

## RESEARCH PAPER

# Adults only: the prevalence of tobacco promotions in bars and clubs in the Boston area

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**Objective:** To document the nature and prevalence of tobacco promotions in bars and clubs in a major US city.

**Design:** We conducted systematic observations in a representative sample of 38 establishments in the Boston area, half of which had been advertised in a tobacco company ad. We also observed seven events in six additional clubs hosting Camel Casbah promotions. Telephone interviews were later completed with club managers.

**Main outcome measure:** Use of branded give-away items, distribution of free cigarette samples, managers' reports of costs and benefits of hosting promotions.

**Results:** The majority of the 38 clubs were observed to use bar paraphernalia including matchbooks with tobacco brand logos, regardless of their history of appearing in tobacco sponsored ads. Free cigarette samples were not observed at any of the sampled clubs, but were a feature of every Casbah event. Managers of clubs in the advertised group were somewhat more likely to report having hosted promotions, but 44% of managers of non-advertised clubs indicated that tobacco promotions had occurred in their establishments in the past. Approximately one third of club managers viewed public links with a tobacco company as a negative feature of hosting promotions.

**Conclusions:** Based on managers' reports, tobacco promotions occurred in more than 50% of the Boston area entertainment venues frequented by young adults. Cigarette companies should be required to inform the attorney general of plans to conduct promotions in adult-only venues to facilitate monitoring of compliance with the Master Settlement Agreement. The negative health and business consequences of hosting promotions should be communicated to bar owners.

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Important progress has been made in recent years towards the goal of reducing tobacco marketing to youth. In 1998, 46 US state attorneys general and the tobacco industry entered into a large scale Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) of lawsuits by the states against the tobacco industry. The states received the promise of payments of \$206 billion over the next 25 years and agreements for certain restrictions on industry marketing and behaviour. For example, the industry was no longer able to give out free samples of cigarettes in most places, give away free merchandise such as caps and backpacks, advertise on billboards, or sponsor concerts.<sup>1</sup> In almost every case, the restrictions included an important exception: the industry could continue these marketing strategies and behaviours in "adult-only facilities". These include bars and nightclubs and other venues where the operator of the establishment assures that no underage person will enter the facility.

Marketing activities in bars and nightclubs are seen by tobacco companies as an important strategy for reaching young adults and influencing their behaviour. Document researchers have uncovered rich descriptions of the intensive and creative methods tobacco companies have used to attract the attention and loyalty of young adults. The techniques include holding swimsuit contests, body art exhibitions, and having troops of female models distribute free samples of cigarettes.<sup>2,3</sup> Document research has revealed that bar and nightclub promotions were being used in the 1980s and grew in importance in the 1990s. More recently, the tobacco industry has made use of the alternative press to reach young adults who frequent these establishments.<sup>4,5</sup> Sepe and Glantz quantified a 300% increase in tobacco advertisements linked with bars and clubs in entertainment weeklies in San Francisco and Philadelphia between 1994 and 1999.<sup>5</sup> At the

same time, there has been an increase in smoking prevalence among young adults and an increase in the rate at which young adult intermittent smokers progressed to habitual smoking.<sup>6–8</sup> Some, but not all, of the increase can be attributed to the aging of youth cohorts with higher smoking prevalence.<sup>7,8</sup> There is reason for concern, however, that some of the increase is due to the intensification of tobacco promotions in bars and clubs.

Although there is ample evidence of their existence from document research, from analysis of advertising practices, and from anecdotal reports in the popular press,<sup>9–13</sup> no published research has systematically monitored bar and nightclub promotions to determine their nature and prevalence, and to assess whether or not the promotions are abiding by the restrictions set out in the MSA. The current study was undertaken to fill those gaps by examining the phenomenon in the Boston metropolitan area. The objectives of this study were to: (1) estimate the prevalence of tobacco promotions in bars and nightclubs in the greater Boston area; (2) characterise the nature of these promotions (for example, distribution of free samples, use of advertising, entertainment, giveaways); and (3) assess managers' views of the costs and benefits of tobacco promotions to the business establishment in order to guide potential interventions aimed at reducing promotions.

