Rethinking Well-Intentioned but Insufficient Strategies to Counteract Tobacco Use and Promotion in Minority Populations


CHALLENGES

In the 1920s and promoted as a less irritating way to smoke, mentholated cigarettes have become an advisory issue in the U.S. because they have been disproportionately marketed to African-American and Hispanic populations for decades. Although San Francisco became the first city to ban the sale of menthol cigarettes in 2017, the net impact of opposing menthol has been more symbolic than substantial. The tobacco industry counteracts the public health initiatives against smoking and tobacco control, legislation passed in 2009 by the U.S. Congress to permit the Food and Drug Administration to regulate tobacco products, but cigarette maker Philip Morris, which crafted the bill with the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, threatened to withdraw its support.

MENTHOL: AN ANESTHETIC

Contrary to popular belief, menthol is not green but consists of a compound that is anesthetic to lessen the irritation of cigarette smoke in 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 cigarette brands most favored by minority groups became the focus of several advertising campaigns during the 1970s-2000s. Examples included striking graphics on packs of R. J. Reynolds’ Salem (“The Box”) and Philip Morris’ Benson & Hedges. In the early 1990s, as rap music’s popularity among African-American adolescents rose, a metallic-blue wrapper for Salem, which the company named “The Waz,” was featured in a major advertising campaign. Salem video vans targeted minority neighborhoods, showing rap videos and giving out cigarettes.

THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY AS A HEALTH EDUCATOR

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the tobacco industry co-opted the effort to restrict teenagers’ access to tobacco products. 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 social clinic, fraternal, or even health-related groups, accepted financial support from the tobacco industry. Through such willful ignorance of the tobacco pandemic, the issue was not regarded as a priority in the black community.

INFLUENCING THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEDIA

One of the effects of the ban on overt cigarette advertising on television in 1971 was the shift of ad dollars by tobacco companies to the print media. The largest circulation African-American magazines were the weekly Jet, and the monthly Ebony, published by Johnson Publishing until 2016 when the company changed hands. Both contained cigarette ads in nearly every issue (all for menthol brands), and neither ever commented on the devastating impact of smoking. Existing programs have failed to elucidate the relative impact of smoking on minority communities compared to other emerging health threats such as obesity, drug use, and AIDS. Rethinking strategies to counteract tobacco use and promotion in minority populations is urgently needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Unit new federal or state legislation on smoking has been proposed or enacted to help reduce smoking in minority communities. Pending programs have not adequately evaluated the relative impact of smoking on minority populations to other emerging health threats such as obesity, drug use, and AIDS. Rethinking strategies to counteract tobacco use and promotion in minority populations is urgently needed.