

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

Alan Blum, MD, University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA ablum@ua.edu

CHALLENGES

Introduced in the 1920s and promoted as a less irritating way to smoke, mentholated cigarettes have become an advocacy issue in the U.S. because they have been disproportionately promoted 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 successful. The fight for a menthol ban could have been avoided had it been included in the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, 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.

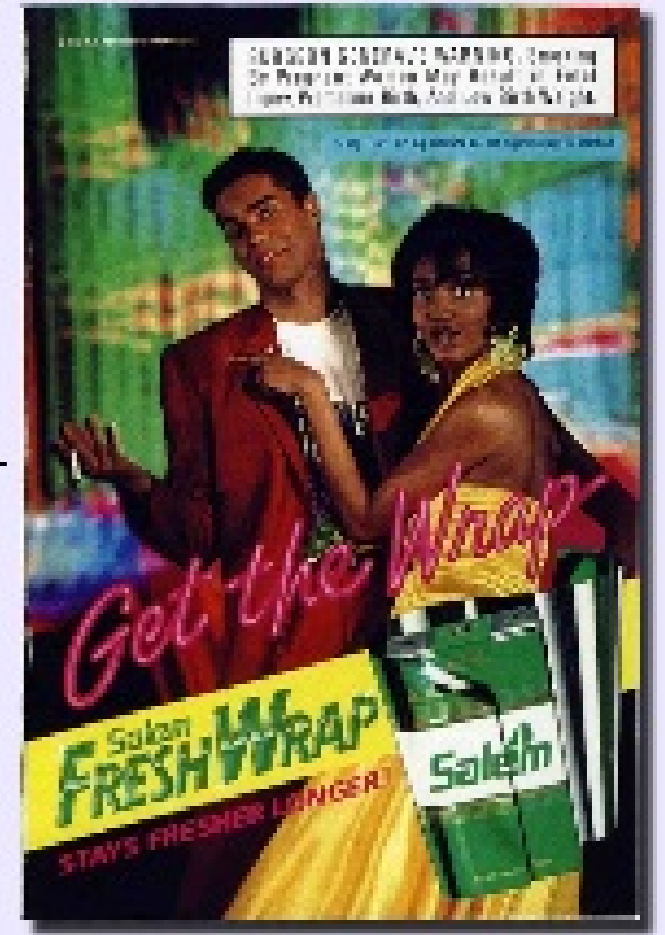
MENTHOL: AN ANESTHETIC

Contrary to popular belief, menthol is not green but colorless and acts 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 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-foil outer wrapping for Salem, which the company named "The Wrap," was featured in a major advertising campaign. Salem video vans roamed minority neighborhoods, showing rap videos and giving out cigarettes.

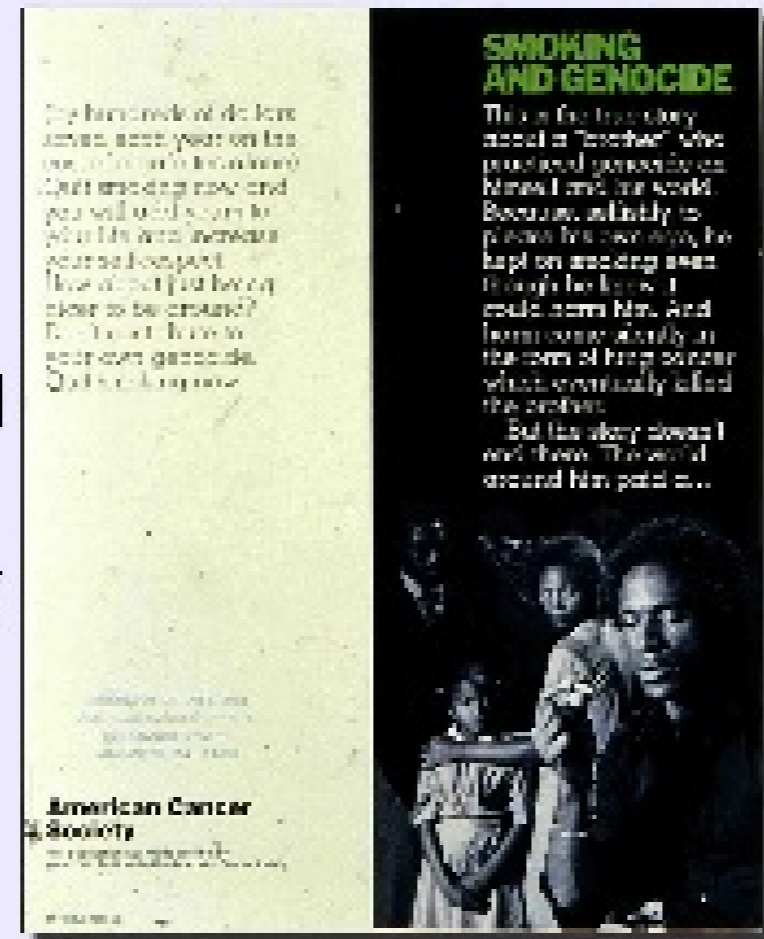


Deloyd Parker of SHAPE (Self-Help for African People through Education) in Houston, Texas, suggested that the redesign of the Salem brand to include the colors of the flag of African unity—red, black, and green—was a cynical attempt by R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company to create a "liberation cigarette."



