

# The African Americanization of menthol cigarette use in the United States

Phillip S. Gardiner

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Today, over 70% of African American smokers prefer menthol cigarettes, compared with 30% of White smokers. This unique social phenomenon was principally occasioned by the tobacco industry's masterful manipulation of the burgeoning Black, urban, segregated, consumer market in the 1960s. Through the use of television and other advertising media, coupled with culturally tailored images and messages, the tobacco industry "African Americanized" menthol cigarettes. The tobacco industry successfully positioned mentholated products, especially Kool, as young, hip, new, and healthy. During the time that menthols were gaining a large market share in the African American community, the tobacco industry donated funds to African American organizations hoping to blunt the attack on their products. Many of the findings in this article are drawn from the tobacco industry documents disclosed following the Master Settlement Agreement in 1998. After a short review of the origins and growth of menthols, this article examines some key social factors that, when considered together, led to disproportionate use of mentholated cigarettes by African Americans compared with other Americans. Unfortunately, the long-term impact of the industry's practice in this community may be partly responsible for the disproportionately high tobacco-related disease and mortality among African Americans generally and African American males particularly.

## Introduction

Mentholated cigarettes have been a ubiquitous part of the smoking landscape in the United States for the past 75 years. Since the introduction of Spud cigarettes in 1925, mentholated cigarettes have established a significant foothold in the United States smoking market, where today these brands represent 26% of all cigarettes sold and consumed (Federal Trade Commission [FTC], 2002). This finding is significant on its own, given that only three countries—the Philippines (60%), Cameroon (35%–40%), and Hong Kong (26%)—have higher or equal rates of menthol cigarette use compared with the United States (ERC Group, 2001). However, a unique history in the United States led to the rise and acceptance of

menthol cigarettes and the adoption of these products by over 70% of African American smokers, as compared with 30% of White smokers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 1998).

This article examines key social factors that, when taken together, conspired to create the demand for menthol cigarettes in the African American community. The African Americanization of menthol cigarettes by the tobacco industry included targeted marketing, use of segregated markets, capitalization on the growing "Black ethos" of the Civil Rights movement, and the promotion of the "healthful" qualities of menthol.

Menthol use has become widespread in our culture, residing in everything from chewing gum to liniments. It also is an additive in *all* tobacco products, a fact unknown to many (Hopp, 1993; Table 1). The menthol additive laced in cigarettes today is the chief constituent of peppermint oil and has a minty fresh odor, stimulates cold receptors, has an anesthetic effect, increases salivary flow, dilates the bronchial

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Phillip S. Gardiner, Dr.P.H., Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program (TRDRP), University of California Office of the President, Oakland, CA.

Correspondence: Phillip S. Gardiner, Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program, University of California Office of the President, 300 Lakeside Drive, 6th floor, Oakland, CA 94612-3550 USA. Tel: +1 (510) 987-9853; Fax: (510) 835-4740; E-mail: phillip.gardiner@ucop.edu

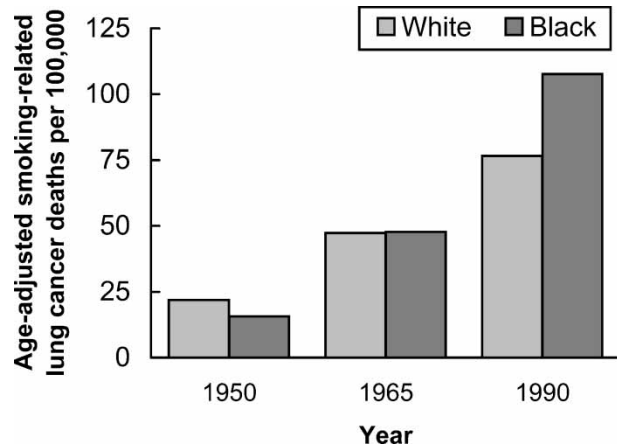
**Table 1.** Menthol content of U.S. tobacco products

Product	Menthol (mg)
Regular (nonmenthol) cigarettes	0.003
Menthol cigarettes (weak effect)	0.1–0.2
Menthol cigarettes (strong effect)	0.25–0.45
Pipe tobacco	0.3
Chewing tobacco	0.05–0.1

Source: Hopp (1993, p. 7).

pathways, and increases transbuccal drug absorption (Gardiner, 2000; Hopp, 1993; Kluger, 1996; USDHHS, 1998).

