

The Tobacco Tug-of-War: Advertising and Counteradvertising Tobacco Products to Youth

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Declines in smoking prevalence have slowed over the past few years for both youth under the age of 18 and young adults aged 18–24. A major contributing factor is the sustained and ever-evolving marketing and promotion strategies of the tobacco industry, including use of cartoon characters, distribution of free tobacco products, tobacco brand merchandise, and promotional social and sporting events sponsored by tobacco companies. With tobacco industry advertising and promotion expenditures well into the billions of dollars annually, it is a difficult task for public health officials to counter such influence. The use of edgy media campaigns that go beyond basic health education and also educate on the tactics used by the tobacco companies to attract smokers have been successful at reducing youth and young adult smoking rates. Since 1996, there have also been a range of regulatory efforts to prevent tobacco marketing to youth under the age of 18. The purpose of this article was to review the existing evidence on the range of practices used by the tobacco industry to recruit and retain youth and young adult smokers, as well as to place such efforts in the context of public health tobacco control programs and policies intended to protect this population from engaging in tobacco use.

Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults

DESPITE MORE THAN 5 DECADES of research on the negative health consequences of tobacco use,¹ every day ~3,900 youth in the United States between the ages of 12 and 17 years smoke their first cigarette, with about 1,000 becoming daily smokers.² Among middle-school students, 6.3% reported current cigarette use and 2.6% reported current smokeless tobacco use.³ Among high-school students, 19.5% reported current cigarette use with the prevalence of current tobacco use increasing by grade: 13.5% in 9th grade, 18.3% in 10th grade, 22.3% in 11th grade, and 25.2% by 12th grade; however, 46.3% of high-school students report having ever smoked a cigarette.⁴ In 2009, 22.6% of young adults aged 18–24 years were current smokers, a slight increase from 22.3% in 2008.⁵ Approximately 90% of current adult smokers began smoking at or before the age of 18 and young adults who use smokeless tobacco are more likely than nonusers to become adult cigarette smokers.² Moreover, there has been an increase in the number of young adults who are light smokers⁶ and nondaily smokers^{7,8}; 30% to 50% of young adult smokers limit their tobacco use to social settings.⁹

The tobacco tug-of-war

Youth and young adults are in the middle of a tug-of-war between the tobacco industry working to recruit and

maintain smokers and public health officials working to prevent tobacco use initiation and promote cessation. However, there are considerable differences in the strategies and tactics being used by both sides, mainly focused on the target audience and messaging. The medical and public health communities have largely focused smoking prevention efforts among adolescents,^{10,11} whereas the tobacco industry has focused on young adults, typically the 18–24 years range.^{12,13} Young adulthood is a turning point when young smokers either quit or continue to smoke and become addicted.^{12,14–16} Tobacco advertising and promotions increase the likelihood that adolescents will initiate tobacco use.^{17–19}

Tobacco Industry Advertising to Attract and Maintain Youth Smokers

Tobacco companies have long recognized young adulthood as the time during which adolescent experimenters either quit or make the transition to regular smoking,^{12,13,20,21} noting the importance of peer influence as a means to drive smoking initiation.^{22,23} RJ Reynolds acknowledged that the tobacco market largely hinged on youth and young adult smokers^{24,25} and that 18 year olds were particularly attractive as that was when smokers select their brand of preference as opposed to young adults aged 19–24 who are more likely to be switching brands.²⁶

The tobacco companies conducted extensive research on youth smoking, including the attitudes, aspirations, activities, and lifestyles of their consumers, rather than just demographics.^{13,20,27} Ranging from a focus on the tobacco products' characteristics in the 1970s, transitioning to youth smokers and psychographics including taste, health concerns, and social values in the 1970s and 1980s, and a complete focus on attributes related to values, attitudes, and lifestyles in the 1990s,¹³ the industry used this information to match particular brands and product types with consumer audiences. The industry essentially catalogued smokers into different market segments, such as "traditional, virile, coolness, stylish, moderation/concerned, and savings" groupings.²⁸ The tobacco industry also focused specifically on women, noting that cigarette brands for younger females should address camaraderie, self-confidence, freedom, and independence, whereas brands for older females should address pleasure, relaxation, social acceptability, and an escape from daily stresses.²⁹ The tobacco companies matched the characteristics of the cigarette brands (tar content, taste, filters), packaging (color, size, design), and advertising (themes, logos, images) to appeal to the range of categories of youth and young adult smokers.³⁰

