsory) introduction of plain packaging, it is unclear what, if any, positive associations were formed in relation to the cigarette box through its use in cigarette advertising. The present study addresses this and evaluates changes in advertising strategy between 1950 when the first research was published concerning the health effects of smoking (Doll and Hill, 1950) and 2003 when cigarette advertising in print and on billboards was banned in the UK. The research focuses on how the cigarette box has been used in cigarette advertising and what associations are created in relation to the box in order to discern whether and, if so, how the cigarette box operates as a form of advertising for the tobacco industry. The study also explores the relationship between changes in the use of the cigarette box and its associated meanings and existing data on changes in smoking behaviour.

2. METHOD

Forty UK tobacco print advertisements from each decade (1950s -2000s) were selected from an online advertising archive that contains over 1500 tobacco advertisements using a random number generator. The original sample contained both pro-smoking and anti-smoking advertisements. Thirty six were omitted from this analysis as they were anti-smoking advertisements, leaving a sample of 204 advertisements for analysis (39 from the 1950s, 38 from the 1960s, 33 from the 1970s, 38 from the 1980s and 28 from the 1990s and 2000s). A comprehensive coding framework was developed and refined through analysis of a sub-group of advertisements to address aspects of content and

meaning. The advertisements were grouped by the decade in which they were published and then analysed using content analysis (Rose, 2012), a method that has previously been suggested for analysing tobacco advertisements (Anderson et al., 2006). The advertisements were coded for their content in terms of whether they displayed a cigarette that was being smoked, whether they displayed a cigarette that was not being smoked and whether they displayed a cigarette box but no cigarette. They were also coded for how they promoted their product and the meanings being evoked. Eighteen codes were used here: aroma, convenience, cost, fear, flavour, friendship, happiness, health, humour, image, ladylike, pleasure, popularity, promotions, quality, quantity, relaxing and size. In addition, changes in smoking prevalence data from 1950 to the present day were obtained from Cancer Research UK and were mapped onto the analytic outcomes. The results were analysed in terms of changes in content across the decades, associations between changes in content and changes in smoking prevalence, and changes in meaning across the decades.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Changes in the content of advertisements across the decades (1950-2003)

Changes in the content of advertisements from 1950 to 2003 are shown in Figure 1.

-insert Figure 1 about here-

Chi squared goodness of fit tests were conducted on the data. The results showed a significant association between decade and advertisements with a cigarette being smoked ($\chi^2(5) = 39.953$, $p < .01$) with percentages indicating that fewer advertisements used a cigarette being smoked to promote their product over time. There were however brief increases in the 1970s and 2000s (64.1% in the 1950s; 36.8% in the 1960s; 48.5% in the 1970s; 15.8% in the 1980s; 3.6% in the 1990s; 17.9% in the 2000s). The results also showed a significant association between decade and advertisements showing a cigarette not being smoked ($\chi^2(5) = 56.468$, $p < .01$). Figure 1 shows an overall decline in

the use of a cigarette not being smoked over the decades apart from the 2000s which showed a brief increase (82.1% in the 1950s; 65.8% in the 1960s; 54.5% in the 1970s; 34.2% in the 1980s; 3.6% in the 1990s; 21.4% in the 2000s). There was also a significant relationship between decade and whether advertisements showed a cigarette box but no cigarette ($\chi^2(2) = 22.399, p < .01$). The percentages for 'box only' showed a more complex pattern but generally there was an increase across the decades, with a particular increase between the 1980s and 1990s and a decrease in the 2000s (7.7% in the 1950s; 5.3% in the 1960s; 15.2% in the 1970s; 13.2% in the 1980s; 42.9% in the 1990s; 32.1% in the 2000s).

3.2 Changes in content of advertisements across the decades and smoking prevalence

Changes in advertising content and smoking prevalence across the decades are shown in Figure 2.

-insert Figure 2 about here –

Smoking prevalence amongst females has consistently been lower than amongst males but this gender gap has closed in recent years. Smoking prevalence declined slightly following the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act ban in 2003 but has levelled off since, remaining stable for both males and females since 2006. Smoking prevalence declined most sharply between 1970 and 1990. There is no obvious association between changes in advertising strategy and smoking prevalence.

3.3 Changes in the meanings of advertisements across the decades

The percentages of meaning codes displayed by the advertisements in each decade are presented in Table 1.