Understanding the African Americanization of menthol cigarettes is no trivial matter, because it is a documented fact that African American men have a disproportionately high mortality rate from cancers of the trachea, bronchus, and lung, among other types of cancer (USDHHS, 1998; Figure 1). Moreover, African Americans smoke fewer cigarettes per day (Clark, Gautam, & Gerson, 1996); take fewer puffs per cigarette (McCarthy et al., 1995); maintain higher blood levels of cotinine, the major metabolite of nicotine (Benowitz et al., 1999; Caraballo et al., 1998; Wagenknecht, et al., 1990); and have higher carbon monoxide concentrations in their blood (Ahijevych, Gillespie, Demirci, & Jagadeesh, 1996; Jarvik, Tashkin, Caskey, McCarthy, & Roseblatt, 1994), compared with other racial and ethnic groups. In fact, lung cancer rates among African Americans have increased significantly compared with those of White Americans over the past 40 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003; Figure 2). The jump in 1990 lung cancer mortality rates among African American males reflects a 20- to 25-year latency period, which corresponds to the increased use of menthol cigarettes by this population.

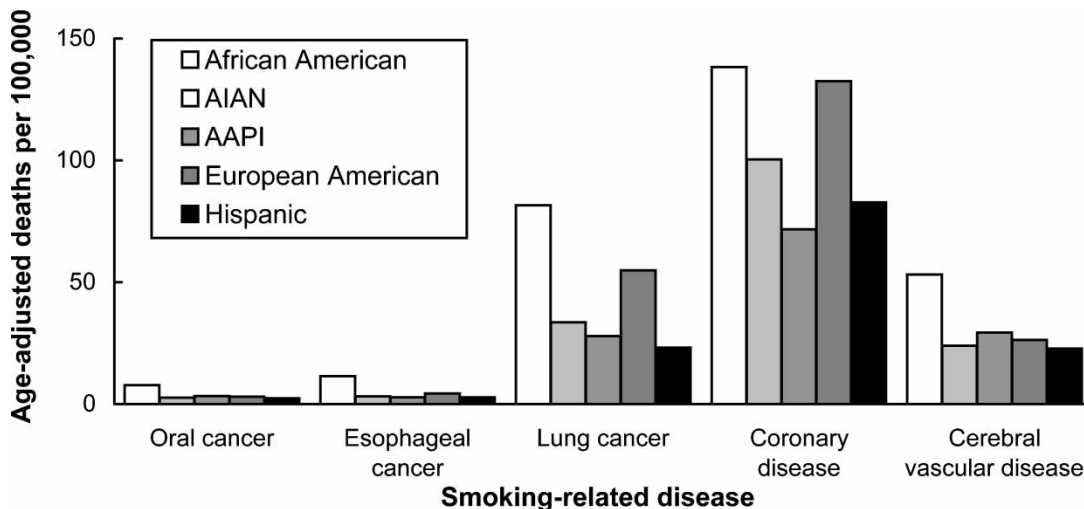


**Figure 2.** Age-adjusted smoking-related lung cancer deaths rates in the United States among African and White American males. From CDC (2003).

One hypothesis generated from these facts and guiding some research over the past decade is that even though African Americans consume fewer cigarettes on a daily basis, their use of mentholated cigarettes, particularly among males, may be an important causal factor in this population’s elevated lung cancer mortality. Although this hypothesis has produced contradictory epidemiological findings (Carpenter, Jarvik, Morgenstern, McCarthy, & London, 1999; Sidney, Tekawa, Friedman, Sadler, & Tashkin, 1995), a historical account of how and when African Americans became predominately menthol smokers is an important and necessary step in gaining a full and accurate picture of menthol use in the United States.