Marketing

The tobacco industry steadily increased expenditures on marketing and promotions over time to attract smokers, climbing from \$1.84 billion in 1975 to \$4.64 billion in 1985, \$6.48 billion in 1995, and \$12.49 billion in 2006 (all values are inflated to 2006 dollars) (Fig. 1). With the rise of tobacco control media campaigns in the early 1990s,³¹ tobacco industry spending on advertising began to increase at a faster past, suggesting that these public health campaigns (discussed below) were a worthy adversary in the fight over smokers. As tobacco control expenditures on advertising were increasing,

per capita cigarette consumption was decreasing,³² driving the industry to work harder to maintain sales. One segment of tobacco marketing was aimed at youth and young adults.

The tobacco industry recognized 2 distinct areas of youth smokers—starters and continuing smokers, which can range from light to more everyday smokers.³³ In fact, researchers from RJ Reynolds created a quasi-theoretical model to reflect the industry's understanding of the process of smoking initiation among youth,^{12,21} which largely resembles the modified version of the transtheoretical model³⁴ used in the Surgeon General's report on youth smoking.² Using this theoretical model to better understand youth smoking, the tobacco company targeted areas where youth could be found in both mindset and venue, such as colleges, clubs and bars,^{20,22,27} and social settings such as music and sporting events.^{35–40} The full spectrum of marketing strategies have contributed to the increase in youth smoking.^{20,41,42}

Even before major marketing campaigns from the tobacco companies, 96% of youth aged 3–6 could recognize Joe Camel when compared with only 67% of adults.⁴³ Philip Morris used the Marlboro Man to attract young smokers⁴⁴ and a 1994 study showed that 69% of underage smokers smoked Marlboro cigarettes.⁴⁵ The industry capitalized on such characters. In the mid to late 1990s, Philip Morris and RJ Reynolds each began publishing youth-oriented magazines with varying degrees of smoking imagery as opposed to brand imagery; these magazines were used to cultivate brand loyalty among young smokers.^{46,47} With the advances of technology, the tobacco companies shifted to the internet in the early 2000s. Tobacco products can easily be purchased on the internet, an advertising venue that is largely unregulated.⁴⁸ Internet sites such as You Tube are used to market to youth,^{49,50} not only with tobacco branding but also with interesting video clips that entice youth to explore and find more information on the video, often leading to the tobacco companies.