## METHODS

### Overview

This study included systematic observation of a representative sample of bars and nightclubs in the Boston metropolitan area during the spring and summer of 2001 and a subsequent telephone survey with the owner or manager of observed establishments. The study protocol was approved by the

institutional review board of the University of Massachusetts Boston.

### Sample design Sampling frame

The study population was 110 bars and clubs listed in the "Club Directory" of a popular entertainment weekly, the *Boston Phoenix*, during the 31 week period between 1 September 2000 and 30 March 2001. Of this population, 49% (n = 54) had appeared at least once in a full page advertisement sponsored by Camel, Marlboro, Newport, or Parliament. The average number of appearances was 12.8. The range was from 1 to 27 appearances. Although Camel was the most frequent advertiser of bars and clubs (a Camel page appeared in the newspaper on 29 of the 31 weeks during this period), other brands used this strategy periodically. Marlboro ran 13 ads that listed local clubs during that time, Newport ran two, and Parliament ran four ads. Of those establishments ever appearing on a tobacco page, 88% appeared on the Camel page, 15% on the Marlboro page, 2% on the Newport page, and 4% on the Parliament page.

### Study sample

The sample design stratified this population according to whether the establishment had appeared at least once during the targeted time frame in an advertisement sponsored by a tobacco company. Twenty establishments were then randomly selected from each stratum.

In May of 2001, after the original sample had been selected, RJ Reynolds began a marketing campaign in the *Boston Phoenix* promoting "7 Pleasures of the Casbah in 70 cities, 700 parties, and 700 trips to Las Vegas" (see Katz and Lavack<sup>3</sup> for a reproduction of this advertisement). Six Boston area clubs were scheduled to hold these promotional events during the months of June and July 2001. We added these seven events to the sample. Two of the six Casbah clubs also fell into the original "advertised" sample.

Observations were completed at 45 events at 42 individual bars and clubs between May and July of 2001. In the original sample of 40 establishments, 38 observations were completed. One club in each category was dropped because it was not open during the night chosen for the visit. Seven additional observations were completed at the Casbah events.

### Manager interviews

Attempts were made to interview the owner or manager of each of the 42 observed clubs. The identity of the owners and managers was obtained from public records and phone calls to the establishments. Twenty three interviews were completed for a response rate of 56%. The response rate was higher for advertised clubs (76%) than for non-advertised clubs (50%). Only two interviews were completed with a manager of one of the six Casbah Clubs, and one of these was also the manager of a club included in the advertised sample.

### Observational data collection protocol

All observations were scheduled on a Thursday, Friday, or Saturday. Pairs of observers (observer "A" and observer "B") were sent to each establishment and instructed to carry out 90 minutes of continuous observation between 10.30 pm and 1.30 am. Each team was equipped with one handheld computer, either a Palm Pilot or HP Jornada. The first observer (A) entered data into the computer for 45 minutes and then gave the computer to the second observer who independently repeated the sequence of observations in the second 45 minute period.

Each pair was also responsible for collecting a napkin and matchbook (regardless of whether it had a tobacco logo) from the site as well as any items distributed as part of a

tobacco promotion (for example, free samples of cigarettes, T shirts, hats, etc). After leaving the club, each observer filled out a post-visit form that provided additional details on any special tobacco promotions that had occurred.

### Manager interview protocol

Four professional interviewers administered the manager interview over the phone between 30 October 2001 and 15 January 2002. Interviewers were blind to the observational data collected at the club. Respondents were informed that their establishment was selected randomly from among those listed in the *Boston Phoenix*. They were told that the goal of the interview was to understand the kind of tobacco promotions that young adults in Massachusetts were exposed to, and also to learn of the advantages and disadvantages to bars and clubs of hosting tobacco promotions. They were offered a \$25 honorarium for completing the 20 minute confidential survey. They were assured that their identity as well as that of their club would not be published. No mention was made of the earlier observational survey.

### Measures

#### Observational data

The establishment and event variables included: the number of rooms in the establishment; cover charge; type of entertainment (live music, pool tables, DJ, video games, dancing, jukebox, karaoke); whether observers' IDs were checked at the door; and smoking restrictions (none, some smoke-free areas, total ban). Patron characteristics included approximate patron ages, and approximate percentage of smokers in the bar/club.

