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(Un)Filtered Females: Exploring the Changing Representation of Women in Cigarette Advertising, 1920-1940

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Abstract

Throughout the first half of twentieth century, the act of smoking transitioned from being an exclusively male to a predominantly female practice. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century merely being female was considered a serious risk to developing a smoking habit. This cultural shift is reflected in contemporary cigarette advertising, in which women begin as attractive accessories to male smokers and gradually become depicted as smoking independently. These advertisements were actively engaged with the social worlds of the women they targeted, drawing upon their contemporary concerns and values, namely those of women's liberation and an increased attention placed upon body image. This paper argues that the majority of this male to female advertising shift took place between 1920 and 1940, during which advertisements adapted their imagery to accommodate smoking as paradoxically both a powerful symbol of liberated femininity and as a means of conforming to the image of the attractive modern woman.

At the beginning of the 20th century the sight of a cigarette dangling from a woman's hand – or worse, her mouth – was more than offensive, it was almost front-page newsworthy¹. Yet by the close of the century merely being a woman was considered a significant risk for developing a smoking habit². This rapid cultural shift is difficult to trace exactly, not least of all because women smoking was considered such a shameful activity for many years that it was done almost exclusively behind closed doors³. There is, however, a distinct shift in how cigarette advertisers portrayed women, a shift that was certainly guided by the changing norms of society. These advertisements began by depicting women as merely attractive accessories for smoking men, gradually introducing them as smokers themselves, and eventually highlighting a uniquely

feminine smoker identity. Though the identity of the woman smoker changed greatly in a variety of subtle ways throughout the century, the shift from women smoking as complete cultural taboo to an everyday occurrence can be isolated more specifically to a few decades after the First World War. Thus, this paper argues that cigarette advertising between 1920 and 1940 shifted from targeting almost exclusively men to targeting a large female audience as well, changing their imagery to accommodate the concerns and values of the contemporary woman, most notably that of women's liberation and the heightened attention to body image.

At the turn of the 20th century smoking was a thoroughly masculine activity. To smoke as a woman, then, was to give off an image tantamount to total deviance, mannish lesbianism, and prostitution⁴. Yet during the First World War women became thoroughly immersed in cigarette culture, and when the war ended and their men came back from the front they found it challenging to return to the status quo of viewing smoking as exclusively masculine⁵. Thus, by the start of the 1920s there had already been a significant increase in the number of women who enjoyed smoking, though it was an activity enjoyed covertly, and seen as worthy of shame⁶. Cigarette advertising at this time, though it did not explicitly target women, featured them prominently as the attractive side pieces to smoking men⁷. Consider, for example, the Murad advertisement in which two men and two women dance around a cigarette, the women making loving eyes at the men, the only two characters with cigarettes dangling from their lips⁸. This advertising draws women in not by depicting them as smokers, but by making cigarettes seem like sexually attractive products, and by picturing them as the linchpin of social interaction⁹. Similarly, Chesterfield had a popular advertising campaign featuring couples sitting together with the man smoking a cigarette and the woman enjoying the second-hand smoke, the copy reading "blow some my way" as an acknowledgement of women taking pleasure from proximity

to cigarettes, if not necessarily the action of smoking them¹⁰. There were some occasions in the first half of the 1920s where women were depicted actually holding cigarettes, though these were few and far between, and they were often depicted as receiving cigarettes from men, either as gifts – to replace, for example, flowers – or as indications of intimacy¹¹.

Regardless of the social taboo, it became apparent to the tobacco industry that women were a potentially huge untapped market, especially attractive given the rise of anti-smoking moral outrage, with cigarettes being nicknamed colourful dysphemisms such as “coffin nails.”¹² In order to take advantage of a female market, advertisers needed women to be able to see themselves as possible smokers¹³. This required an understanding of women’s desired self-image, as advertising is essentially pitching a product as the means to satisfy a need that is often psychological¹⁴. Advertisers needed to make cigarettes appear to fulfill the desires of the average woman, thus leading them to infuse their products with images of glamour, thinness, and heterosexual desirability¹⁵. This image was greatly helped by a dramatic increase in the representation of women smoking in movies outside of the villainess role¹⁶. Bombshell movie stars such as Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, and Mae West all smoked on screen, all lending to an increased public image of smoking as an activity undertaken by reputable women¹⁷.

