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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 highlighted 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.

SIGNALING SUPPORT: SOCIAL MEDIA EXPRESSIONS, PRODUCTS AND INITIATIVES

We identified several examples of cigar/cigarillo and hookah manufacturers integrating BLM and racial equity themes in their advertising and merchandise. Social media posts included expressions of support, solidarity, ‘listening’, remembrance and

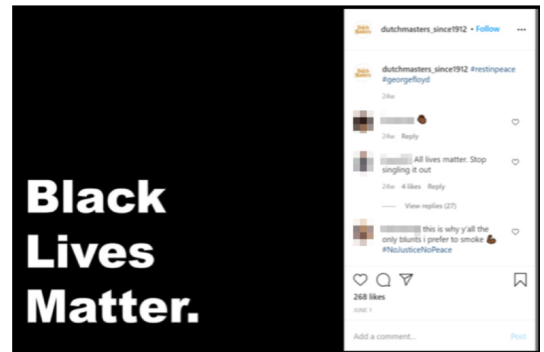


Figure 2 A 1 June 2020 Instagram post from cigar/cigarillo brand Dutch Masters featuring a black square, the phrase ‘Black Lives Matter’ and a hashtag reference to George Floyd. (image source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA5WqHkg2Zu/>)

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 jewellery 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 promising these initiatives included Swisher

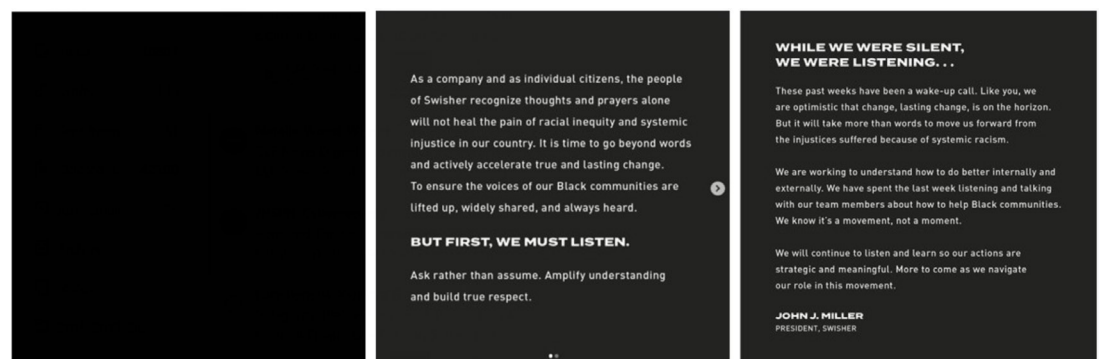


Figure 1 An Instagram carousel posted by Swisher in June 2020 featuring: (1) an empty black square posted on 2 June 2020 as part of ‘Blackout Tuesday’, a social media action where supporters posted similar posts in solidarity across various platforms; (2) a statement posted on 4 June 2020 from the company president about racial inequity in America, without mentioning BLM specifically; (3) a promise to take action to address systemic racism, posted on 15 June 2020. (image source: <https://www.trinketsandtrash.org/detail.php?artifactid=15409&page=1>)



Figure 3 A 19 June 2020 Instagram post from cigar/cigarillo brand Swisher Sweets referencing Juneteenth and stating 'Reflective and resolute'. (image source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBn19YDnAjv/>)

International and John Middleton Co., makers of Swisher Sweets and Black & Mild cigarillos, products disproportionately used by young, Black consumers.^{10 11} 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).⁹ John Middleton Co. advertised a new initiative which included

