

Exploratory Study of Young Adults' Perceptions of Tobacco Use and Tobacco Marketing

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Abstract

There is considerable evidence that the tobacco industry's marketing practices persuade many people to start smoking (Pierce, Choi, Gilpin, Farkas, and Barry, 1998). Sepe, Ling, and Glantz (2002) found that when tobacco companies increase their marketing and promotion practices in nightclubs and bars concurrently there is a rise in young adults smoking. To better understand the perceptions and experiences surrounding tobacco use and tobacco marketing, we conducted four focus groups in two mid-size U.S. cities with young adults. The analysis of these focus groups produced five complementary findings: (1) tobacco marketing and tobacco use was associated with the social scene of college, (2) tobacco marketers give personal attention to young adults, (3) smokers and nonsmokers perceive tobacco marketers differently, (4) tobacco marketing promotes tobacco use, (5) and smoking status was ambiguously defined.

In 1999, the tobacco industry spent \$335.7 million on promotional items such as t-shirts, coasters, and lighters (Federal Trade Commission, 2001). The tobacco industry spent 33.7 million dollars just on free cigarettes that same year (Federal Trade Commission, 2001). In 2002, advertising and marketing by five major tobacco companies totaled nearly 12.5 billion dollars (Federal Trade Commission, 2004). Obviously, the tobacco industry spends this magnitude of money on marketing because it persuades many people to experiment and use tobacco products (Pierce, et al., 1998).

Historically, the tobacco industry has tried many different techniques to initiate and maintain tobacco use. From television, radio, and print advertising to flavored cigarettes and promotional discounts of cigarettes, the tobacco industry has tried numerous tactics to promote tobacco use. To illustrate the different marketing approaches used by tobacco companies over the years, the "Trinkets and Trash" website (<http://www.trinketsandtrash.org/>) was created. This comprehensive website collects, archives, and publicizes the marketing strategies of the tobacco industry. In one of their feature exhibits, this website displays the "visual history of the tobacco pack" showing images of cigarettes and tobacco packaging from the 1930's to present day. Visitors of the website are informed of the numerous pack designs, marketing devices, and technological innovations used by tobacco companies.

In one of the other feature exhibits of the "Trinkets and Trash" website, the direct marketing strategy is illustrated. This exhibit illustrates the different ways tobacco companies have used direct mailings, coupons, controlled circulation magazines, promotional items (known as "brand loyalty" items), sweepstakes, and sponsor entertainment events to promote

tobacco use. One recent example of direct mail marketing was described in the British Medical Journal. Arie (2001) reported that a Colombian newspaper delivered free cigarettes in a Sunday edition of *El Espectador* (the paper with the second highest circulation in the country of Columbia) to over 70,000 adult subscribers. As a side note, when anti-tobacco advocates argued that youth could easily get the cigarettes, the tobacco industry responded by stating the cigarettes were sealed in plastic bags and meant only for the adult subscribers.

Given the continual use of the direct marketing strategy by the tobacco industry indicates that it is an effective advertising and promotional strategy. In particular, Lewis, Delnevo, & Slade (2004) report that direct mail marketing has “the potential to influence smoking initiation . . . because direct mail and its messages provide smokers with inviting images of and rewards for smoking” (p. 259). Despite direct mail marketing accounting for only a small percentage of total advertising and marketing spending, Lewis et al. (2004) note that “it is worthy of concern” because it “encourages smoking initiation and consumption” (p. 259).

In addition to different marketing tactics such as direct mail marketing, the tobacco industry also targets particular demographics. For example, African Americans, adolescents, and those with a lower socioeconomic status have all been targeted in marketing campaigns to initiate and maintain tobacco use (Kaplan & Weiler, 1997). In particular, the tobacco industry has given a great deal of attention to women in their marketing efforts. Lipsitz (1993) asserts that tobacco marketing aimed at women centers around “weight control, upward social mobility, sophistication, financial success, and independence” (p. 29). As such, in 1994 R.J. Reynolds launched the “Josephine Camel” campaign to portray smoking as sexy to entice more women to smoke and associate smoking with beauty and sexuality (Goldman, 1994).