One integral aspect to the development of the identity of the female smoker was women’s liberation. The turn of the 20th century was the height of first wave feminism, and thus women were increasingly thinking about themselves as independent beings with the same rights as men¹⁸. The first cigarette ads depicting women actually smoking displayed almost exclusively upper-class women, always well-dressed and immensely glamorous¹⁹. They also depicted women who were confidently behind the wheels of cars, or unchaperoned in the presence of a man²⁰. These images of glamour and independence were markers of liberty and modernity, and

intrinsically linked cigarettes with the cultivated image of free-spirited modern feminism. An excellent example can be found in a Gitanes advertisement from 1931 that depicts two women lighting one another's cigarettes, dressed in pantsuits that emulate male formal attire²¹. These women, free of any male companions, are the very picture of liberated femininity – though, notably, both women wear wedding rings. Nonetheless, the advertisement takes full advantage of coopting the masculine image of smoking, albeit in a uniquely feminine way. Women's liberation became associated with smoking *because* of the action's masculine connotations, as well as its ties to female sexuality²². Smoking, then, was also an image of sexual liberation, perhaps explaining why the flappers of the roaring twenties can hardly be pictured without their slender cigarettes dangling from their gloved hands.

Imagery of women's liberation in cigarette advertising was sometimes displayed overtly. A Lucky Strike advertisement sports the headline "Women Are Free! An ancient prejudice has been removed," equating women's right to smoke with the hefty issues of women's suffrage²³. Similarly, an Abdulla advertisement reads "Our New Electorate Votes for Abdulla," showing an elegantly dressed young woman with a cigarette hanging languidly from her hand. The body of this advertisement reminds the viewer that "flappers won the vote," and so surely smoking must also be a part of this attractive modern female identity²⁴. This line of advertising proved to be largely effective. Indeed, even when women found the actual act of smoking repulsive or uncomfortable, they persisted, intending to take full advantage of its symbol of liberated womanhood²⁵.

Cigarette advertisers also took to displaying women excelling, both in sports and professionally²⁶. Women were shown, for example, effortlessly smoking while cross country skiing²⁷, or refreshing themselves with a smoke after a tiring game of tennis²⁸. These physical

activities, both habits of the leisure class, making them aspirational rather than achievable for most of the women in America²⁹, showed yet another way that smoking could fit into ideal modern femininity. In addition to images of an aspirational personal life entwined with smoking, advertisers used many celebrity endorsements to showcase the kind of lifestyle smoking lent itself to. Responding to contemporary desire for women's liberation, many ads featured prominent women who excelled in typically masculine fields. Camel issued an ad with a beaming young Mrs. John W. Rockefeller Jr. with her boot up on the wing of her monoplane, enjoying a cigarette, presumably after a thrilling flight³⁰. Similarly, Lucky Strike put out an advertisement appearing to feature a testimonial from Amelia Earhart herself, though this was ultimately misleading, as Earhart was not a smoker, though it is true that her male crew preferred Lucky Strike cigarettes^{31,32}. Nonetheless, Earhart's face on a cigarette advertisement drew a clear parallel in the viewer's mind between smoking and accomplished womanhood. These advertisements thus reflected the contemporary values of women who were fighting for their civil rights, riding on the ideological coattails of suffragettes by asking why stop with the vote, why not level the smoking playing field as well?

One of the more effective acts of cigarette advertising that linked emancipation with smoking took place not on paper, but on the street. The 1929 Easter Parade in New York City featured a pseudo-event orchestrated by Edward Bernays, consisting of marching fashionable socialites lighting up cigarettes in the effort to "[smash] the discriminatory taboo"³³ concerning women smoking. This was done as a public relations stunt for the American Tobacco Company who hired Bernays as part of their quest to make smoking seem more appealing to women. Bernays enlisted the help of the psychoanalyst A. A. Brill, who claimed that in order to attract women to smoking they needed to equate smoking to power, something that women, in the midst

of the contemporary first-wave feminist movement, would find attractive³⁴. People would supposedly be enamoured with these glamorous women smoking in public, something still taboo enough to be newsworthy³⁵. Though this publicity stunt, coined “Torches of Freedom” by Bernays, may not have been earthshattering in its impact on cultural taboo, it certainly contributed to the shifting image of cigarettes from improper to empowering³⁶.

