MENTHOL: AN ANESTHETIC

Contrary to popular belief, menthol is not grown out elsewhere and does not act as an anesthetic to lessen the irritation of cigarette smoke on the throat. The most consistently advertised brands to African-Americans have been Reynolds American’s Newport, Kool, Salem, and More; and Philip Morris’ Virginia Slims and Benson & Hedges.

“WRAPPERS”

Packaging for cigarettes brands most favored by minority groups became a focus of several advertising campaigns during the 1970s-1990s. Examples included striking graphics on packs of H.J. Reynolds’ Salem (“The Box”) and Philip Morin’s Benson & Hedges. In the early 1990s, as rap music’s popularity among African-American adolescents rose, a metal-fil fil filter wrapper for Salem, which the company named “The Wrap,” was featured in a major advertising campaign. Salem video vans normed minority neighborhoods, showing rap videos and giving out cigarettes.

DELROY PARKER OF SHARPE (Self-Help for African People through Education) in Houston, Texas, suggested that the redesign of the Salem brand to include the colors of the flag of African unity—red, black, and green—was a cynical attempt by H.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company to create a “feminization” graphic.

THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY AS A HEALTH EDUCATOR

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the tobacco industry cooperated to the extent that many teenagers’ access to tobacco products was increased. A Reynolds Tobacco Company took out numerous advertisements in African-American and Hispanic publications that featured adolescents behind a headline that proclaimed: “We don’t think they should smoke.”

SUPPORTING AND SUPPRESSING THE MINORITY COMMUNITY

For nearly all of the latter half of the 20th century, most minority organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and the United Negro College Fund, as well as local civic, fraternal, or ethnic health-related groups, accepted financial support from the tobacco industry. Even though unwilling to admit the tobacco problem, the problem was not regarded as a priority in this black community.

RECENT STRUGGLES

Much of the literature on the advertising and promotion of tobacco products to minority groups has been a refocusing of articles written in the 1980s. Present day reports decry the catalogue of injustices wrought on minority groups by the tobacco industry. These reports point to a lack of community awareness. Research on tobacco promotion to minority groups remains limited in the descriptive phase, such as counting the number of cigarettes advertised in street corner signs in minority neighborhoods, as opposed to challenging the existence of cross-compliance agreements to avoid such situations. Although the increased calls for federal, state, and local legislation—taxes, warning labels, restricting teenage access, and advertising bans—have stimulated greater public dialogue, they would be less effective steps toward reducing demand for tobacco than would massive tobacco media campaigns to increase tobacco ad campaigns. Above all, existing cross-compliance agreements on tobacco advertising in minority communities point to the need to address the tobacco epidemic with a renewed focus on understanding health threats such as obesity, drug use, and AIDS. Rethinking strategies to control tobacco use and promotion in minority populations is urgently needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In a new federal or state legislation on smoking has been proposed or enacted to help reduce smoking in minority communities. Tobacco programs have concentrated on evaluating the relative impact of smoking on minority communities in the face of other emerging health threats such as obesity, drug use, and AIDS. Rethinking strategies to control tobacco use and promotion in minority populations is urgently needed.