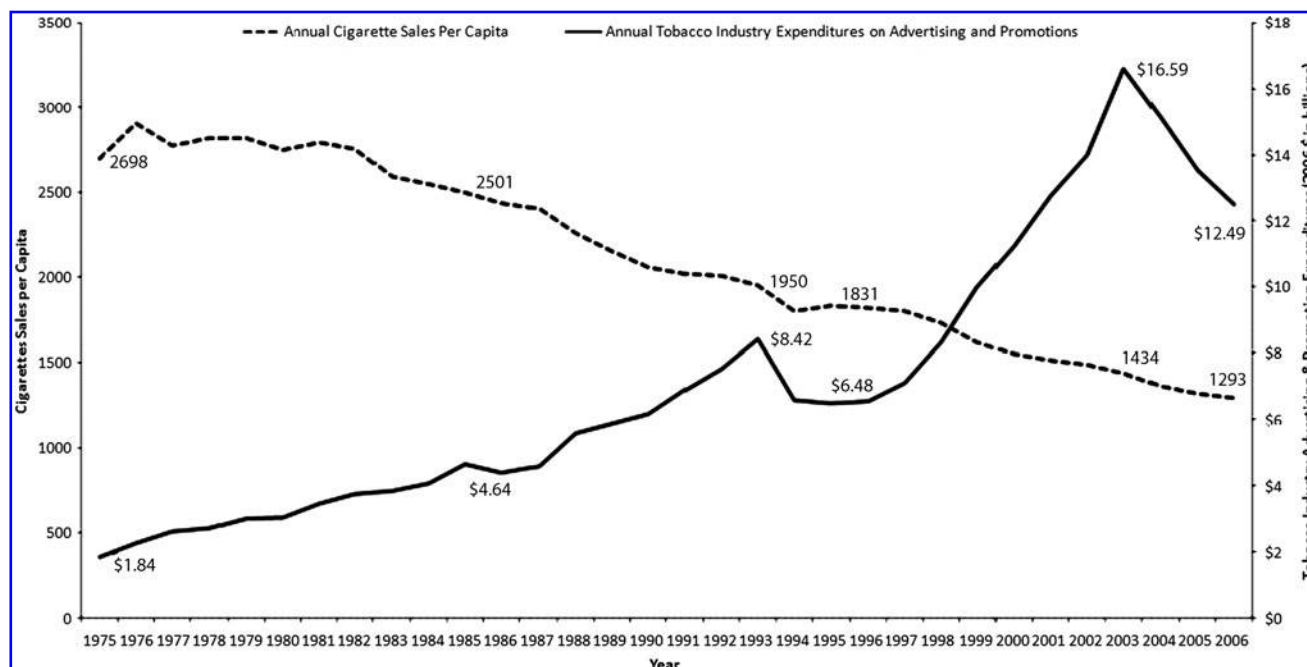


FIG. 1. Trend in cigarette sales per capita in comparison with tobacco industry expenditures on advertising and promotions.^{32,112} Note: All dollar amounts are in 2006 real dollars.

Similar to the internet, the tobacco industry has used movies to recruit and reinforce brand loyalties.^{51,52} Although tobacco advertising on television was banned in 1970 with the end of the Fairness Doctrine,⁵³ the tobacco companies can still use the big screen to promote tobacco. By showing popular celebrities smoking in the movies, youth view the behavior as desirable.⁵¹ There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that viewing smoking in the movies is associated with an increase in adolescent youth smoking.^{52,54-57}

In addition to the advertising, the industry capitalized on the products themselves to attract young smokers. Beginning in the early 1990s, the tobacco companies began to explore adding flavor to their tobacco products (cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, cigars, and rolling papers), thereby making them more appealing to a younger audience. With flavors ranging from spearmint, berry, and mocha, the tobacco companies recognize the potential for young smokers to be drawn to the candy-like flavors.^{58,59}

Promotional events

The tobacco industry also used promotional events and sponsorship as another means of attracting youth and young adults. In the 1990s, the tobacco industry used corporate sponsorship ranging from charitable causes, educational pursuits, programming for minority groups, performing arts, and politics⁶⁰; music was used as a hook to allure new young smokers.^{61,62} The arena of sports sponsorship was a target of tobacco industry promotions, including golf, tennis, pool, rodeos, and motorsports such as NASCAR racing.⁶⁰

The example of sponsorship for events bars and nightclubs provides an opportunity to elaborate. Beginning in the mid-1980s, several tobacco companies were using promotions at bars and nightclubs to attract young adults.²² The tobacco companies would provide bars with merchandise and decorations to saturate the environment, thereby leaving a last impression on the customers; financial incentives to the bar owners was used to encourage this type of aggressive marketing and distribution of tobacco samples.²² Whether it was Brown and Williamson's Kool,⁶³ Philip Morris' Marlboro,⁶⁴ or RJ Reynolds' Camel,⁶⁵ the industry uses bar promotions to spread the brand image and promote smoking initiation through peer influence and uses this opportunity to collect names and contact information for future marketing and political opportunities.^{36,66,67} Moreover, one brand could be used for sponsoring multiple events that could appeal to several consumer segments; Marlboro did this with country, race, and sports nights.³⁵⁻³⁷ A 2007 study found that college students from across 109 different schools reported seeing tobacco promotion events on campus,⁶⁸ and exposure to such events was associated with students initiating and sustaining tobacco use behaviors.^{15,69} Bar and club attendance and exposure to tobacco marketing in these venues is strongly associated with smoking.⁷⁰