-insert Table 1 about here –

The results showed that, overall, the four most common meanings were 'quality' (for example, '555 cigarettes are the same superlative quality the world over' and 'A new cigarette gifted with Embassy quality'); 'flavour' (for example, 'Filters the smoke but not the taste' and 'Come to where the flavour is'); 'pleasure' (for example, 'Whatever the pleasure Player's complete it' and 'The simple pleasure of Benson and Hedges Sovereign. Anytime'); and 'cost' (for example, 'Now! Benson and Hedges pleasure at every day prices!' and 'I like these better than Benson's Hedges! Yes, Sir, at £3.99 we're cuttin' edge'). The four least common codes were 'fear', 'being ladylike', 'friendship' and 'convenience'. 'Health' was present in the top four codes in the 1980s. There was a general downward trend over time in the range and number of meaning codes present in the advertisements.

Changes in the four most common codes ('quality', 'flavour', 'pleasure' and 'cost') are compared to the shift in the use of the cigarette box only in Figure 3.

-insert Figure 3 about here –

The results showed that over time the use of the meanings associated with pleasure, cost and flavour declined. The invocation of quality in advertisements similarly declined but showed an increase in prevalence in parallel to the increased use of the box only rather than the cigarette.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings from the present study indicate that the tobacco companies increasingly used the cigarette box in their UK advertising until the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act ban in 2003, illustrated by the decline in the use of either a cigarette being smoked or not being smoked and the increase in the use of the box only. The results also suggest that this shift from cigarette to box was

unrelated to smoking prevalence. Furthermore, the results indicate that the key meanings used in advertising across the decades were flavour, quality, pleasure and cost, with health being important in the 1980s, and that, although an overall decline in their use was seen over time, the shift from cigarette to box only was reflected in an increased presentation of images relating to quality.

As noted earlier, proponents of plain packaging argue that the cigarette box is a key source of advertising and that the introduction of plain packaging would reduce smoking behaviour (Thrasher et al., 2011). This is refuted by tobacco companies for various reasons, including the contention that consumers do not make smoking choices on the basis of packaging (Phillip Morris Limited, 2008). The results of the present study indicate that the box is indeed a source of advertising and that this source was used for several decades before current restrictions were introduced. Moreover, the results indicate that the tobacco companies are fully cognisant of the power of the cigarette box as a form of advertising as they used it to promote their product even when other advertising foci were available to them. This research can be said to build on previous studies that have examined the use of branded packaging (Ford et al., 2012; Hammond et al., 2013) and provides further evidence that the cigarette box is indeed an advertising vehicle in its own right. In addition, the results also indicate that the meanings associated with cigarettes were transferred from the cigarette onto the box in the years prior to the 2003 ban on print and billboard advertising, particularly those meanings associated with quality. The downward trend in the number and range of meaning codes used in the advertisements throughout the decades can be interpreted as pointing to the key meanings that the tobacco industry wished to be associated with their products.

Theories of persuasion provide insights into how changes in tobacco companies' advertising foci may have oriented towards influencing consumption behaviour. At a very basic level, a strong case or

argument in favour of a product needs to be created in order to be persuasive. (Potential) consumers are more likely to be persuaded by advertising that focuses exclusively on the merits of a particular product (Fennis and Stroebe, 2010). The focus over time on specific key positive features that were ascribed to cigarettes can be seen as a refinement of persuasion endeavours. The focus on quality in association with the cigarette box functioned as a catch-all 'bottom line' argument for brands in the face of decreasing advertising possibilities in context and content. Furthermore, it has been claimed that a combination of information and image can increase the likelihood of an advertisement persuading an audience to purchase a product: an image can act as a reminder cue for positive 'informational' claims (Ajzen, 2005; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). In tobacco advertising, it is possible that the increased use of the cigarette box led to the box becoming a reminder cue for the positive claims that were included in the advertisement. With the increase in the use of the box in advertising, the positive associations from the advertisements became linked with the box itself and the box carried forward these associations. The shift from the cigarette to the box was not reflected in any obvious decline in smoking, suggesting that the box was as effective at promoting smoking as the cigarette itself.

This provides some evidence in support of the call for compulsory plain packaging as the box cannot be considered a neutral object that has no impact on consumer choices. Instead the box can be viewed as a form of branded packaging that is oriented towards persuading the target audience to purchase the product. After the recent bans on advertising, the box continues to function as a mobile marketing tool that is presented to potential consumers by existing consumers as they smoke their cigarettes. The introduction of compulsory plain packaging of cigarettes would eliminate this advertising medium and its persuasive function.