A new demographic being targeted by the tobacco industry is young adults aged 18-24 (Rigotti, Moran, & Wechsler, 2005). Since the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement, where the tobacco industry agreed to restrict the content of marketing and promotional materials to minors and restrict the distribution of free tobacco products to places where minors are not allowed (Master Settlement Agreement, 1998), there has been a dramatic increase in marketing and promoting tobacco products to the young adult population (Patterson, Lerman, Kaufmann, Neuner, & Audrain-McGovern, 2004). Because they are the youngest legal targets of tobacco marketing, young adults have been more aggressively targeted since the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement. In fact, bars and nightclubs where young adults are often found have become fertile marketing grounds for the tobacco industry.

By sponsoring social events on campuses and having tobacco marketers approach young adults in bars and nightclubs, the tobacco industry is now heavily pursuing the college age young adult demographic. As a result of modifying their marketing strategy from more traditional advertising, the tobacco industry is “increasing use of techniques emphasizing, developing, and maintaining relationships with individual customers” (Lewis, et al., 2004, p. 257). According to one recent comprehensive study analyzing data from the 2001 Harvard College Alcohol Study, during the 2000-2001 academic year, 8.5% of college students surveyed attended an industry-sponsored event where free tobacco products (i.e., cigarettes) were distributed (Rigotti, et al., 2005). According to this study, distribution of free cigarettes occurred at 118 of the 119 four-year institutions surveyed (99.2%). Given that this marketing strategy is acceptable from the 1998 Agreement, it has become a widely used strategy to target young adults. This study further reports that tobacco marketing has the greatest influence on students who enter college as non-smokers and “attendance at a tobacco industry

sponsored event such as a bar, nightclub, or campus party was associated with a higher smoking prevalence among college students. Promotional events may encourage the initiation or the progression of tobacco use among college students who are not smoking regularly when they enter college” (Rigotti, et al., 2005, p. 138).

Biener and Albers (2004) found that young adults were twice as likely to older adults to visit bars and nightclubs and were significantly more attracted to tobacco advertising. Botvin, Botvin, & Baker (1983) report that those with high exposure to tobacco advertising significantly were more likely to be smokers than were those with low exposure to cigarette advertising. Similarly, Sepe, et al., (2002) found that when tobacco companies increased their marketing and promotional practices in nightclubs and bars concurrently there was a rise in young adults smoking. It seems that marketing at such places “has the potential to increase tobacco use by encouraging nonsmokers to try cigarettes, by encouraging experimental smokers to develop regular use, and by discouraging current smokers from quitting” (Rigotti, et al., 2005, p. 138).

Although the tobacco industry insists that its marketing strategies are aimed at current smokers, it is clear that nonsmokers are also being encouraged to experiment with tobacco (Lipsitz, 1993). By switching marketing practices to a more personal and social marketing strategy, more young adults are trying and using tobacco (Patterson et al., 2004). As such, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP), over 75% of college students report having tried cigarettes (1997).

The CDCP further report that of college smokers, occasional smokers are highly typical. “Young adults are significantly more likely than older adults to be occasional rather than daily smokers” (Biener & Albers, 2004, p. 328). Biener & Albers also report that 55% of intermittent smokers converted to everyday smoking within a year. Since the transition from nonsmoker to smoker tends to be progressive and unidirectional (Kenford et al., 2005), the distribution of free cigarettes and tobacco marketing in nightclubs and bars influences more young adults to experiment with smoking and to increase progression from occasional smoking to heavy smoking (Biener & Albers, 2004).

Tobacco marketing in bars and nightclubs may have a racial angle that has just recently being explored. Biener and Albers (2004) found that tobacco marketing in bars and nightclubs was more effective with White young adults. Although they report a small sample, it is worthy to note that ethnicity and race may be a factor in tobacco marketing strategies. In addition, “young white nonsmokers are significantly more likely to own a tobacco promotional item than their more mature counterparts” (Biener & Albers, 2004, p. 329).