PAMPHLETS, POSTERS, PREACHING

Until the 1990s, there was scant material in the medical and public health literature on the subject of tobacco use and promotion among minority groups. One of the earliest attempts to tackle the problem in the African-American community was a brochure published by the American Cancer Society (ACS) in 1981 entitled "Smoking and Genocide." But by the late 1980s, the ACS had shifted its focus to what it called the "socio-economically disadvantaged," and the term "genocide" was deleted from the brochure. However, a new group called the National Association of African-Americans for Positive Imagery (NAAPI), aided by funding from the Centers for Disease Control Office of Smoking and Health.



THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY AS A HEALTH EDUCATOR



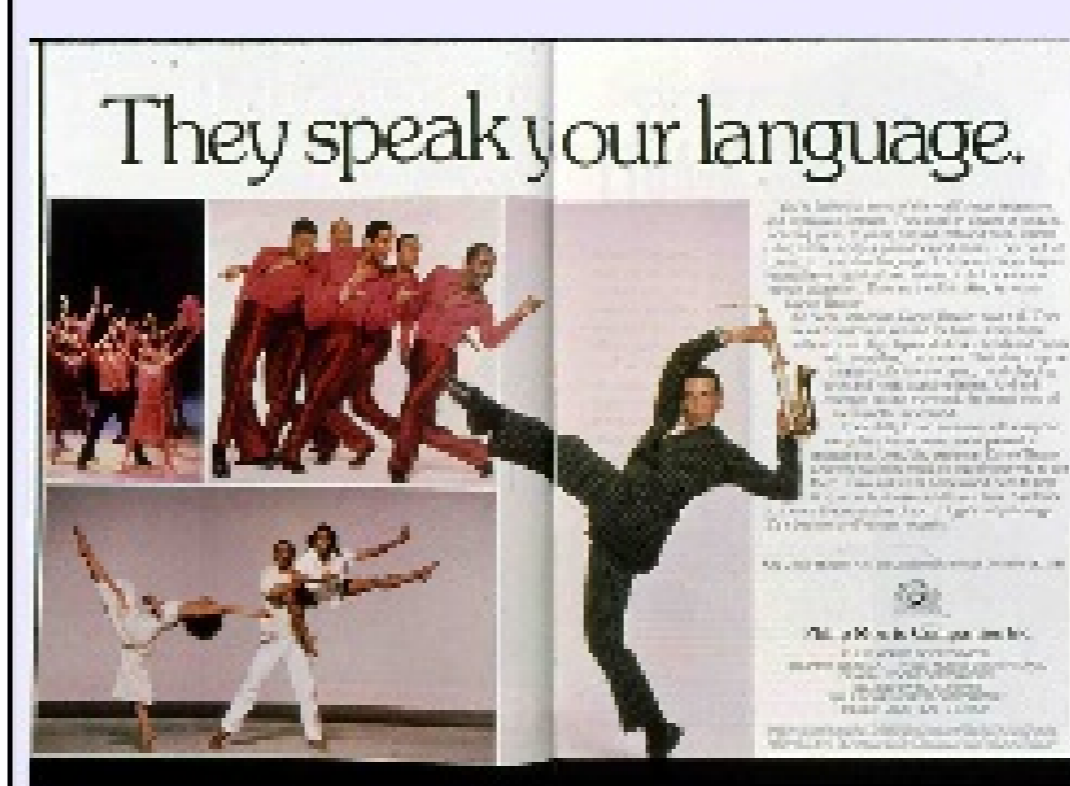
In the late 1980s and 1990s, the tobacco industry co-opted the effort to restrict teenagers' access to tobacco products. R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company took out numerous advertisements in African-American and Hispanic publications that featured adolescents beneath a headline that proclaimed, "We don't think they should smoke."

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 published an article focusing on the devastating impact of smoking on African-Americans. A similar situation existed with the more than 100 African-American-oriented newspapers in the United States and Caribbean region, which simply did not publish content antithetical to tobacco.



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 even health-related groups, accepted financial support from the tobacco industry. Through such willful ignorance of the tobacco pandemic, the problem was not regarded as a priority in the black community.

DOC PAID MASS MEDIA STRATEGY IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES

For two decades, Doctors Ought to Care (DOC) worked with minority communities throughout the United States to develop innovative, humorous school-based and community-based strategies for countering tobacco and alcohol advertising. Unique among health organizations, DOC pioneered the use of paid satirical advertising in the mass media to ridicule the brands aimed at African-Americans. DOC's motto was "Laughing the pushers out of town."



RECENT STRUGGLES

Much of the literature on the advertising and promotion of tobacco products to minority groups has been a rehashing of articles written in the 1980s. Present day reports decry the catalogue of injustices wrought on minority groups by the tobacco industry. Proposed solutions are almost non-existent. Research on tobacco promotion to minority groups remains mired in the descriptive phase, such as counting the number of cigarette billboards and storefront signs in minority neighborhoods, as opposed to challenging the existence of racial segregation and discriminatory zoning laws. 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 paid media campaigns to undermine tobacco ad campaigns. Above all, most proposals for tackling the tobacco pandemic fail to take into account the dynamic ability of the tobacco industry to create new identities to insinuate itself into the social fabric of the communities in which they promote their products most heavily.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Scant new federal or state legislation on smoking has been proposed or enacted to help reduce smoking in minority communities. 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.