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Appendix A: Figures and Tables

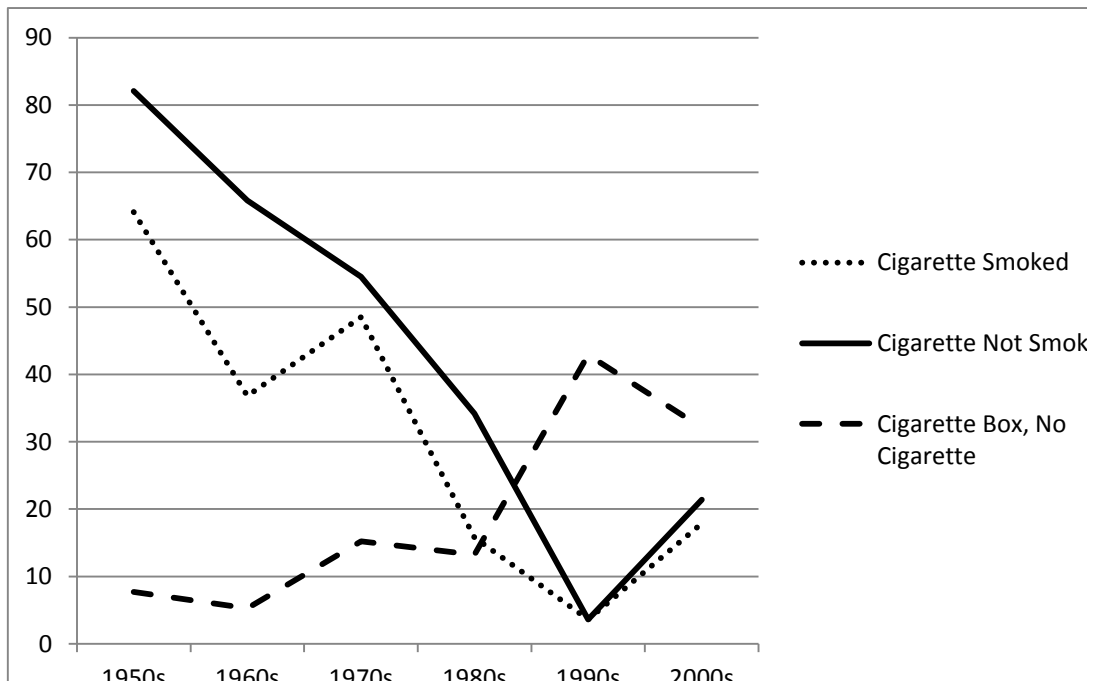


Figure 1: Changes in the content on smoking advertisements from 1950-2003

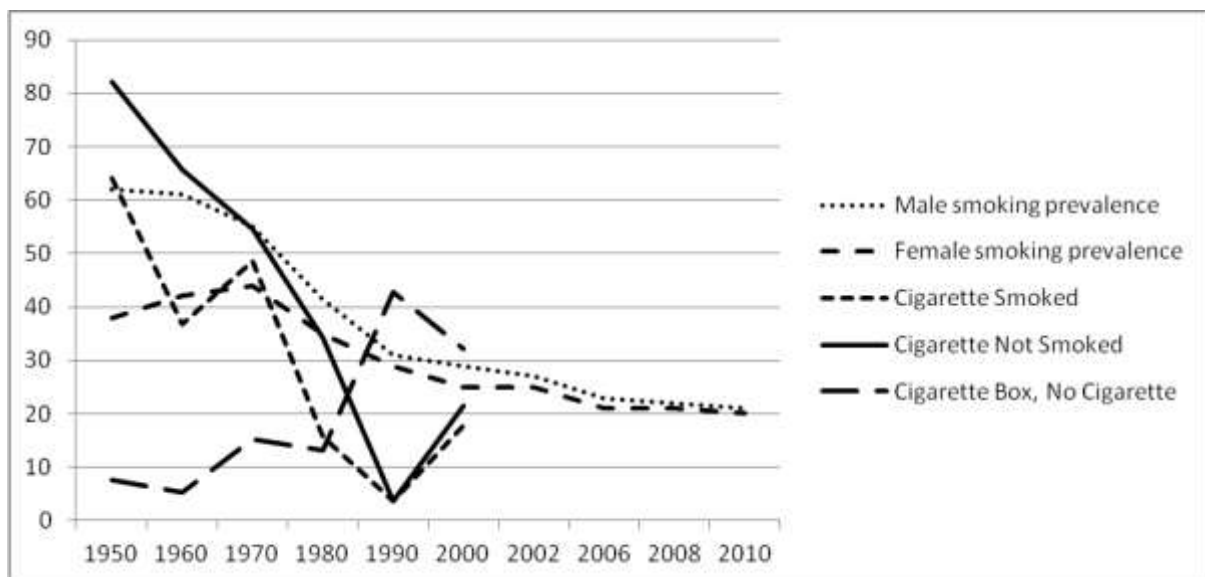


Figure 2: Content of advertisements since 1950 and changes in smoking prevalence for men and women

