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What Role Do Cigarettes Play in Gentrified Williamsburg?

This is an interview of my roommate Sayo Watanabe she studies Fashion Design at The New School Parsons.

Q: Are you a New Yorker who smokes cigarettes?

A: I guess I am.

Q: Why and when did you start smoking?

A: Beginning of high school when I was very stressed, I thought it would help. Then it became a social obligation when interacting with friends.

Q: Do you feel that the media has taken a roll in romanticizing and influencing your smoking habits?

A: Yes. While watching movies and flipping through magazines it definitely made it seem like a badass thing to do. The people I looked up to smoked; my cool uncle used to smoke. The fact that my parents didn't want me to smoke made me want to rebel against them and smoke even more.

Q: Has your smoking increased since being in college in New York?

A: Definitely, because the kids here smoke more. If I'm standing in a group of people I'm not going to be the odd one out. It relaxes me especially during breaks in school.

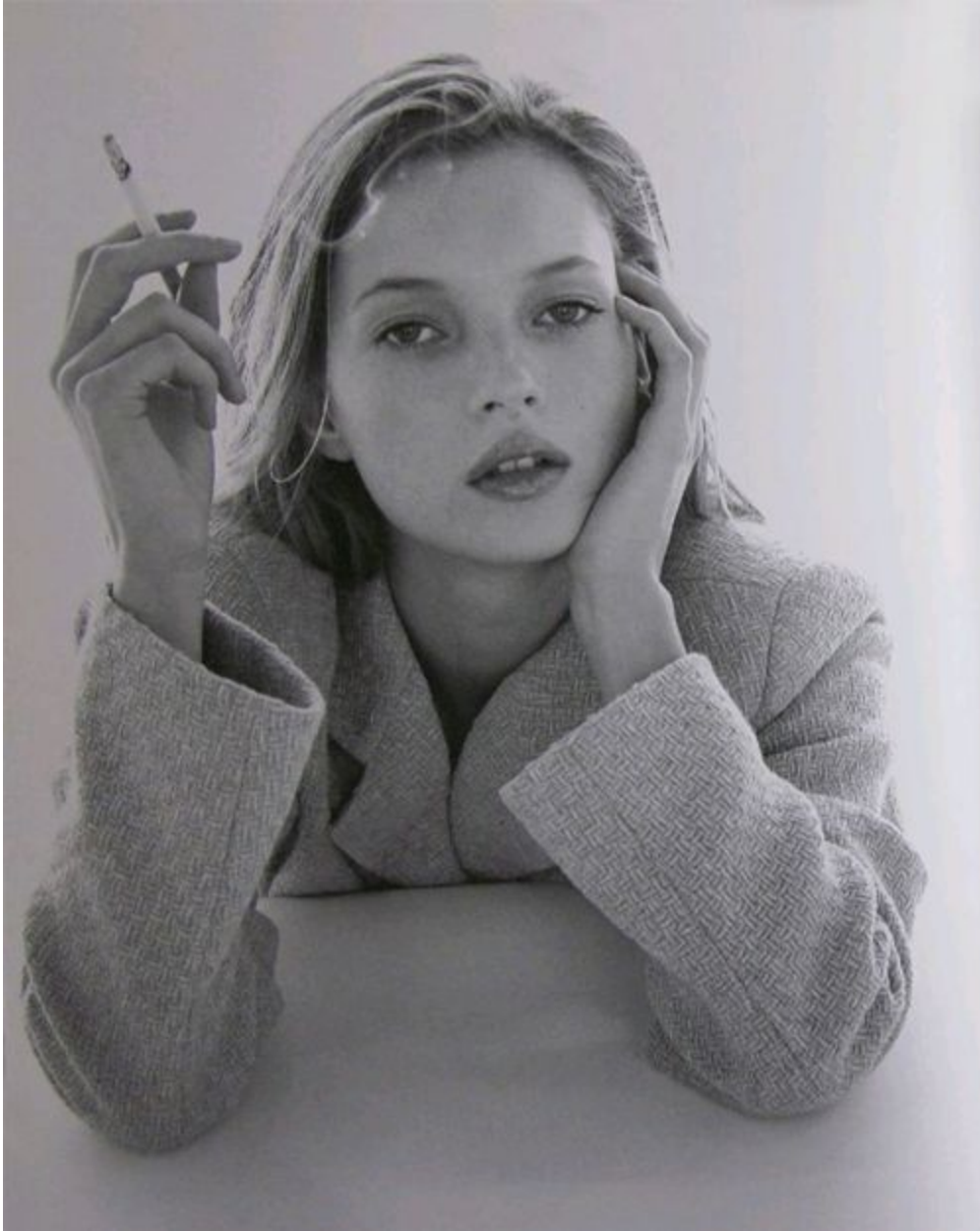
Q: What is your favorite cigarette brand? And what influenced you to choose it?