*Method*

This article traces the historical development of key social factors affecting the African American



**Figure 1.** Age-adjusted death rates for males by race and ethnicity, 1992–1994. AIAN = American Indian/Alaska Native; AAPI = Asian American/Pacific Islander. From USDHHS (1998, pp. 140–141).

population in the 1960s that led to an overwhelming adoption of menthol cigarettes by African American smokers. A brief historical overview of the origins and growth of menthol cigarette use from 1925 to the present is presented, followed by an examination of the tobacco industry's successful marketing of mentholated cigarettes to the African American community in the 1960s.

The major sources for this article are tobacco industry documents. In 1998, literally millions of pages of heretofore undisclosed industry documents were made available after the Master Settlement Agreement between state attorneys general and the major tobacco companies (Hurt & Robertson, 1998). One of the main documents used in this article is "The Growth of Menthols, 1933 to 1977," written by MSA, Inc., for Brown & Williamson (MSA, Inc., 1978). Although a number of industry documents are cited in this article, the Black market analyses by R. J. Reynolds helped provide insight into the industry's goals, understanding, and perspectives of the African American community ("Consumer wants study," 1979; Haller, 1966; Thale, 1977).

The 1998 report of the surgeon general *Tobacco Use Among U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups*, was relied on to scientifically ground this article (USDHHS, 1998). Additionally, the articles by Garten and Falkner on their Web site, *Menthol and Tobacco Smoking*, were used extensively in the "Origins and Growth of Menthol Cigarettes" section of this article (Garten & Falkner, 2001a, 2001b). Finally, the presenters and participants at The First Conference on Menthol Cigarettes: Setting the Research Agenda, held in Atlanta Georgia, March 2002, were instrumental in identifying and elaborating the thesis of this manuscript.

#### *Origins and growth of mentholated cigarettes*

Lloyd F. (Spud) Hughes was the originator of the mentholated cigarette (Reid, 1993). The folklore surrounding this invention is that, in 1925, Spud Hughes placed his tobacco in a baking powder tin along with his daily treatment of menthol crystals, which he took regularly for a persistent cold, and closed it for the night. In the morning, he rolled a cigarette and realized that he was smoking a mentholated cigarette, something that neither he, nor anyone else, had ever smoked before. Hughes applied for and a year later received a patent for spraying tobacco with menthol (Reid, 1993). He went on to produce and market Spud cigarettes, the first mentholated cigarette brand (Reid, 1993). Through many twists and turns, ultimately the Spud Cigarette Corporation was acquired by the Axton-Fisher Company in 1927; they were taken over by the Philip Morris Corporation in 1944 (Garten & Falkner, 2001a; Reid). However, by 1963, Philip Morris stopped

production of Spud cigarettes in the United States due to their unprofitability resulting from competition with other mentholated cigarette brands (Garten & Falkner, 2001a; Reid).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, numerous mentholated cigarette brands and specially treated cigarettes became available. In 1927, along with Lloyd Hughes' Spuds, the Lambert Pharmaceutical Company introduced Listerine Cigarettes, and the Hed Klee Tobacco Company jumped on the flavored cigarette bandwagon and launched "The Original Eucalyptus Smoke" (Garten & Falkner, 2001a). Corresponding to these developments, other tobacco companies began to manufacture their own versions of mentholated cigarettes in the early 1930s: Snowball was marketed by Paul A. Wener, Cigarette-Time was sold by Philip Morris, Skis were produced by Fleming-Hall Tobacco, and Menthorettes were produced by Rosedor Cigarette Company (Garten & Falkner, 2001a). However, the introduction of Penguin by Brown & Williamson in 1931, later replaced by Kool mentholated cigarettes in 1933, set the standard for the early menthol market. During this time period, mentholated cigarettes represented only 2% of the tobacco market, and Kool was the market leader until the introduction of filter-tipped Salem mentholated cigarettes in 1956 (MSA, Inc., 1978).