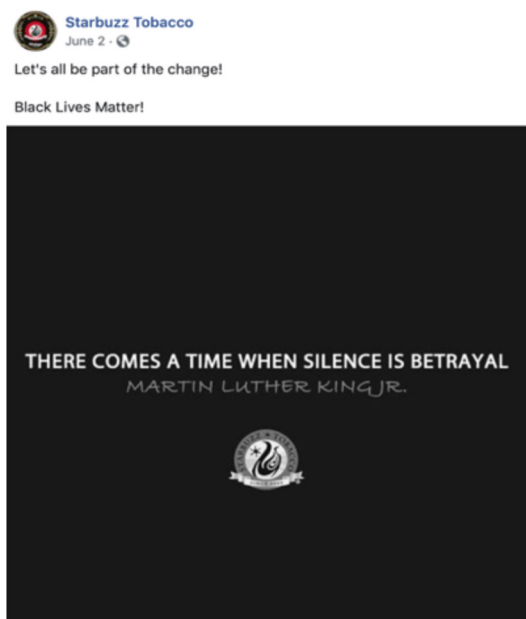


Figure 4 Facebook post featuring a black square and a quote from Dr Martin Luther King Jr, posted by hookah company Starbuzz Tobacco on 'Blackout Tuesday' (2 June 2020), a day in which individuals and organisations posted black squares on their social media accounts as a gesture of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests against the police killing of George Floyd. (image source: <https://www.facebook.com/StarbuzzTobacco/photos/a.376580699062/10159078516924063/?type=3&theater>)

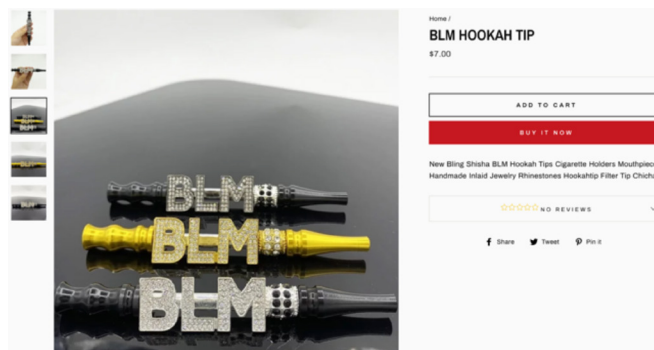


Figure 5 BLM-branded hookah products available for sale in 2020 from Blazee, a commercial website selling hookah products. (image source: <https://www.blazehookah.com/products/blm-hookah-tip>)

advertising of Black-owned businesses and an initial commitment of \$1 million to non-profits supporting them (figure 7).¹²

DISCUSSION

The use of BLM and racial equity messaging by the tobacco industry is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the products in these targeted messages—cigars/cigarillos and hookahs—are disproportionately used by and cause harm to non-white communities.^{13 14} We did not find similar examples for other tobacco products, such as smokeless tobacco. Second, this marketing of products that exacerbate disparities in tobacco-related harms^{15–17} is in contrast to the work of the BLM movement, which pursues equity and the eradication of the targeting and harming of Black individuals.¹⁸

Racial inequities in tobacco impact are well documented. In the US, Black individuals assume an inordinate burden of tobacco-related diseases.^{15–17} An extensive literature documents the tobacco industry's aggressive targeting of Black communities, such as elevated rates of advertising in Black neighbourhoods,^{15 19} price promotions,¹⁹ and the use of culturally-tailored messages and focused marketing in publications with a primarily Black readership to sell menthol cigarettes.^{20–22} 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

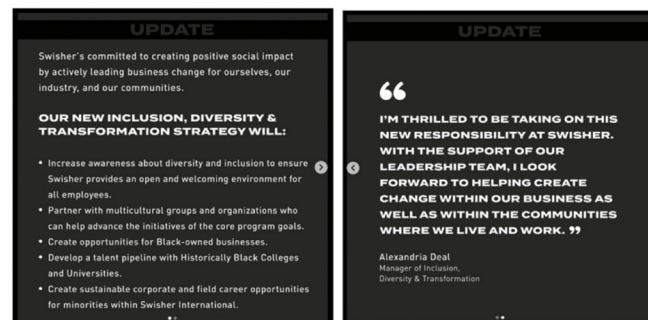


Figure 6 An Instagram carousel posted by Swisher Sweets in July 2020 with an update about the company's 'Inclusion, Diversity & Transformation Strategy' to support Black Lives Matter. The posts describe how the brand will create economic opportunities for Black-owned businesses, artists, and workers, as well as introduce the manager who will lead this initiative. (image source: <http://www.trinketsandtrash.org/detail.php?artifactid=15408&page=4>)