Observers recorded the presence of outdoor and indoor advertising (posted signs, displays, banners, functional signs, and other), and types of bar paraphernalia with tobacco brand names and/or logos (napkins, matchbooks, coasters, etc). The absence or presence of free samples and company representatives was noted. Observers made note of promotional activities as well as sale and distribution patterns of cigarettes within each club. Perceived proportions or counts recorded by the two observers were averaged. Any discrepancy regarding the presence or absence of particular promotional items or activities was resolved through examination of post-visit descriptions and in two cases through follow up discussions with the observers.

#### Interview data

The telephone survey of managers was semi-structured. Respondents were asked whether tobacco promotions had taken place at their establishment during the time that they had been manager. If so, they were asked to describe the kinds of promotions. Interviewers checked a list including the following types: giveaways, free cigarettes, sales by tobacco company employees, games, contests, or entertainment. If a particular type was not mentioned, the interviewer asked about it so that each respondent had an opportunity to mention each type of promotion. If the respondent's bar or club had hosted a promotion, he/she was asked about the advantages and disadvantages of doing so. The following items were included as potential benefits: discounted prices on tobacco products; free entertainment; increased patronage of bar when promotional events take place; monetary benefits for staff or personnel; cost savings on disposable items such as napkins, matchbooks, towels; free market research about patrons; free merchandise for employees (not including cigarettes); revenue for repairs and infrastructure improvements, as well as an open ended category "other" for specification. The following items were included as potential disadvantages: agreement to sell the sponsoring brand exclusively; being publicly associated with the tobacco

**Table 1** Establishment and patron characteristics of observed clubs

	Representative sample of clubs			Camel Casbah events (n = 7)
	Non-advertised clubs (n = 19)	Advertised clubs (n = 19)	p Value	
Patron characteristics				
More than 25% of patrons smoking	53%	74%	0.18	71%
Age 25 and older*	64%	51%	0.06	48%
Establishment/event characteristics				
Number of rooms (mean)*	1.84	2.22	0.48	2.71
Cover charge (mean)*	\$4.58	\$3.58	0.54	\$10.00
Entertainment				
Live music	58%	21%	0.02	14%
DJ	32%	42%	0.50	100%
IDs checked on entry	68%	88%	0.13	85%
Smoke-free areas provided	21%	16%	0.50	0%

\*Mann-Whitney U test used to test significance.

industry; obtrusive or unattractive signage; tobacco company representatives being annoying to customers; pressure on employees to smoke only the sponsored brand, and an "other" category. The same questions on advantages and disadvantages were asked of managers who reported not hosting promotions, although rephrased to inquire about what they considered to be the benefits and negative consequences of hosting tobacco promotions.

### Analysis plan

Differences between the observed and reported characteristics of advertised and non-advertised clubs were tested using the  $\chi^2$  test for dichotomous variables and Mann-Whitney U for interval variables. Due to the small sample size and the exploratory nature of this research, differences with a  $p < 0.10$  are considered significant. Observations were done at all Casbah events in the area (that is, not a sample from which estimates of the population are made), and only descriptive statistics are presented.

## RESULTS

### Observations

Comparisons of patron and establishment characteristics indicated that the non-advertised clubs were significantly more likely to attract an older crowd than advertised clubs: on average, 64% of the patrons were judged to be 25 years of age or older versus 51% and 48% in the advertised clubs and Casbah events respectively (table 1). Rates of smoking were somewhat (but not significantly) higher at the advertised

than non-advertised clubs. A high rate of smoking was also observed at Casbah events. Cover charges were similar and relatively low at both advertised and non-advertised clubs, but were on average twice as high (\$10) at the Casbah events. Live music was significantly more likely to be featured at the non-advertised clubs (58%) than at advertised (21%) clubs, and was seen at only one of the Casbah events (14%). DJs were seen at similar proportions of non-advertised and advertised clubs (32% and 42%, respectively), but were a feature at all Casbah events. The majority of all clubs checked IDs upon patron entry with the non-advertised clubs tending to be the least diligent, but not significantly so. At the time that observations were carried out, none of the towns included in the sample had an ordinance restricting smoking in bars and clubs. Nevertheless a few of the advertised and non-advertised clubs did provide for some smoke-free areas. None of the Casbah clubs had smoking restrictions.