Industry sponsored youth smoking prevention programs

The tobacco companies also implemented more covert strategies, such as youth smoking prevention programs, programs to retailers to decrease youth access, and sponsorship of youth programs,⁷¹ largely with the intent to displace meaningful tobacco control efforts.⁷¹ In Minnesota, the

tobacco industry introduced its own youth campaign ("Helping Youth Decide") in the mid-1980s in an attempt to minimize the state's strategic plan for tobacco control efforts.^{71,72} In 1998, Philip Morris introduced "Think Don't Smoke" and in 1999 Lorillard began "Tobacco is Whacko, If You're a Teen."⁷³ Philip Morris discontinued "Think Don't Smoke" in 2002,⁷³ after an external evaluation demonstrated that the program was associated with an increase in the intention to smoke within the next year.⁷⁴ Since 1999, Philip Morris has developed and implemented various media campaigns directed at parents, encouraging them to talk to their children about smoking.^{71,73}

The value of such efforts was to put forth a good public image, attempt to increase social acceptability, and counteract tobacco control efforts.^{71,75} In fact, the tobacco industry worked to advance youth smoking prevention programs that they knew were ineffective.⁷⁶ For example, when the Centers for Disease Control were recommending the Life Skills Training Program (school-based drug prevention), Philip Morris and Brown and Williamson had conducted internal research and found that the program was ineffective; as a result, they promoted it and even paid for the curriculum for several schools.⁷⁷ By advancing "tobacco control efforts," the tobacco industry was able to set the tone of the messaging received by youth, thereby minimizing its potential impact.

Public Health Media Efforts to Counter Tobacco Industry Advertising

Public health programs do not have the financial power that the tobacco industry has, making the need for focused and powerful messaging that much more important.⁷⁸ Tobacco control "marketing" can be seen in state-level media campaigns that work to prevent youth smoking and work to reveal the actions of the tobacco industry. Media campaigns that addressed the practices of the tobacco industry head are most effective in changing tobacco-related attitudes and tobacco use behaviors.^{74,79-82} In 1984, Minnesota implemented the first publicly funded state tobacco control media program under the Minnesota Plan for Nonsmoking and Health.⁸³ In April 1990, funded under Proposition 99,^{84,85} California began its tobacco control media campaign focused on reducing tobacco use by "promoting a social norm of not accepting tobacco"⁸⁶ with a budget of \$14.4 million.⁸⁷ Program messages included the activities of the tobacco industry, secondhand smoke, addiction, cessation, cigarette additives, smokeless tobacco, general health, pregnancy, and prevention among youth.⁸⁸ In October 2003, Massachusetts began its tobacco control media campaign, funded as part of the statewide tobacco control program under the voter initiative, Question 1.⁸⁹⁻⁹³ The media campaign began with a budget of \$14 million⁹⁴ and focused on messages regarding the hazards of tobacco use and secondhand smoke with a focus on preventing youth from starting to smoke.⁹⁰

Perhaps most notable among state-level media campaign efforts was the "Truth" campaign, which began in Florida, as part of the state tobacco control program developed as a result of the 1997 settlement between the Florida Attorney General and the tobacco industry.⁹⁵ The media campaign began in April 1998 with a budget of \$26 million⁹⁶ and focused on maintaining tobacco-free youth, educating on the risks of secondhand smoke and smoking, and demonstrating that peer pressure to use tobacco can be effectively

countered.^{96,97} The “Truth” campaign revealed the true intentions and efforts of the tobacco industry to recruit smokers.⁹⁶

In November 1998, the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) between the 46 states Attorneys General and the tobacco industry gave rise to a national public health foundation (American Legacy Foundation) with \$1.45 billion in funding for the first 5 years of its public education campaign.⁹⁸ The foundation was “to support the study of and programs to reduce youth tobacco product usage and youth substance abuse in the states, and the study of educational programs to prevent diseases associated with the use of tobacco products.”⁹⁸ Building on the success of the Florida “Truth” campaign, Legacy produced a range of anti-industry ads that were associated with an increase in anti-tobacco attitudes and beliefs.^{74,80}

State- and national-level tobacco control media campaigns can only go as far as the public dollars that fund them, whereas the tobacco industry has the ability to spend much more on advertising and promotions. However, laws that restrict or prohibit specific advertising practices by the tobacco industry are less expensive and have wider impact. The following section is a brief overview of policies aimed at curbing tobacco marketing to youth.