Table 1: The percentage counts of meanings evoked by smoking advertisements in each decade
1950-2003

Meaning Code	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Total	Rank
Aroma	0	7.9	9.1	0	3.6	0	20.6	12
Convenience	7.7	5.3	0	0	0	0	13	15
Cost	12.8	50	36.4	5.3	7.1	10.7	77.3	4
Fear	2.6	0	0	0	0	0	2.6	18
Flavour	38.5	34.2	39.4	28.9	3.6	7.1	151.7	2
Friendship	5.1	5.3	0	0	0	0	10.4	16
Happiness	7.7	2.5	0	2.6	3.6	10.7	27.1	11
Health	5.1	2.6	9.1	15.8	0	0	32.6	10
Humour	17.9	0	3	0	7.1	25	53	6
Image	2.6	5.3	6.1	0	0	0	14	13
Ladylike	0	2.6	3	0	0	0	5.6	17
Pleasure	43.6	34.2	15.2	2.6	3.6	0	99.2	3
Popularity	20.5	13.2	6.1	2.6	0	3.6	46	7
Promotions	0	21.1	12.1	2.6	0	7.1	42.9	8
Quality	66.7	50	18.2	2.6	21.4	3.6	162.5	1
Quantity	0	21.1	0	2.6	3.6	7.1	34.4	9
Relaxing	5.1	5.3	3	0	0	0	13.4	14
Size	17.9	18.4	15.2	18.4	0	7.1	77	5

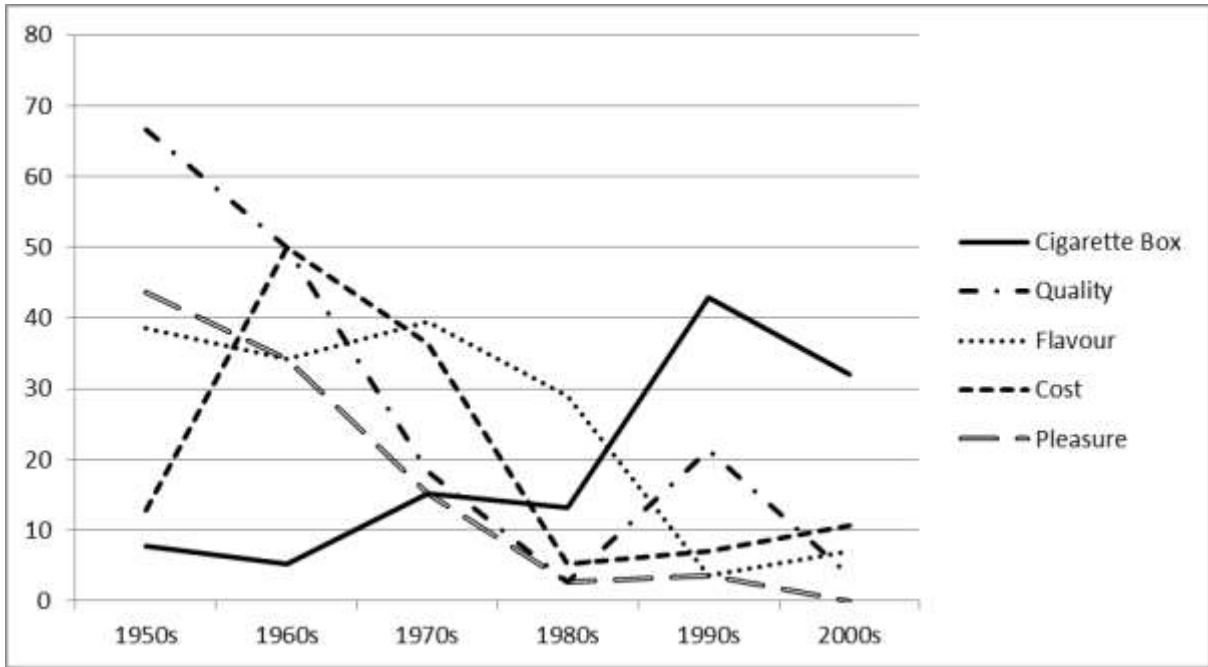


Figure 3: Percentages of the top four most frequently utilised meaning codes and the use of the cigarette box only