From 1933 to 1956, menthol cigarettes generally and Kool particularly were seen as "throat" cigarettes to be used when a cough or a cold prevented the use of one's regular brand (MSA, Inc., 1978). The Kool advertising of the day emphasized the supposed healthful nature of Kool with slogans like "Keep a clear head with Kools. All the signs seem to point to a tough winter: cold, ice, chills and sniffles. Why not play it safe and smoke Kools?" and "Has a stuffed-up head killed your taste for smoking? Light a Kool. The mild menthol gives a cooling, soothing sensation ...leaves your nose and throat feeling clean and clear." Kool was not only for the winter months but also for summer: "There is just enough menthol in Kools to soothe your throat and refresh your mouth no matter how hot the weather gets—no matter how hard and how long you smoke" (Brown & Williamson, 1942).

Even after the FTC filed suit and won a judgment against Brown & Williamson for false advertising (Brown & Williamson, 1942), the industry generally and menthol producers specifically continued to promote the imaginary health benefits of menthol cigarettes. In this regard, the Kool mascot, Willie the Penguin, in 1947 continued to tout the ice-cool nature of Kool (MSA, Inc., 1978).

Salem's introduction in 1956 pushed the menthol market share from 2% to 5% within the first year of its introduction (MSA, Inc., 1978; Table 2). The success of the new filter-tipped offering from R. J. Reynolds signaled the way for other producers to join the field:

**Table 2.** Menthol U.S. market share, 1920–2000

Year	Market share (%)
1920–1955	2
1955–1957	5
1963	16
1978	28
1990–2001	27–29

Sources. Brown & Williamson (1978), Federal Trade Commission (2002).

BelAir, Oasis, Alpine, Montclair, and Benson & Hedges Menthol were just a few of the new brands hitting the market in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Garten & Falkner, 2001a; MSA, Inc., 1978). The appearance of Newport in 1957 seemed to be one among many new menthol cigarettes introduced in the late 1950s. Newport, today's menthol market leader, was initially eclipsed by both Salem and Kool. This was especially true in the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s when the preeminence of Salem helped to push the entire menthol share from 5% in 1957 to 16% in 1963 (Garten & Falkner, 2001b; MSA, Inc., 1978). Salem sought to position its menthol offering not as a specialty item but rather as a cigarette that should be used year-round, using messages like "perpetual springtime" and "a wonderful world of freshness" (MSA, Inc., 1978).

Yet the almost doubling of menthol's market share, from 16% in 1963 to 28% in 1978, was due in many respects to the rise of Kool menthol cigarettes and this product's embrace by the African American community (MSA, Inc., 1978). Kool's popularity grew to the point during the 1960s and 1970s that it became the menthol market leader in 1972 (MSA, Inc., 1978). Kool didn't maintain its market dominance for long. By 1981, Salem had reemerged as the leader in the menthol field (MSA, Inc., 1978). Kool's decline was fueled in part by the proliferation of menthol extension and the rise of low-tar cigarettes (MSA, Inc., 1978).

Two urban myths also may have played a role in the fall-off of the Kool brand (Mikkleson & Mikkleson, 2001). Rumors spread in the mid and late-1970s that Kool cigarettes contained fiberglass. Another legend suggested that the K in Kool was emblematic of the Ku Klux Klan and that Kool was a plot by racists to addict and kill Blacks.

Today, all other menthol brands have receded in the wake of the Newport explosion. Since 1993, Newport has been the market leader for sales of mentholated cigarettes (Garten & Falkner, 2001b; Sutton, 2001). By 1999, Newport accounted for more than 75% of all of Lorillard's sales, and it claimed a 7.5% share of the approximately \$50 billion cigarette market, up from 6.9% in 1998 (Campbell, 2000). The consumption of mentholated cigarettes has remained relatively constant at about 26% since the mid-1970s (FTC, 2002;

see Table 2). Although the leading brand has shifted from Kool to Salem and now to Newport, the defining feature of these products remains their overwhelming use by the African American community, a unique feature established in the 1960s (Campbell; MSA, Inc., 1978).