John Middleton Co. Stands Against Systemic Racism

1 message

Black & Mild <no-reply@e.blackandmild.com>

Mon, Jul 27, 2020 at 12:02 PM

Reply-To: Black & Mild <bounce@e.blackandmild.com>
To:

Read our plan to fight for economic equality.

This email is being sent to you because you certified that you are a smoker 21+ interested in communications from John Middleton Co. brands and should not be forwarded. If you are unable to see the images below, please contact us at 1-855-5610000. The BlackandMild.com website is restricted to eligible smokers 21 years of age or older.

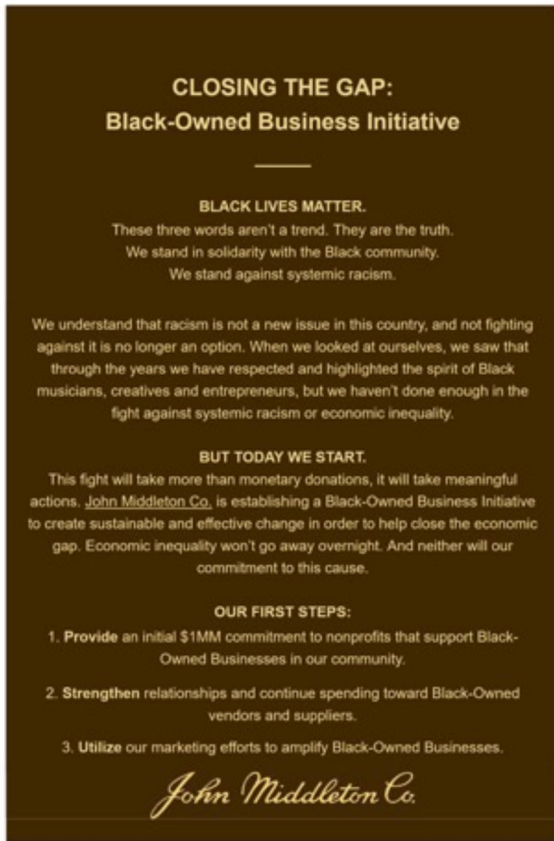


Figure 7 Email from cigar/cigarillo company Black & Mild, sent 27 July 2020, with a message from their parent company, John Middleton Co., supporting Black Lives Matter. The email outlines their Black-Owned Business Initiative plan to address economic inequality. (image source: <http://www.trinketsandtrash.org/detail.php?artifactid=15404&page=1>)

image and further their business interests.^{15 23 24} The examples identified in this review illustrate a recent form of this long-standing pattern of tobacco industry-targeted marketing of the Black community, and reinforce previous studies^{25 26} that have established the impact of this targeted marketing on use. As the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) weighs the public health harms and benefits of new tobacco products seeking marketing authorisation, the role of targeted marketing on increasing appeal and attracting/addicting vulnerable populations should be an essential factor in the equation.

Finally, the BLM-related industry messages observed have particular salience amid the FDA's announced intentions to ban flavoured cigars and menthol cigarettes, policies that have the potential to save countless Black lives,²⁷ and that can follow similar international policy actions.^{28 29} Groups such as the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council have actively advocated for such policies and made use of community organising strategies to inform and mobilise those in communities likely to be impacted by them.³⁰ History has shown though that previous US efforts to restrict tobacco products, including

menthol cigarettes, have been met with industry resistance. In the face of such resistance, the examples highlighted are clearly yet another example of industry exploitation of Black 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)⁴ 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.

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