Ministry of Health

16 College Road

College of Medicine Building

Singapore 169854

Attention: Director, Epidemiology and Disease Control Division

Email: Tobacco_Control@moh.gov.sg

Comment on Public Consultation Paper on Proposed Tobacco-Control Measures in Singapore

June 21st 2018

To whom it may concern,

We would like to consider the following arguments and facts that show how branding bans and plain packaging policies have failed over and over again. Consumers and the taxpayer loses and black markets grow in societies that infringe on brand freedom.[1]

These infringements of brand freedom might be perceived as isolated events but by looking at the big picture one can identify a trend towards a more authoritarian approach to brands and therefore constraints to free expression. And the ball is rolling in Singapore: Plain packaging for tobacco products is currently being discussed in Singapore despite clear evidence from Australia showing that it did not lead to lower smoking rates. Data from other countries such as the United Kingdom and France actually shows that smoking rates event went up.[2] And leading politicians such as the French Minister of Health have admitted that plain packaging policies don't lead to lower smoking rates.[3]

Legislating bans for certain brands leads consumer choice and commercial freedom on a slippery slope away from the market economy and towards the planned economy. The history of brands shows us why they are important for consumers and how consumers have suffered in regimes that outlaw brands. A recent study estimates that banning the brands of alcoholic and sugary beverages would lead to an economic loss of $250 billion (328 billion SGD).

While some anti-Capitalists claim that brands are an invention of corporate exploitation, the opposite is actually the case. Brands began as a self-regulating form of consumer protection. As a result of urbanization, people moved to larger cities and therefore didn't have the quality certainty they once did in their one-shop village. Entrepreneurs filled that gap of trust by offering branded products consumers were certain about. Business owners have a huge incentive to maintain the quality level of their branded products – it's the value of their brand. Companies utilize brands in order to build and retain customer loyalty.

In developing countries, the arrival of foreign brands points to an increase in quality and competition from which consumers gain. Brands have value only where consumers have choice, therefore brands are an indicator for

---

[1] https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2018/05/australia_illicit_tobacco_report_2017.pdf

[2] http://www.europe-economics.com/publications/tpd2_and_standardised_tobacco_packaging_may_2018.pdf

[3] http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/cri/2017-2018/20180075.asp#P1117763

how open a society is. Brands stand for freedom. The absence of brands in public life stands for a world like that of the Soviet Union, in which consumer choice and competition have no role.

Totalitarian communist regimes traditionally consider brands an “enemy of the people.” Brands and logos do not exist and every consumer gets access to equally poor and unbranded products. This is plain packaging for everyone and everything.

It is no surprise that there’s a strong correlation between the level of how developed brands are and the quality and diversity of goods. All products in a given store look the same in a brand-free society, leaving consumers without choice. When brands are prohibited, businesses do not have the incentive to invest in improving or even maintaining the quality of their products. Black markets with counterfeited products of inferior quality thrive in countries that limit brands. This is harmful for consumers and only good for organized crime.
In a market economy, brands enable competition and diversification of products and services. The more we limit brands the more we move to a grey, collectivist, and unfree society. Every consumer benefits from brands.

Brands provide consumers with product safety information and individualism at the same time. If they don’t provide value to customers, those brands will disappear. Brand freedom means the rule of law and allowing freedom of commerce. An attack on brand and labeling freedom is a direct attack to the market economy and mutual voluntary exchange in the marketplace. Therefore, any regulatory infringements on brand freedom need to be stopped in order to keep places like Singapore shining beacons of commerce and the rule of law.

Sincerely,

Fred Cyrus Roeder
Managing Director
Consumer Choice Center
fred@consumerchoicecenter.org