



Despite years of rising public awareness about the dangers of smoking, cigarette addiction remains a serious public health concern. Now, legislators are hoping to harness the power of color psychology in product packaging to reduce smoking rates.

Image Source: Lindsay Fox at [EcigaretteReviewed.com](http://EcigaretteReviewed.com)

What colors draw people in, interest them, make them want? What [combination of hues](#) will inspire someone to choose one something over every other something? These are the questions that design departments all over the world grapple with as they seek to increase the appeal of products and fortify brand identity.

But not all products should be appealing and perhaps never is this truer than in the case of cigarettes. Now, lawmakers in the UK want to [harness the power of color to psychologically deter customers](#) from smoking by replacing branded cigarette packs with standardized packaging. However, the goal isn't simply to remove the allure of distinctive and attractive branding, but to actively turn people off smoking by combining "off-putting photographs" with the offensive use of color.<sup>1</sup>



Replacing distinctive branded boxes with off-putting, standardized colors could raise quit rates and decrease the number of new smokers.

Image Source: Flickr user Rusty Clark

#### “The Ugliest Color in the World”

So what color is disinviting enough to potentially prevent smoking? According to Australian marketing research company GfK, the answer is Pantone 448C.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise known as opaque couché, Pantone 448C is a swampy mud color that market research participants associate with words like “death,” “dirty,” and “tar,” aligning perfectly with the reality of smoking. Angela Wright, a color consultant and author of *The Beginner’s Guide to Color Psychology*, is more direct in her assessment: it looks like human waste. “It makes perfect sense that smoking packets would use a vile green that looks like bodily fluids and makes people feel slightly nauseated,” she says.

Using greenish-browns as a chromatic deterrent has a lengthier history that most realize, Wright explains. In the 1960s department stores, enlisted color consultant Faber Birren to advise them on how to prevent employees from taking long bathroom breaks. “The company asked him, ‘Can you improve the working area so they don’t have to leave all the time and use the restrooms?’”

Wright says. “Birren actually took a different view and painted the restrooms in a color similar to Pantone 448C. And nobody wanted to spend time in the restrooms after that.”

Of course, the stakes in the fight to prevent smoking are immeasurably higher than those of a department store wanting to increase the productivity of their employees. So will the integration of “the ugliest color in the world” in cigarette packaging make a difference? According to recent research, there is compelling evidence that it already does.



Research suggests that color psychology can be used to reduce smoking rates at a greater pace than overt warnings and education, reaching people on a subconscious level and breaking through years of successful cigarette marketing.

Image Source: Melanie Tata

#### Using the Color of Product Packaging to Change Smoking Behavior

While Pantone 448C is making headlines currently due to new legislation, such coloration has been used in standardized Australian cigarette packaging since December 2012, giving researchers an emerging but intriguing glimpse into [the potential product packaging color has to change both attitudes and behaviors](#). According to 14 Open Access studies, “standardized packaging reduced the appeal of smoking and of cigarettes themselves, encouraged smoking cessation and made the health warnings more prominent.”<sup>3</sup> These real-life observations “support those observed in the laboratory studies and surveys conducted prior to the implementation of standardized packaging.”

But changing hearts and minds is one thing; changing behavior is quite another. The real question is whether the “human waste” colored packaging changes the number of people who smoke. Olivia Maynard, Senior Research Associate at the University of Bristol, writes:

Although the prevalence of smoking has been in decline in Australia for some time, an Australian government report shows that this decline has accelerated since the introduction of standardized packaging. It is estimated that standardized packaging is directly responsible (after taking into account other factors such as tax increases) for 25% of the 2.2% drop in smoking prevalence observed in the 36 months after the introduction of standardized packaging as compared with the 36 months before. This may not sound like a lot, but this is equivalent to 118,000 fewer Australians smoking as a direct result of standardized packaging. Given that two-thirds of smokers are expected to die from diseases caused by tobacco use, this is a clinically meaningful decline.

These findings are significant both in their implications for public health as well as for understanding the impact of color in product packaging overall; after all, most smokers [are under no illusion that](#)

[smoking is an attractive, healthy habit](#) and it would be disingenuous to believe that new smokers take up smoking because they have not been informed of its effects. As such, it is unlikely that the standardized packaging introduced new logical information that caused smokers to reconsider their habit or made would-be smokers decide against taking their first drag. Instead, [the packaging reaches people on a more visceral level](#) and begins to unravel decades of some of the most successful product marketing the world has ever seen.

#### HunterLab Color Measurement

At HunterLab, we understand the extraordinary power of color psychology in product packaging. For over 60 years, we have devoted ourselves to the science of color measurement to help our customers [develop and produce their chosen colors](#) accurately and consistently, [regardless of packaging material](#) or [manufacturing location](#). We offer a full range of [portable, benchtop, and inline spectrophotometers and customizable software packages](#) that allow you to monitor color at every stage of the production process, optimizing your ability to create the message you want and take full advantage of the unique ability color has to speak to customers. We invite you to [contact us](#) to learn more about our renowned spectrophotometric instruments and how we can help you take your color management abilities to new heights.

1. “‘World’s Ugliest Colour’ Used on Cigarette Packets to Put Smokers Off,” June 11, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/worlds-ugliest-colour-revealed-pantone-448c-a7076446.html>”
2. “Can Sludge-like Color Deter Smokers? The Psychology Behind Advertising,” June 10, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/09/health/pantone-448c-color-cigarette-advertising/index.html>
3. “Plain Cigarette Packaging Has Arrived, But Will It Reduce Smoking?” May 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/sifting-the-evidence/2016/may/20/plain-standardised-cigarette-packaging-has-arrived-but-will-it-reduce-smoking>