

# Kent cigarette brand marketing in the Republic of Korea: the role of a pioneering image, flavour capsules and leader price promotions

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Kent is a cigarette brand that was first introduced in 1952, being named after Herbert A Kent, who was president of the cigarette's producer, the Lorillard Tobacco Company.<sup>1–3</sup> Currently, Kent is produced by British American Tobacco (BAT) internationally (ie, for all markets beyond the USA), and the cigarette brand is regarded as one of BAT's five major 'Global Drive Brands' (along with Dunhill, Lucky Strike, Pall Mall and Rothmans).<sup>4</sup> In 2010, Guy Meldrum, BAT Korea's marketing executive director, stated that 'Kent is the second-largest premium brand globally—outside of the U.S. and China'.<sup>5</sup> According to BAT, Kent is a pioneering brand and 'symbolises progress through technology in the cigarette category and stands out as the most innovative and forward-looking brand in the industry'.<sup>6</sup>

South Korea is identified as a key market for BAT in the Asia-Pacific region as well as a market that is fundamental to the company's global growth strategy.<sup>4,7</sup> Coinciding with Kim Eui-soung being named the chief executive officer of BAT Korea, Kent was relaunched in South Korea during July 2019 (the brand had been discontinued in 2016). Mr Kim, who is the first non-foreigner to assume this title, previously held trade marketing positions at BAT Korea and he is best known for overseeing the launch of Kent Convertibles during 2010.<sup>8–10</sup> Kent Convertibles featured a mentholated capsule that could be crushed and activated by consumers, with the product innovation strategically considered to reinforce the brand's pioneering image (figure 1).<sup>10</sup> While flavour capsule cigarettes were first launched in Japan during 2007, Kent Convertibles represented the earliest capsule cigarette to be offered in South Korea.<sup>11</sup> Marketing communication for the brand, including packaging, features the IEC 5009 power button symbol (ie, the power symbol often seen to turn devices, such as laptops, on or off) to highlight technology.<sup>12</sup>

As seen in figure 2, print advertising for the relaunch of Kent—in 2019—highlights that the brand is a 'game-changer' with two brand variants (Switch and Purple) depicted. 'Switch' or 'Boost' are identified by BAT as two discrete deliveries for capsule cigarettes (these descriptors are also currently used as brand varieties of Neo Stick for Glo, which are flavour capsule heat-sticks for heated tobacco products).<sup>13</sup> The ad copy also claims that 'with the most innovative technology, Kent becomes beyond a cigarette and is

a generational icon. Kent creates a new standard of low tar with a refreshing taste and cool price'. The ad claim about 'low tar' is noteworthy given that Article 11 and Article 13 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) guidelines state such claims should be prohibited due to their likelihood of being misleading. While the reported tar delivery of Kent Convertibles was identified as 6 mg in marketing communication from 2010, the ad copy for the 2019 ad (figure 2) identifies that the reported tar deliveries for both brand variants is 1.5 mg. South Korea is recognised as a market dominated by brands and variants promoting low reported tar deliveries, with tar yields commonly communicated in advertising, packaging and purchase receipts.<sup>14–18</sup>

Kent packaging and point-of-sale (POS) advertising indicates that the product is 'new' (figures 3 and 4) and the Korean copy specifies that the brand is available for a 'limited-time, special price'. As seen in figure 5, POS advertising identifies the price—for a package of 20 cigarettes—as KRW 3500 (~US\$2.89). The price listing appears to strategically exemplify *leader pricing* by setting a promotional price that is lower than its usual listing.<sup>19</sup> Given that BAT classifies Kent as a



**Figure 1** Kent Convertibles print cigarette advertising circulated during 2010 in the Korean edition of *GQ*. Ad copy highlights personal consumer engagement by claiming 'Taste. You Can Change'. Multiple arrows point in the direction of the cigarette's capsule in the filter to give it emphasis. Moreover, innovation and technology is highlighted with ad copy stating, 'Inventing Taste Transmission Technologies' and repeated depictions of the IEC 5009 power button symbol that is presented as 'on'. The ad would suggest an international brand and appeal to younger consumers with the copy primarily in English (rather than Korean).



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**Figure 2** This Kent cigarette ad circulated in the August 2019 Korean editions of *GQ* and *Esquire*. The colour displays of purple, green and blue—surrounding the cigarette packages—implies the notion of ‘bursting’. The number 1 appears prominently on both depicted packages. Moreover, the cigarette packages are opened such that the graphic pictorial portions of the health warnings are not visible while the extended cigarettes are Kent-branded along with the IEC 5009 power button symbols being noticeable.