It is, however, perhaps a bit of a double-edged sword to name cigarette advertising as feminist. The emasculating connotations of women smoking and thus taking away what had theretofore been an exclusively male practice certainly did not appeal to every woman. Indeed, the vast majority of the public was uncomfortable with the idea of women sacrificing their femininity to smoke cigarettes³⁷. This called for advertisers’ job as ‘missionaries of modernity,’ ushering in the new and the unfamiliar under the guise of established and comfortable values to ease the wariness against modern life³⁸. In order to accommodate the uncomfortable idea of women smoking, advertisers positioned their advertisements within distinctly heterosexual gendered relations. Thus, women could smoke, as long as they were smoking in “a distinctly feminine manner.”³⁹

One way in which cigarette advertising catered to traditional femininity was to position cigarettes as the heart of heterosexual relationships. Women were constantly depicted in the company of men, being attractive and charming, with the cigarettes a focal point of the social interaction⁴⁰. Cigarettes were depicted as romantic gifts for women⁴¹, or as the (literal) spark in a lasting romance. Consider the Chesterfield advertisement with the headline “I struck a Match in the Rain,” with copy that reads “a little flame revealed we both like Chesterfield... and now we’re furnishing a cottage.”⁴² Chesterfield is drawing women in by asserting that sharing a penchant for smoking is a sure-fire way to “strike a match” with an eligible bachelor. Similarly, a

Lucky Strike advertisement features a man and a woman smoking at a café, with the man blowing two smoke rings towards the woman, one shaped as an engagement band and the other as a wedding ring with a diamond set on top. The headline reads “forever and ever,” as once again the cigarette is positioned as the key to successful heterosexual relationships⁴³. In addition, the women in these ads are positioned as physically submissive to the man, positioned below him or with their eyes bashfully downcast as he makes the defining action, whether blowing smoke or lighting her cigarette⁴⁴. Thus, these women may be smoking, but they are smoking in a way that still defers to her male companion, and it is seen as more palatable as a result.

Another way that cigarettes targeted women in a more conventional sense was to focus on female body image, something that was becoming more important to women giving the newly slimmed fashions of the roaring 20s⁴⁵. The most common target was slimness of figure, something that Lucky Strike focused on throughout several advertising campaigns, most notably “reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet,” which claimed that picking up a cigarette would help women keep a trim and modern figure⁴⁶. They also released advertisements with celebrity endorsements from attractive stars, all claiming that Lucky Strike cigarettes were the key to their slim figures⁴⁷. The Lucky Strike slimness campaign was eventually cancelled and the company ordered to refrain from using the claim that smoking kept users in shape again, largely because of the misleading and medically incorrect information it offered, but also because of how it fundamentally angered the extremely powerful capitalist sectors of the sugar trust and the candy lobby⁴⁸. Instead of claiming that the cigarette led to a skinny body, then, Lucky Strike released further campaigns that claimed it was healthier to pick up a smoking habit than a sweets habit, leading to the same result⁴⁹. These campaigns were so successful that they lifted Lucky Strike

from third to first in the American tobacco market between 1925 and 1930⁵⁰, remaining in the top spot until the 1950s⁵¹.

Cigarettes targeted women's concerns about meeting beauty standards in a variety of ways, by targeting not just slimness, but keeping their teeth white from tobacco stains, ash out of their lipstick⁵², and avoiding harsh smoke^{53,54}. Indeed, smoking was considered bad for one's health only inasmuch it robbed women of charming femininities, such as a pleasant voice. It was, in fact, considered an equal health risk to inhaling heavy dust⁵⁵. It became popular to offer female-targeted varieties of tobacco products that claimed to be milder on the throat⁵⁶, or that prevented bad breath, such as the Old Gold advertisement warning women to "keep kissable" with lighter cigarettes⁵⁷. Also targeted was women's fashion, in which cigarettes were "utilised... stylistically to accentuate feminine lines, more specifically to elongate and make more graceful the hand and arm or to assist in framing the face."⁵⁸ In an interesting move from Lucky Strike, the cigarette company hired Bernays to promote green as a newly fashionable colour for modern women, with the hope that having women wear more green would encourage them to buy Lucky Strikes, as their dark green box would now complement their ensembles^{59,60}. Thus, these aesthetic concerns added to the act of smoking a uniquely feminine dimension. Women were still encouraged to smoke themselves, attracted by the promised of high glamour and romance that the women in the advertisements embodied, though they were expected to smoke under strict gender guidelines, so that they would not offend too badly those who were still sore about losing smoking as a masculine practice.

Thus, one can see the double-edged blade with which cigarette advertising marketed to women between 1920 and 1940. On one hand, society was in the throes of first-wave feminism, and as such advertising needed to reflect the fierce desire for independence and liberation that

the average young woman would feel. Yet, smoking in some ways conformed to the social pressures of femininity, seeking thinness, romance, the appearance of confidence, and the social and intellectual connotations that came along with the image of the sophisticated woman dangling a cigarette from her hand. The 1920s began with women hardly able to picture themselves in public with a cigarette, and barely twenty years later they had discovered a uniquely feminine identity of “smoker.” There was little doubt that a new feminine identity was forming, and that smoking would somehow be involved. The question was to what extent would smoking become a part of womanhood, and in what capacity. Cigarette advertising played for both teams, simultaneously supporting smoking as a symbol of liberated womanhood and a marker of traditional femininity. Regardless, it was in these decades that smoking became a staple of the average woman’s life, making them a prominent market for a previously masculine image throughout the entire 20th century.