### The African Americanization of menthol cigarettes

Numerous social factors, when taken together, conspired to coerce the adoption of menthol cigarettes by a majority of African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. Key among these factors was the targeted marketing by the tobacco industry to the segregated, yet growing, African American urban market. Identification by young urban Blacks with menthols as "fresh and modern" helped establish these brands as an important part of the African American experience. Additionally, African Americans became attached to the notion that menthols were safer to smoke than regular, nonmentholated cigarettes. At the same time that the industry vigorously pushed menthol products on Blacks, they also were giving money to Black community organizations, including civil rights groups. In essence, the tobacco industry successfully created an attachment to menthols that still resonates in the Black community today. Initially targeted to a high-end clientele when they were first broadly advertised in the 1930s, and though consumed primarily by women, menthol brands became the cigarette of choice for African American smokers by the 1970s (Garten & Falkner, 2001a; USDHHS, 1998).

#### *The emergence of the African American urban market*

Not until the 1940s did the tobacco industry target African Americans as a distinct consumer market (USDHHS, 1998). The African American market was less than \$1 billion following World War II. However, this market blossomed to \$30 billion by the mid-1960s (Gibson, 1969). Following World War II and continuing into the 1950s and 1960s, a majority of African Americans migrated from rural parts of the United States and settled in urban settings, even within the South (Gibson, 1969). As Table 3 shows, the 1960s was a time when Blacks began to swell America's inner cities. Gibson's 1960s population estimates are included to give the reader an accurate picture of what tobacco industry executives were projecting at the time concerning the Black urban market.

The tobacco industry clearly saw the African American market as a new and growing phenomenon that was increasingly urban and fertile for exploitation (Gibson, 1969). Given the segregation of Black

**Table 3.** Proportion of African Americans in populations of U.S. cities, 1960–1970

City	Proportion (%)		
	1960	1965 <sup>a</sup>	1970 <sup>b</sup>
Detroit	29	39	47
New Orleans	37	41	45
Baltimore	35	41	47
St. Louis	29	37	46
Newark	34	40	46
Oakland	23	31	39
Gary	39	44	50

Note. <sup>a</sup>estimated, <sup>b</sup>projected.  
Source: Gibson (1969).

communities, coupled with distinct cultural wants and needs of this population, specialty products (e.g., hair oils, make up) were developed by both Black and White manufacturers to service African American needs. Indeed, the African American migration and urban concentration was the ideal setting to promote new products, specially targeted to the new consumer, and the tobacco industry was one of the first manufactures to grasp this fact (Pollay, Lee, & Carter-Whitney, 1992). By the 1950s, tobacco companies were being described as “leaders among advertisers gunning for a bigger share of the Negro market” (Dallaire, 1955).

In the midst of this new urban market upsurge, menthol cigarettes took their place alongside malt liquors, fortified wines, and cheap whiskies as another product marketed predominately to poor and “colored” communities (Alaniz and Wilkes, 1998; Hacker, 1987). Increasingly, these products were advertised, marketed, and sold primarily in these communities (and they still are). In this instance, utilization and promotion of segregated marketing and practices meant different smokes for different folks.

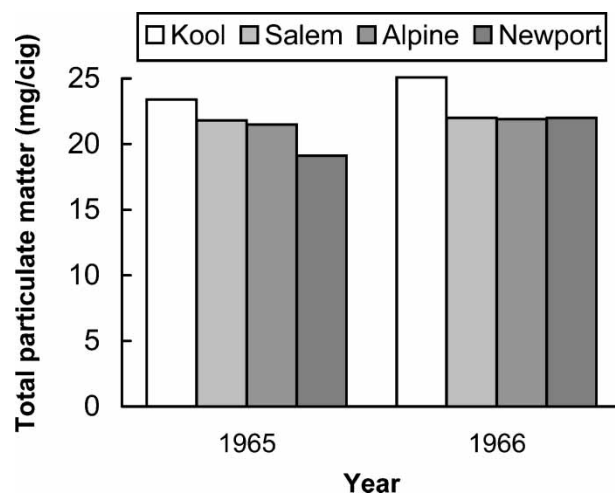
*The advent of Kool cigarettes as the menthol market leader through their embrace by the African American community*