In order to better understand tobacco marketing and tobacco use among young adults, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of young adults attending college. In trying to identify the emergent themes of tobacco use and tobacco marketing focus group questions were designed to specifically ask about perceptions of tobacco products and tobacco marketing. Particular interest was given to experiences and encounters with tobacco marketing and language about tobacco use.

Method

Participants

This study encompassed 27 participants in the four focus group sessions; 44% smokers and 56% nonsmokers. The average age was 22 and the majority of participants were

female (67%). All participants were college students and reported going out to social events at least once a week.

Design and Procedure

To capture the thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of the participants about tobacco use and tobacco marketing, focus group methodology was employed. Obtaining in-depth information via the focus group sessions was ideal because we could explore beliefs, perceptions, and concerns that college students had regarding tobacco use and tobacco marketing (Greenbaum, 1994). Another important advantage of using this methodology was that we were able to explore unanticipated issues and participants' reactions, which may or may not be detected using quantitative survey methods. In addition, the social interaction that occurs during focus groups yields richer responses than those typically elicited by questionnaires or interviews (Kitzinger, 1994).

The focus groups were segmented by current smoking status (smokers and nonsmokers). By having the focus groups segmented by smoking status (thus homogeneous focus groups) allowed "for more free-flowing conversations among participants within groups and also facilitated analyses that examines differences in perspective between groups" (Morgan, 1997, p. 35). Morgan (1997) argues that it is "wisest" to run several smaller size focus groups where availability of participants is a concern than larger size groups.

Prior to conducting the focus groups, approval for research on human subjects was obtained. Participants were recruited from two large, public universities in the same southern state by placing ads in university newspapers. Flyers were also distributed around the universities. Participants were paid \$20 for their participation and were given a snack during the focus group session. Two focus groups were conducted at each university consisting of one nonsmoker and one smoker focus group for a total of four focus groups. Each focus group ranged from 45 minutes to one and half hours in length. The focus group questions consisted of open-ended probes on perceptions of tobacco use and tobacco marketing. Specific questions were designed to encourage participants to share perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about tobacco use and tobacco marketing.

Based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1969), the following steps were taken to identify the emerging themes in the focus group data: (1) listening to the recorded focus group session several times; (2) transcribing the focus groups; (3) coding the data from the transcripts into categories, and finally, (4) examining and summarizing the transcripts to identify key elements, issues, and/or themes. This process of analysis involved breaking down and examining the data, comparing and conceptualizing categories, and formulating categories into themes and key ideas. The transcripts were reviewed, coded, and analyzed by two team members.

These processes produced five complementary findings: (1) tobacco marketing and tobacco use was associated with the social scene of college, (2) tobacco marketers give personal attention to young adults, (3) smokers and nonsmokers perceive tobacco marketers differently, (4) tobacco marketing promotes tobacco use, (5) and smoking status was ambiguously defined.

Results & Discussion

The first trend that emerged from this data was tobacco marketing and tobacco use were associated with the social scene of college. Specifically, the participants coupled tobacco

marketing and tobacco use with social events and saw smoking as a social activity. Across all focus groups the sentiment was that tobacco marketing and tobacco use occurred at social events, specifically in bars and nightclubs where college-age students frequented. Each of the focus groups had lengthy discussions about how they were aware of tobacco marketing and tobacco use in bars. For example, one female non-smoker commented that she did not notice tobacco marketing unless she was in a bar and remarked “people just smoke more when they go out.”

The participants of this study also remarked tobacco marketing promoted cigarettes to be associated with social events. One female smoker stated, “I think they [tobacco marketers] probably see the social scene linked to smoking. Like my sister stopped God knows how many times, you know but then you get stressed, you drink, and it leads into that [smoking]. I think they [tobacco marketers] are trying to be a catalyst. They catch you at a bar and they can make it a routine. They want you to smoke when you drink, when you get stressed, when you go out.”