‘premium’ brand,<sup>5 10</sup> and most competing cigarette brands in South Korea are priced at KRW 4500 (~US\$3.72),<sup>20</sup> Kent’s price of KRW 3500 is indeed likely temporary and meant to generate attention and drive consumer interest, which is a main goal of sales promotion tactics such as discounts.<sup>21</sup> Lower price promotions are strategically used by the tobacco industry to recruit new users, especially price-sensitive youth.<sup>22 23</sup>

Kent cigarette advertising, by promoting the brand’s price as KRW 3500, has important consumer implications. McDonald’s Big Mac and Starbucks Tall Latte Indexes have been created by *The Economist* in efforts to examine if currencies around the world are under-valuated or over-valuated,<sup>24 25</sup> and these indexes have been applied to the pricing of cigarettes and relative affordability across countries.<sup>26 27</sup> The current retail price of a Big Mac at McDonald’s is KRW 4500, whereas a tall latte at Starbucks in South Korea is KRW 4600. According to a Korea Health Promotion Institute report from 2014, when most cigarette brands were KRW 2500, ~33 cigarettes could be purchased for the price of a Big Mac in South Korea, compared to 6 cigarettes in Australia, 14 in the USA and 12 in Japan.<sup>28</sup> In 2015, cigarette taxes were increased, and consequently most cigarette brands in South Korea are now priced—as aforementioned—at KRW 4500.<sup>29</sup> Thus, an updated application of these indexes reveals that 20 cigarettes can be purchased for the price of a Big Mac in South Korea, whereas with Kent’s low pricing strategy consumers can buy ~26 cigarettes. Using these indexes as a guideline, it is apparent that cigarettes are comparatively cheaper than other



**Figure 3** Relating to ‘switch’ or ‘boost’ as two discrete deliveries for BAT’s capsule cigarettes, the blue-coloured package variant is identified as switch and states ‘Click. Switch to Clean Finish’ on the backside of the package, whereas the green-coloured package variant is oddly identified as ‘purple’ as well as ‘spark’, stating, ‘Click. Spark the Refreshing Aroma’ on the backside. The backside of both packages also refers to the brand’s ‘Nano capsule technology’. The cigarettes were purchased on 9 August 2019.



**Figure 4** In a convenience store retail setting, Kent point-of-sale (POS) signage can be seen alongside cigarettes notably displayed upside-down to minimise the visibility of the pictorial health warnings on the package. The photo was taken by Timothy Dewhirst on 9 August 2019.





**Figure 5** Kent cigarette advertising as observed at the POS. The ad copy identifies Kent as a ‘game-changer’ and ‘new’ with a special launch price of KRW 3500. The two brand variants are identified as ‘switch’ and ‘purple’. The yellow-coloured signage, below the main POS ad, states: ‘Kent is the most perfect superslim regular cigarette. It is not an e-cigarette. New Kent, in packages of 20 cigarettes, cost KRW 3500. With a sweet filter and fresh capsule, from clean cigarette to refreshing capsule, it is available in two selections’. The photo was taken by Timothy Dewhirst on 3 August 2019.

consumer goods and sundries in South Korea, unlike what would be observed in many other countries globally. Indeed, in seeking growth objectives, a BAT Korea presentation, aimed at motivating major financial investors, identified ‘The Pricing Opportunity In Korea’ and found that ‘cigarettes are very affordable’ based on the comparative price of a pack of cigarettes to a Big Mac, Starbucks coffee, local and imported beer, and a cinema ticket.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, as a product characteristic, capsule cigarettes are known to have youth appeal,<sup>31–35</sup> with BAT documentation indicating that building future growth in South Korea with Kent would involve ‘an innovation platform based on technology positioning’ and appeal to smokers <25 years old seeking ‘individual choice’. Flavour capsule cigarettes have proven to be popular in South Korea, which is one of the top 10 countries globally regarding where the product type has its largest market share.<sup>36</sup> Questions are likely to emerge, however, about innovations, such as capsules, for combustible cigarettes when companies such as BAT are otherwise highlighting their supposed interest in harm reduction with new product development. Further monitoring of Kent cigarette brand marketing appears fruitful given that the brand is aligned with innovation and new product developments.

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