A: I usually get cigarettes from people on the streets, after classes there are always people to bum them off. I usually don't buy packs often, but if I had to choose a brand it would be Menthol Camels. They just seem cool, I like the packaging and some of my friends smoke them.

Q: What social class do you associate cigarette smokers with?

A: I think that cigarettes are very special because everyone smokes them: the businessman, the construction worker, the student, even some of our presidents have smoked. There is no specific social class-- it's universal.

Q: What word comes to mind when you see the photo below of Kate Moss smoking? And if she wasn't smoking how would this change the message of the image?



A: She seems as if she's living an almost perfect life. She's beautiful and elegant , someone to look up to. If she wasn't smoking a cigarette in this image, I would assume she is less successful and that she isn't going as far in life. I would see her as just a pretty model not a business woman.

Q: What is your opinion on the smokers in Williamsburg Brooklyn?

A: That they are rich and can afford it. It looks almost part of a luxurious life style.

Traditional advertising used to be the lever that companies pushed when they wanted to increase consumption of their products. Now with everyone's attention focussed on social media, traditional advertising has lost much of its influence. Though cigarette smoking has been decreasing since the 1960s, it appears, at least according to my observations, to be trending up in trendy neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Why would smoking go up when its promotion is going down? Perhaps this is partly due to cigarettes being glorified on Instagram and other social media platforms.

Williamsburg has become one of the fastest growing gentrified areas in New York. I took a day to get lost in Williamsburg, solely to observe and experience this up-and-coming locale. I found that the majority of people I saw on the streets were smoking cigarettes. This observation left me curious as to why Williamsburg had become such a mecca for smokers. In the early days of the tobacco industry, cigarettes were advertised as glamorous accessories. During the 1940s and 50s, the Hollywood film industry promoted smoking by putting cigarettes on the lips of nearly every star. When evidence emerged that cigarettes were dangerous, the government moved to label packaging and restrict advertising, banning cigarette ads on television and radio in 1970. Since then regulations on tobacco advertising have become increasingly restrictive, with particular attention to protecting young people. Even after all this clamping down and public knowledge of tobacco's harmful effects, people still romanticize smoking and see it as

something cool or aesthetically pleasing. Today's film industry continues to condone smoking, with stars looking edgy and romantic as they take a drag on their cigarettes.

With modern technology accessible at our fingertips, it's easy to see how social media strongly impacts and seduces its viewers perhaps even more than traditional media. As a young adult I have noticed that as I habitually scroll through internet apps such as Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, and Snapchat, I see frequent images of the act of smoking. As a fashion photographer, I understand how cigarettes can be used as a prop or added accessory that enhances the mood and tone of the image. Could our subconscious be influenced to smoke by these images bombarding us in our social media feeds. And how much weight does design have in the decision to buy a pack? What makes American Spirits cooler to the ages of 18-35 than Menthol Newports? Is that striking image on Tumblr of the girl holding a Marlboro Red cigarette really a selling factor? <sup>1</sup>

Our individual identity separates us from others, but at the same time it connects us with our communities. In this study, cigarette brand appears as a dimension in the construction of social identity, closely intertwined with expressions of individuality: "Gyda (19, female, apprentice) said: 'I smoke Prince, sometimes Prince Mild. Prince is really my brand. It was sort of what we all started with. My best friend smoked it, everybody did. You see, this small town we live in...it is sort of...you know, like the neighbouring town is a little bigger and like a much nicer place...so they smoke Marlboro Light. In my town we have Prince, because we are sort of the drug place and...it is not very nice there and everything is just ugly. It is not hip to be there or anything.' Gyda positioned her brand choice as part of her identity as a girl from the small

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<sup>1</sup> Scheffels, J. "A Difference That Makes a Difference: Young Adult Smokers' Accounts of Cigarette Brands and Package Design." *Tobacco Control* 17, no. 2 (2008): 118-22.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20208390>.

town. The larger neighbouring town was described as a place with another identity, another status and another cigarette brand to go with that.”