Tobacco use was also seen as a social activity. One female smoker summarized this notion by stating, “I would never smoke alone. If I’m going to do it I want my girls with me.” Another female smoker stated, “If I’m having a bad time, I’ll ask my friend, ‘hey, come have a smoke with me’.” On a similar note, both a female nonsmoker and a female smoker stated that it was sad to see someone smoking alone. Comments like “You wonder if they don’t have friends” were typical in the focus groups. It seems smoking is more acceptable if it is a group activity or time spent with friends.

The second trend that emerged from the data was the personal attention given to young adults by tobacco marketers. Both the smoker and non-smoker focus groups were able to give details about the marketing process at bars and nightclubs. In short, tobacco marketers carry tobacco products (i.e., cigarettes) or tobacco paraphernalia (i.e., t-shirts) with them and approach young adults. The marketer asks the young adult if he/she would like a free “gift”. If the young adult says yes, the marketer asks a few questions, scans the young adult’s driver’s license into a hand-held computer, and has the young adult sign the computer screen. Scanning the driver’s license then places the young adult on the tobacco company’s mailing list. After this process the tobacco marketer then hands the young adult a free “gift”. As one female smoker commented, “They [tobacco marketer] walk around the bars and scan your ID then they give you a pack of cigarettes. Then they send you all this stuff to your house . . . I even got a cookbook from Marlboro.”

Across the focus groups, every participant gave details about the types of materials given away by tobacco marketers. One female smoker commented, “I got all kinds of junk in the mail. I got shot glasses that light up, coasters, gift certificates, and posters.” Even the nonsmokers were forthcoming with examples of tobacco related products. As one male said, “When this guy [tobacco marketer] approached me I didn’t like the cigarettes he was giving away . . . but hey, it’s free so I took a pack.” Both the smokers and non-smokers could readily give examples of free tobacco related products. Across all focus groups the most common product mentioned as a free “gift” was a pack of cigarettes.

Even if the young adults were obviously not smoking, they still participated in the tobacco marketing process at the bars. As one female nonsmoker stated, “They [tobacco marketer] will come up and start talking to you and then ask if you want a free item. Of course, we’re broke students. When we hear something’s free we’re all about that. You give them your driver’s license, sign their computer gadget, and then you get whatever they have

in their bag. Even you aren't a smoker, if they give away free cigarettes you'll take them. I've gotten free lighters, t-shirts, coasters. . . ."

In one interesting example of the power of giving products away, young adults followed the tobacco marketers to different bars. One male smoker stated, "After seeing one of them [marketer] I would ask where they [the other marketers] were going to be. I would call my friends and we would purposely go to places where they [marketers] were going. I came home with like 10 packs of cigarettes. I got the better deal I got stuff in the mail, the shot glasses were cool." One other male smoker stated, "I've even seen people leave with the marketers. I guess they wanted more free packs of cigs." One nonsmoker that bartended stated, "we have regulars who come in every Sunday night because they have a Camel Light representative handing out free packs of cigarettes. They ask 'where are you tomorrow night?' When they get their answer they say 'See you there, save me some cigarettes.' It's like this every week. I guess they just follow them around." It is apparent that the tobacco marketers not only approach young adults but young adults are approaching them as well.

The third trend that emerged from the data was that tobacco marketers were perceived and talked about differently in the smoking and nonsmoking focus groups. In particular, the nonsmokers had more in-depth discussions about tobacco marketers. It was apparent that the non-smokers could give more details about the tobacco marketers. The smoking focus group participants had fewer comments about the actual tobacco marketers and their comments were less descriptive. The smokers on the other hand were not able to give as many details when asked about the specifics of the tobacco marketers. The smokers would say "they're like us" or "I can't remember what they looked like. They were just there." The types of information the smokers and nonsmokers related about the tobacco marketers were different. The nonsmokers commented on the marketer's behavior and appearance while the smokers thought the marketer's blended in to the social scene. The smokers' comments lacked details and critical thought when compared to the nonsmokers' comments.