With regard to promotional features, advertised clubs were significantly more likely than non-advertised clubs to display indoor signs advertising a tobacco brand (53% *v* 16%, respectively). Indoor signage was used at 71% of Casbah events (table 2). It is interesting to note, however, that the non-advertised clubs were almost as likely as the advertised clubs to have some form of tobacco branded bar paraphernalia. These items were always on hand at the Casbah events. Observers recorded no distribution of free samples or promotional items, nor did they witness games, activities, or company representatives at either the advertised or the non-advertised clubs. By contrast, every Camel Casbah event

**Table 2** Promotional features of observed clubs

	Representative sample of clubs			Camel Casbah events (n = 7) (%)
	Non-advertised clubs (n = 19) (%)	Advertised clubs (n = 19) (%)	p Value	
Tobacco related promotions				
Tobacco signage				
Outdoor sign	0	0		71
Indoor sign	16	53	0.02	
Bar paraphernalia	53	68	0.51	100
Free samples	0	0		100
Company reps	0	0		100
Other items				
Lighters	0	0		71
Coupons	0	0		29
Gift bags	0	0		100
Manager's reports*				
Hosted tobacco promotions	44	77	0.12	–
Use branded bar paraphernalia	56	100	0.01	–

\*Nine managers from non-advertised clubs and 13 managers from advertised clubs completed interviews. Data from the one manager of a club hosting a Casbah event who completed an interview was disregarded.

**Table 3** Bar managers' perceived benefits and costs of tobacco sponsored bar promotions

	Hosting managers n = 14 (%)	Non-hosting managers n = 9 (%)
<b>Benefits</b>		
Save on disposable bar items	93	89
Free merchandise	21	67
Free entertainment	36	44
Increased patronage	29	44
Market research	7	33
Discounts	7	22
Money	14	0
<b>Costs</b>		
Reps annoying	7	78
Brand restrictions	29	56
Obtrusive signage	21	56
Annoys non-smokers	21	44
Public link with tobacco company	36	33

featured the distribution of free samples and gift bags containing a variety of other promotional items. The items distributed had no Camel logo inscribed.

### Manager interview

Four of the nine managers (44%) of the non-advertised clubs and 10 of the 13 managers (77%) of the advertised clubs reported having hosted a tobacco promotion at some time during their tenure ( $p = 0.12$ ). All managers of the advertised clubs and 55% of the managers of non-advertised clubs ( $p < 0.01$ ) reported using tobacco branded bar paraphernalia.

The vast majority of both hosting and non-hosting managers listed cost savings on disposable items (napkins, matchbooks, towels, etc) as a benefit (93% and 89%, respectively) (table 3). Hosting managers were less likely to mention the benefits of free entertainment (36%), increased patronage (29%), free merchandise (21%), monetary benefits for staff or personnel (14%), market research about patrons (7%), and discounts on tobacco products (7%). In contrast, non-hosting managers were more likely to believe that each of those benefits would accrue to a club that did host tobacco promotions. Non-hosting managers were more likely than hosting managers to mention negative features associated with tobacco promotions. Non-hosting managers were much more likely (78% v 7%) to feel that the tobacco company representatives are annoying to customers and twice as likely to feel that non-smokers would be annoyed (44% v 21%), and that brand restrictions (56% v 29%) and obtrusive signage (56% v 21%) were detrimental to business. The potentially harmful impact of having a public link with a tobacco company was confirmed by about one third of both hosting (36%) and non-hosting (33%) managers.

### DISCUSSION

Because this study was carried out in only one metropolitan area of one state, we must generalise with caution to other areas. It is not clear how often bar and nightclub promotions occur in rural areas, for example. Furthermore, given that Massachusetts was implementing a high visibility anti-tobacco programme during the period we were collecting data, bar owners might have been less amenable to hosting tobacco promotions than might be the case in other states. Nevertheless, it is useful to document these findings as a benchmark against which future research in other areas may be compared.

