

Study examines marketing deception's role in consumer thinking

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The acceptance and popularity of e-cigarettes is rapidly growing, creating a market where consumers are vulnerable to the long-term health risks caused by using the products. Credit: Thinkstock

Heavily marketed as a safer, healthful alternative to smoking, electronic cigarettes are under fire from California health officials who have declared "vaping" a public health threat, hoping to head off the type of deceptive manipulation that tobacco companies succeeded with for decades, according to new research from the University of California,

Davis.

"The e-cigarette industry has proven to be very creative in their product marketing," says Greta Hsu, an associate professor at the UC Davis Graduate School of Management. "There's a great deal of ambiguity about product content in the largely unregulated e-cigarette industry right now, and considerable debate over the safety, long-term risks, and effects of [secondhand smoke exposure](#). At the same time, acceptance and popularity of e-cigarettes is rapidly growing, creating a market where consumers are vulnerable."

Organizational sociologists Hsu and co-author Stine Grodal, an assistant professor at Boston University's School of Management, say e-cigarettes may be just one of many markets where firms strategically decouple the actual features of products from the features expected by their customers.

"For example, as labels such as 'low fat' and 'low sugar' became increasingly taken-for-granted shortcuts for the notion of 'healthy' food, there is some evidence that companies increasingly manipulated underlying product characteristics to make them more palatable, such as adding more sugar or fat and adjusting the serving size to mask the increase," says Grodal. "It's scope creep, and it's deceiving."

In their new study, published in the February issue of the *American Sociological Review*, Hsu and Grodal investigated how it was possible for the tobacco industry to ratchet up the levels of tar and nicotine in "light" cigarettes for decades without a regulatory crackdown. This happened despite mounting proof of health hazards.

Looking at history of tobacco regulation

Starting in the early 1960s, in the face of increasing public scrutiny, U.S.

tobacco firms marketed "lights" as a new, safer type of cigarette due to their low tar and nicotine content. By the 1990s, a number of light brands exceeded their full-flavor counterparts in deliveries of both components.

Using evidence from tobacco firm internal documents, Hsu and Grodal found that consumers decreased their scrutiny of the tar and nicotine levels of light [cigarette brands](#) as they became increasingly familiar with the light category. Tobacco firms in turn strategically used this lack of scrutiny to increase the tar and nicotine deliveries of both new and established light cigarette brands. It wasn't until 2009 that the federal government finally stepped in to regulate [tobacco](#) products with the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act.

"While one may be tempted to regard cigarettes as an extreme case due to its links with addiction, we believe this kind of widespread manipulation of shared categorical understandings takes place in a variety of markets," the authors wrote.

Hsu and Grodal point out that researchers and the media have highlighted the potential for manipulation in several growing market categories, including organic produce, "green" products such as hybrid cars and energy-saving appliances, nontoxic beauty products, and sectors defined around craft techniques, personnel, or ingredients such as microbrews, wild fishing, and Greek yogurt.

"In such cases, without the presence of regulatory watchdogs setting and upholding clear standards, the opportunities for and likelihood of manipulations are expected to increase," Hsu says. "One lesson is that monitoring must be done by a trusted source."

More information: "Category Taken-for-Grantedness as a Strategic Opportunity: The Case of Light Cigarettes, 1964 to 1993." *American*

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