¹ Segrave, 1.

² Tinkler, “Red Tips for Hot Lips,” 250.

³ Segrave, 112.

⁴ Tinkler, “Red Tips for Hot Lips,” 257.

⁵ Tinkler, *Smoke Signals*, 68.

⁶ Segrave 112.

⁷ Elliot, 60.

⁸ Ad 1.

⁹ Tinkler, *Smoke Signals*, 57.

¹⁰ Ad 4.

¹¹ Ad 2.

¹² Sivulka, 148.

¹³ Altman, David G., Michael D. Slater, Cheryl L. Albright, and Nathan Maccoby, 22.

¹⁴ Anderson, S. J., S. A. Glantz and P. M. Ling, 127-129.

¹⁵ Anderson, S. J., S. A. Glantz and P. M. Ling, 128.

¹⁶ Segrave 113.

¹⁷ Elliot, 62.

¹⁸ Rampton.

¹⁹ Ad 18, Ad 19.

²⁰ Tinkler, “Red Tips for Hot Lips,” 255.

²¹ Ad 11.

²² Tinkler, *Smoke Signals*, 77, 83.

²³ Ad 8.

²⁴ Ad 7.

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- ²⁵ Tinkler, *Smoke Signals*, 60.
- ²⁶ Tinkler, "Red Tips for Hot Lips," 260-261.
- ²⁷ Ad 9.
- ²⁸ Ad 15.
- ²⁹ Elliot, 63.
- ³⁰ Ad 20.
- ³¹ Ad 3.
- ³² Segrave, 117.
- ³³ Murphree, 258.
- ³⁴ Murphree, 258.
- ³⁵ Murphree, 259.
- ³⁶ Murphree, 281.
- ³⁷ Tinkler, *Smoke Signals*, 43.
- ³⁸ Tinkler, "Red Tips for Hot Lips," 265.
- ³⁹ Tinkler, "Red Tips for Hot Lips," 268.
- ⁴⁰ Elliot, 60.
- ⁴¹ Ad 2.
- ⁴² Ad 17.
- ⁴³ Ad 13.
- ⁴⁴ Tinkler, "Red Tips for Hot Lips," 265.
- ⁴⁵ Segrave, 194.
- ⁴⁶ Ad 6.
- ⁴⁷ Ad 5.
- ⁴⁸ Segrave, 194-195.
- ⁴⁹ Ad 10.
- ⁵⁰ Altman, David G., Michael D. Slater, Cheryl L. Albright, and Nathan Maccoby, 25.
- ⁵¹ Sivulka, 149.
- ⁵² Ad 16.
- ⁵³ Ad 21.
- ⁵⁴ Elliot, 66.
- ⁵⁵ Segrave, 130.
- ⁵⁶ Tinkler, "Red Tips for Hot Lips," 257-258.
- ⁵⁷ Ad 12.
- ⁵⁸ Tinkler, "Red Tips for Hot Lips," 258.
- ⁵⁹ Ad 14.
- ⁶⁰ Sivulka, 149.

Appendix

Brand	Ad Title/Campaign	Date
1. Murad	Murad	1916
2. Abdulla	Say it with Abdullas	1922
3. Lucky Strike	Instead of a Sweet (Amelia Earhart)	1928
4. Chesterfield	Blow Some My Way	1928
5. Lucky Strike	Instead of a Sweet (with female stars)	1929
6. Lucky Strike	Instead of a Sweet	1929
7. Abdulla	Our New Electorate Votes for Abdulla	1929
8. Lucky Strike	Women are Free!	1929
9. Will's Gold Flake	Cool and Fresh	1930
10. Lucky Strike	Future Shadow Faces	1930
11. Gitanes	Gitanes Vizire	1931
12. Old Gold	Keep Kissable	1931
13. Lucky Strike	Forever and Ever	1933
14. Lucky Strike	They Taste Better	1934
15. Camel	Get a Lift with a Camel	1934
16. Marlboro	Ivory Tips Protect the Lips	1935
17. Chesterfield	I struck a Match in the Rain	1935
18. Lucky Strike	Her Singing Coach Advised a Light Smoke	1936
19. Lucky Strike	Luckies – a light smoke	1936
20. Camel	Young Mrs. Rockefeller Pilots a Low-Wing Monoplane	1937
21. Craven'A'	For Your Throat's Sake	1939

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