### Prevalence of promotions

The *Boston Phoenix*, which describes itself as New England's "largest arts and entertainment weekly", is available at no cost in newspaper boxes around the metropolitan area and is distributed widely on college campuses. It is a major source of information about social life for both youth and young adults in the Boston area. During the seven month period in 2000 and 2001 used to establish our sampling frame, almost half of all the bars and nightclubs that listed events in the Phoenix took advantage of free advertising that linked the club with a cigarette brand. We expected that these advertisements would be indicative of promotional activities taking place in the clubs, but our systematic observations and interviews with club managers indicated that the link between advertising and promotional activities was imperfect. Observations demonstrated that the proportion of clubs using paraphernalia such as napkins, ashtrays, and matches with cigarette brand logos was almost as high in clubs that had not appeared in tobacco advertisements (53%) as among those that had (68%).

Except for venues holding Camel Casbah events, we observed no additional promotional activities, such as the distribution of free samples of cigarettes or solicitation of names for mailing lists. However, interviews with managers of the sampled clubs indicated that these more intensive promotional activities (that is, games, contests, merchandise giveaways, and the like) had indeed occurred in the past. This experience was somewhat (but not significantly) more likely to be reported by managers of clubs that had appeared in tobacco advertisements. Still, 44% of managers of clubs that had not appeared in tobacco ads reported that they had, in fact, hosted these sorts of promotions. Thus, advertising cannot be used as a clear gauge of on-site promotional activity. Extrapolating from the finding that roughly half (49%) the establishments in our sample frame had appeared in a tobacco ad and half had not, and that 44% of the managers of non-advertised clubs and 77% of managers of advertised clubs reported having hosted promotions, it is reasonable to estimate that over 50% of the bars and clubs listed in *Boston Phoenix* have hosted tobacco promotions ( $((0.44 \times 0.51) + (0.77 \times 0.49) = 0.60)$ ).

### MSA compliance

Current litigation indicates that tobacco companies have violated the terms of the MSA by providing branded merchandise to customers. Observations demonstrated that matchbooks with cigarette brand logos were provided to customers in many of the sampled clubs in the Boston metropolitan area. The MSA states that manufacturers can no longer "market, distribute, offer, sell, [or] license...any apparel or other merchandise (other than Tobacco Products, [or] items the sole function of which is to advertise Tobacco Products) which bears a Brand Name".<sup>1</sup> An Ohio Court of Appeals recently determined that matchbooks with tobacco industry advertising that are given away for free constitute merchandise under the MSA.<sup>14</sup> The court found that "the common understanding of the term merchandise includes brand name matchbooks because they are tangible items, with a utilitarian value, that are bought and sold in commerce". Distribution of the merchandise for free does not prevent it from being considered merchandise. According to the court's decision, allowing the merchandise restrictions to be defeated by free distribution "would eviscerate the ban on marketing and distribution of brand name apparel or other merchandise contained in the MSA". The court also determined that advertising was not the sole function of the matchbooks, and therefore the matchbooks "are no different from T-shirts or other items of apparel that sport a tobacco



brand name and are banned by the MSA".<sup>14</sup> The case is currently on appeal to the Ohio Supreme Court.

There is an additional exception within the section on merchandise restrictions which has not been litigated and which is open to interpretation. The exception states the brand name merchandise restriction does not "apply to apparel or other merchandise used within an Adult-Only Facility that is not distributed (by sale or otherwise) to any member of the general public". One might argue that patrons in an adult-only facility are not members of the general public. Although the MSA does not define the term "general public", the language of the section indicates that the bar patrons do not lose their status as "the general public" by walking through a door. If the tobacco industry could distribute any brand name merchandise to patrons of an adult-only facility, then the above exception would not be qualified by the words "that is not distributed...to any member of the general public". We must attribute meaning to these words and the implication is that the general public still exists within the bar setting. The words "general public" must refer to the bar patrons as distinguished from the employees. The MSA still allows the tobacco industry the ability to distribute merchandise to the staff of the adult-only facility, but not to the general public patronising the facility. If the MSA allowed widespread distribution of branded merchandise within adult-only facilities it would lead to a result where the industry could give away enormous amounts of branded merchandise and undermine the strict merchandise prohibition section. The adult-only facility exception would swallow the rule prohibiting branded merchandise. This result is similar to the Ohio court's warning against free distribution as a tactic that would destroy the prohibition. Matchbooks have utilitarian purposes that qualify them as merchandise, serve functions other than advertising, and are distributed to the general public, therefore they are prohibited brand name merchandise under the MSA.