The fourth trend that emerged from the data was that tobacco marketing promotes tobacco use. The participants of this study reported that both smokers and nonsmokers were more likely to experiment with or maintain their tobacco use when tobacco marketing was present in the bars. In addition, the participants of this study were keenly aware that tobacco marketers target all young adults in bars (i.e., nonsmokers, irregular smokers, and heavy smokers). As one female smoker stated, "I think it encourages social smokers to smoke more. Like if you are at the bar and they are free you are going to take them instead of having to bum off your friend every time you want a cigarette . . . social smoker might smoke more if it's in their hands. My friends that don't smoke even try it when cigarettes are all around us." Further evidence that marketing increases smoking, one female nonsmoker stated, "I am not going to buy the cigarettes at four bucks a pack just to try it but if I can get it for free I'll try it." Evidently, nonsmokers, irregular smokers, and heavy smokers are enticed to use tobacco that the tobacco marketers supply.

The fifth trend that emerged from this data was how smoking status was ambiguously defined. There was no clear definition of what constituted a smoker found in the data. It was typical for a nonsmoker to smoke and a social smoker to self-define as a nonsmoker. Nonsmokers talked about smoking when they drank alcohol, only smoking occasionally, or smoking when everyone else was smoking (i.e., smoking breaks at work). For example, one female nonsmoker stated, "I don't smoke but when I'm drinking I'll light up every now and then." When asked to clarify why they still classified themselves as

nonsmokers they reported they didn't "have to have" cigarettes, they wouldn't purchase a pack, or they only did it sporadically. It is worrisome to note that these nonsmokers are putting themselves at an increased health risk. Bjarveit (2005) reported that smoking as little as one to four cigarettes a day has serious health consequences. In addition, the smokers were able to talk about friends that claim to be nonsmokers who smoke. As one female smoker stated, "I have a roommate that says she is a nonsmoker. She bums more cigarettes off of me than anyone else." It was evident in both the smoking and nonsmoking focus groups that self-defined smoking status does not accurately represent the behaviors of young adults.

To give more support that it was typical for a nonsmoker to smoke, an interesting trend emerged from the nonsmoking men in the study. The males reported that cigar smoking was not associated with being a smoker. Citing reasons that cigar smoking was "for celebrations" (e.g., "after a big game" or "birth of a baby"), cigar smoking was "only done with 'my boys'", or "liking the aroma and flavor of cigar smoking" the males of the study gave numerous reasons why cigar smoking was not "officially smoking." In addition, the males stressed that cigar smoking "was not inhaled" and "not processed the same way" as cigarettes so the two should not be categorized together. Interestingly, the reasons mentioned for smoking cigars were all associated with social events or seen as a social activity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the trends identified in this explorative study provide scholars with rich data for increased understanding of young adults' tobacco use and perceptions of tobacco marketing targeted toward this demographic. It appears that tobacco marketing has turned its focus on young adults, thus increasing the likelihood that more young adults will initiate and maintain tobacco use. This study found that tobacco marketers are increasingly found at local bars and nightclubs. By coupling tobacco use with bars and nightclubs, tobacco marketing is increasing their association of young adults' notion of being with friends and having a good time.

Given the complexity of tobacco use and tobacco marketing, these findings may serve to help understand how tobacco penetrates the social lives of college-age young adults. These findings also serve to reinforce the notion that decoupling smoking from the social scenes of young adults will likely be an effective way to possibly counteract the tobacco industry's marketing strategies. Future studies need to examine the social dynamics of tobacco use among college age young adults in order to increase our understanding of the complexities of tobacco use among this demographic. Other studies could also investigate how restricting smoking in public places influences tobacco use and tobacco marketing with young adults. In addition, future studies could explore the intercultural approaches of tobacco marketing and tobacco use.

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