In Williamsburg, I recounted seeing groups of young people huddled together in deep conversation while smoking outside of hip spots such as artisan bakeries and Bohemian thrift shops. The act of smoking appears to be integrated into these hipsters’ personas, making us wonder: are you really anyone if you aren't smoking outside of a newly renovated warehouse gourmet coffee shop in Brooklyn? In contrast, outside of districts such as Williamsburg, cigarette smoking is associated with lower economic status and a lack of higher education. A friend of mine who is both a New Yorker and a frequent smoker noted that in her hometown in the south cigarettes are half the price of cigarettes in New York. How can that be? The answer lies in minimum price laws. <sup>2</sup>Retail cigarette prices and retailer participation in cigarette company incentive programmes in 2001 were compared in eight states with minimum price laws and seven states without them. New York State had the most stringent minimum price law at the time of the study because it excluded promotional incentive programmes in its price setting formula; cigarette prices in New York were compared to all other states included in the study. Results: Cigarette prices were not significantly different in our sample of US states with and without cigarette minimum price laws. Cigarette prices were significantly higher in New York stores than in the 14 other states combined. Conclusions: Most existing minimum cigarette price laws appear to have little impact on the retail price of cigarettes. This may be because they allow the use of

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<sup>2</sup> Feighery, E C, K M Ribisl, N C Schleicher, L. Zellers, and N. Wellington. "How Do Minimum Cigarette Price Laws Affect Cigarette Prices at the Retail Level?" *Tobacco Control* 14, no. 2 (2005): 80-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20747779>.

promotional programmes, which are used by manufacturers to reduce cigarette prices. New York's strategy to disallow these types of incentive programmes may result in higher minimum cigarette prices, and should also be explored as a potential policy strategy to control cigarette company marketing practices in stores. Strict cigarette minimum price laws may have the potential to reduce cigarette consumption ...”

Though I am not a smoker and fully understand the health risks, I continue to use cigarettes as a visual prop in my own art, knowing that they can convey a sense of style, and raw sensuality. I've studied how an innocent image of Kate Moss shifts when a cigarette is added to the mix. And walking on the streets of Williamsburg I saw many Kate Moss types, leaning against a wall in their designer clothes, holding cigarettes in their delicate fingers as they socialized with friends.

Today's youth have grown up in the age of technology, with access to the world wide web, and bombarded daily by various forms of mass marketing. With all this visual stimulation it is easy to see how glorified images of smoking pervade the youthful mind. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr are a breeding ground for romanticized images of cigarette smokers. Young adolescent minds eagerly press like or reblog what they consider cool images, many of them smokers they desire to emulate. For example, in my own personal situation, I found many of my artistic influences primarily on Tumblr. There is a constant stream of photography on Tumblr that is separate from anywhere else; it's stylized creating an almost utopian-looking teenage dream. It's easy to get seduced by these images, the life style, the luxury, the freedom it portrays. Every object used as a prop becomes the next thing you want to buy, anything to look, act, and dress like that model in the photograph. In my opinion, it's the

achievable celebrity, someone anonymous who you can copy and take credit for with zero consequences. By studying these images young viewers not only draw ideas to shape their own identity but find a form of online community.

In conclusion, the government can attempt to influence behavior through laws and regulations, such as warning us of the dangers of cigarette smoking and restricting advertising, but government can't determine a person's individuality or how people express themselves and find their communities. Even though cigarettes have disappeared from TV and radio ads, billboards, and many other places in traditional advertising, they continue to pop up everywhere in social media and in trendy neighborhoods like gentrified Williamsburg. As young people struggle to find their identities, smoking will remain a way for them to try to define themselves as hip or cool. But no ban will ever fully succeed in stemming the search for self-definition.