Targeted tobacco marketing in 2020: the case of #BlackLivesMatter

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INTRODUCTION

2020 saw the continued impact of systemic racism and racial inequity in the United States (US). Inequities of COVID-19 heightened the convergence of social risk factors, racism and health,1 while the police killing of George Floyd and others sparked international protests for racial justice.2 The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement brought racial equity central to media and public dialogue in the US and worldwide.3 We provide examples of how tobacco companies and retailers, ever ready to capitalise, used BLM and racial equity in their marketing and messaging. Examples were identified by reviewing social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) for leading brands of tobacco products including cigars, e-cigarettes, cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, heated tobacco products and hookah products; select manufacturer and retailer websites; and advertisements archived on Trinkets & Trash (trinketsandtrash.org), a tobacco advertising surveillance website. Sources were searched in December 2020 and included materials circulated between January and December 2020.

SIGNALLING SUPPORT: SOCIAL MEDIA

-expression themes in their advertising and merchandise. Social media posts included expressions of support, solidarity, ‘listening’, remembrance and togetherness, exemplified by social media black squares, hashtags such as #GeorgeFloyd, and captions (eg, ‘We’re all in this together! Black Lives Matter!’; see figures 1–4 for additional examples).4–7 Several hookah retailers used social media and/or retail websites to promote BLM-branded products and accessories (eg, mouthpiece decorated with jewelry spelling BLM) (figure 5).8

Cigar/cigarillo companies used social media and email to highlight initiatives purporting to address systemic racism, promote economic equality and create ‘positive social impact’ (figure 6).9 Companies promoting these initiatives included Swisher

To cite: Heley K, Popova L, Moran MB, et al. Tob Control 2021;0:1–4. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2021-056838
International and John Middleton Co., makers of Swisher Sweets and Black & Mild cigarillos, products disproportionately used by young, Black consumers. Swisher advertised a new ‘inclusion, diversity and transformation strategy,’ which would partner with multicultural groups and community organisations, ‘develop a talent pipeline with Historically Black Colleges and Universities,’ and create career opportunities for minorities within their own corporate ranks and economic opportunities for Black-owned businesses, artists, and workers (figure 6). John Middleton Co. advertised a new initiative which included advertising of Black-owned businesses and an initial commitment of $1 million to non-profits supporting them (figure 7).

Racial inequities in tobacco impact are well documented. In the US, Black individuals assume an inordinate burden of tobacco-related diseases. An extensive literature documents the tobacco industry’s aggressive targeting of Black communities, such as elevated rates of advertising in Black neighbourhoods, price promotions, and the use of culturally-tailored messages and focused marketing in publications with a primarily Black readership to sell menthol cigarettes. Tobacco companies also have a history of making contributions to minority community organisations, scholarship programmes, higher education institutions, media, and elected officials and cultivating relationships with Black leaders and civic groups to promote their public image and further their business interests. The examples identified in this review illustrate a recent form of this longstanding pattern of tobacco industry-targeted marketing of the
organising strategies to inform and mobilise those in communities—and not the support the industry purports. The language of BLM support put forth by the tobacco industry (eg, ‘it is time to go beyond words and actively accelerate true and lasting change’ figure 1) is meaningless unless companies correspondingly align their actions with these words as policy efforts move forward.

Contributors KH, LP, CS and MM conceptualised the study, KH conducted the analysis of the data. All authors contributed to data collection; interpretation of the results; and manuscript reviews and revisions.

Funding This research was supported, in part, by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) and the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Tobacco Products (FDA CTP) award R01DA047397 (LP); National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) and FDA CTP awards P50HL120163 and U54HL120163 (JH); NCI and CTP award U54CA229971 (OW); NCI and CTP awards T31RP2083—California Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program (TRDRP) (SS); an Innovation in Regulatory Science Award from the Burroughs Wellcome Fund (MM); and NIDA and FDA CTP for the Center for Coordination of Analytics, Science, Enhancement and Logistics (CASEL) in Tobacco Regulatory Science U54DA046060-01 (CS).

Disclaimer The content of this paper is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the co-authors’ institutions, the NIH or the FDA.

Competing interests MM has served as a paid expert witness in litigation sponsored by the Public Health Advocacy Institute against RJ Reynolds. This arrangement was reviewed and approved by the Johns Hopkins University in accordance with its conflict of interest policies. No potential perceived conflicts were declared by the other co-authors.

Patient consent for publication Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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