### Challenge of monitoring

The use of the alternative press and placing products in trendy bars is described in internal industry documents as "trend influence marketing" which relies for its success on being covert and not sales-oriented<sup>15</sup> an approach currently known as "stealth marketing". Although the advertising is sometimes linked with on-site promotions (as in the Camel Casbah events), it often is not. It serves the primary purpose of lending "immediate hip credibility to the brand"<sup>15</sup> by association with "hip" night spots. Consequently, tobacco promotions are difficult to monitor effectively. Promotional strategies change often. One such shift in strategy occurred with the disappearance of the weekly multi-venue Camel advertisements and the appearance of Casbah ads in the *Boston Phoenix* in the spring of 2001. Early in 2002 the weekly "Camel Page" disappeared from the *Boston Phoenix*, and to our knowledge, has not reappeared since. The decline of advertised tobacco sponsored bar nights in alternative newspapers has also been documented in California.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the strategy of bar and club promotions persists in new forms. Patrons who sign up for mailing lists may get email alerts from "Camel Confidential" touting the exclusive benefits (available events and products) of membership. The email then offers a password protected website<sup>17</sup> where the recipient can find out where promotions are occurring in their area. Other methods include direct mail pamphlets, ads that advertise contests (a week at the Marlboro Ranch; Kool Spades Slam Tournament) with toll free numbers to call that provide the callers with information about local bar nights.

As document researchers have revealed,<sup>2,3</sup> tobacco companies have for years been engaged in the practice of "stealth marketing" which has lately spread to makers of other

### What this paper adds

The 1998 Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) limits many forms of tobacco marketing, but provides specific exceptions for many promotional activities in "adult-only" environments. There is now wide concern about the growth of tobacco promotions in bars and clubs and their potential for increasing smoking among young adults. Until now only the frequency of advertising linking cigarette brands with bars and clubs has been summarised, leaving the actual prevalence and specific nature of promotional activities taking place in these venues unexplored.

Through observation and interviews in a representative sample of bars and clubs, this study estimates that promotions occurred at more than 50% of the venues that were listed in the directory of the most popular entertainment weekly in the area. Monitoring these promotions is difficult because activities in the establishment are not reliably linked with newspaper advertisements, and channels for notification of events are now done via the web and direct email marketing. In the interest of public health and compliance with the MSA, the tobacco industry should be required to keep the attorney general informed of their actions.

products such as computer game accessories and digital cameras.<sup>18</sup> When the product being marketed is one responsible for the leading cause of preventable disease and death in the USA, it is a public health priority to monitor those promotional activities. Rather than using public funds to design and carry out monitoring schemes, tobacco companies should be required to report their plans.

A model of this type of self reporting arrangement already exists between United States Smokeless Tobacco Company (USST) and the attorney general of California (personal communication with Dennis Eckhart, assistant attorney general, California, 18 November 2003). USST has agreed to notify the California attorney general's office when it will be sponsoring an event at an adult-only facility. The attorney general then may send representatives to monitor MSA compliance at these events. The MSA has detailed compliance and enforcement requirements that are undermined by stealth marketing. The tobacco companies can assist the attorneys general in fulfilling the goals of the MSA through a simple notification process as set out in the USST memorandum of understanding. Similar memoranda of understanding should be entered into by all the tobacco companies and the state attorneys general.

### Potential for reducing bar and club promotions

It is noteworthy that one third of bar and club managers view the public link between their establishment and a major tobacco company as having a potentially detrimental impact on their business. This suggests that publicising those linkages could reduce some managers' willingness to permit their sites be used as tobacco promotion venues. An effort to raise the awareness of owners of the negative consequences of tobacco promotions to their patrons' health and to their business could be a useful intervention.

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# The Lighter Side



IDIOT OF MASS DESTRUCTION

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