Policy Efforts to Regulate Tobacco Industry Advertising

As of May 2010, 22 states and the District of Columbia restrict the distribution of free samples of tobacco products to the general public, with a range of variations across the states in terms of exemptions for specific locations and minimum pack size or single cigarettes.⁹⁹ There are 8 states that have some form of restriction on tobacco advertising and promotions, ranging from distance to schools and churches, prohibition on public transit, and fees for advertising.⁹⁹ Studies have shown that partial bans on tobacco advertising and promotions have minimal or no effect on tobacco consumption.¹⁰⁰ Despite tobacco industry targeting of young adults, as youth aged 18–24 are considered adults by the law, the government is precluded from placing special restrictions on advertising to this population as this could be considered a violation of free speech. By placing restrictions on advertising to youth and implementing strong tobacco control programs, a strong social norm of refusing tobacco can carry forward into their young adult years.

In 1996, public health officials at the national level began to place restrictions on tobacco industry advertising. Following clear assertions from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services² and the Institute of Medicine¹⁰¹ that tobacco advertising is an important factor in young people smoking, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was given authority to regulate tobacco products with a focus on “reducing the appeal of advertising to children and adolescents.”¹⁰² The rule indicated that (1) tobacco billboards and outdoor advertising had to be a minimum of 1,000 feet away from elementary and secondary schools and playgrounds; (2) print advertising had to be in text-only format in black and white with the exception of ads in primarily adult publications and adult-only facilities; (3) the sale or free distribution of merchandise with the tobacco brand logos, including items such as tee-shirts, hats, and sporting items, was prohibited; and (4)

tobacco brand name sponsorship of race cars or teams, as well as sponsorship of any sporting or cultural event that would involve the use of logos or color schemes that would be associated with specific tobacco products were banned.¹⁰³

With the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement,¹⁰⁴ the tobacco companies experienced additional restrictions on advertising and promotions, including new limits on tobacco brand name sponsorship, a complete ban on youth targeting of any kind (use of cartoons to advertise tobacco products, tobacco brand name merchandise), youth access to free samples, and proof-of-purchase gifts to youth; the companies were also required to commit to a corporate culture that would reinforce the reduction of tobacco products by youth.¹⁰⁴ However, despite the advertising restrictions imposed by the 1998 MSA, tobacco industry advertising expenditures on youth brand cigarettes in youth-oriented magazines continued to increase through 2000, reaching >80% of young people in the United States.¹⁰⁵

In June 2009, President Obama signed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, which gave authority to the Food and Drug Administration to regulate tobacco products.¹⁰⁶ In September 2009, the FDA banned the use of fruit, candy, and clove flavors in cigarettes,¹⁰⁷ which is very popular with young smokers.⁵⁸ In March 2010, the FDA issued new regulations that prohibit the sale of cigarettes or smokeless tobacco to individuals <18 years of age, the sale of cigarette packs containing <20 cigarettes, distribution of free samples of cigarettes and smokeless tobacco, and any brand name sponsorship of athletic, musical, or other social and cultural events.¹⁰⁸ Although these are certainly steps forward in protecting youth from the allure of tobacco use, additional restrictions from the FDA will likely be needed, as these policies do not adhere with existing evidence-based policy recommendations on tobacco advertising.¹⁰⁹

Conclusions

The historical “tug-of-war” between the tobacco companies and public health officials continues. Although the industry has employed a range of tactics, including media campaigns, promotional events, free products, and even youth smoking prevention programs, public health programs counter with tobacco education and efforts to reveal the deceptive practices of the industry.^{73,79} As smoking rates among youth have remained stable over the last few years, despite a previous steady decline, renewed efforts are needed. As the industry has shifted its focus to Web 2.0 technologies,^{49,50} which are harder to monitor and regulate, integrated approaches to youth smoking prevention and cessation are necessary. Part of this integration is the collaboration of research and practice,¹¹⁰ such that knowledge gained through research on the practices of the tobacco industry are translated into effective clinical and public health practice. Pediatric healthcare providers can help to address tobacco use with patients, inquiring not only about their smoking status and intent to quit¹¹¹ but also framing tobacco use or refraining from tobacco use in the social context so as to counter industry efforts.

Author Disclosure Statement

The authors report no competing interests.

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