In 1953, Philip Morris commissioned the Roper organization to conduct a general survey of Americans’ smoking habits. The only menthol cigarette on the survey and the only one of any importance in the early 1950s was Kool. The Roper survey showed that only 2% of White Americans preferred the Kool brand. By contrast, the survey reported that 5% of African Americans preferred Kools (Roper, 1953). This small difference in preference was successfully parlayed by Brown & Williamson executives, and later by the tobacco industry as a whole, into the 70% vs. 30% difference that we see today between Black and White menthol smokers, respectively (USDHHS, 1998). Through targeted marketing and some chance developments,

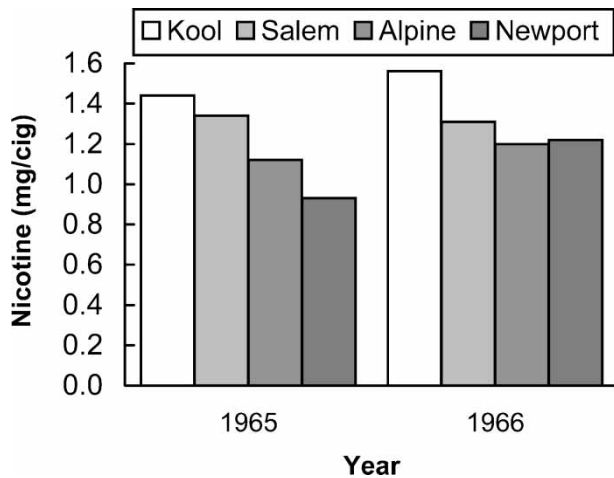
Kool became the menthol industry leader by the early 1970s (MSA, Inc., 1978). One fortuitous event was the rise and demise of the Tar Derby.

The Tar Derby, a time of more stringent FTC regulations on tar levels, was brought about in 1957 by articles in *Reader’s Digest* that depicted the evils of tar in cigarettes, leading many smokers to seek alternatives from high-tar, nonfiltered cigarettes, which subsequently drove many manufacturers to reduce the tar content of some of their brands (MSA, Inc., 1978). In the late 1950s, Salem provided smokers with the taste and the strength they sought. However, once the FTC relaxed tar reporting standards in 1961, smokers began to look for more flavorful (read: stronger) cigarettes. Kool was one of the main beneficiaries of the ending of the Tar Derby in 1961; people could put down their nonfiltered cigarettes and pick up a filter-tipped Kool to get more taste, flavor, and strength (MSA, Inc., 1978). Many people assumed that menthols had less tar; however, nothing could be further from the truth. Not only were Kools’ tar and nicotine content comparable with the leading nonmenthol brands, but by the mid-1960s, Brown & Williamson’s menthol offering contained more tar and nicotine than either of its main menthol rivals, Salem or Newport (Johnston, 1966; Figures 3 and 4).

With the release of the 1964 report of the surgeon general, which unequivocally linked smoking (in males) with lung cancer, many smokers were led to seek alternative cigarettes, especially those that appeared healthier. With smokers making changes in the early to mid-1960s, Brown & Williamson executives launched a bold new strategy aimed to position Kool, through the medium of television, with persons wanting to switch and with those who were working



**Figure 3.** Machine-smoked (Federal Trade Commission method) tar (total particulate matter) levels of popular menthol cigarettes, 1965 and 1966. From Johnston (1966).



**Figure 4.** Machine-smoked (Federal Trade Commission method) nicotine levels of popular menthol cigarettes, 1965 and 1966. From Johnston (1966).

and lower middle class (Johnston, 1966). In discussing the demographic targets of Brown & Williamson, one Philip Morris interoffice memo pointed out, “These people read less and spend more time watching television than other groups. B&W spends a larger share (91%) of its advertising budget on television than any other tobacco company (PM is second, with about 85%; Reynolds is third, with about 65%)” (Johnston). Another Philip Morris interoffice memo concluded that the efficient use of advertising had an impact on the Black market: “Studies show that Kool’s shares among Negroes went from 6.8% in 1965 to 9.8% in 1967. This is equivalent to 0.3% industry share, or 1/3 of Kools’ total growth in the 2 years” (Udow, 1968).

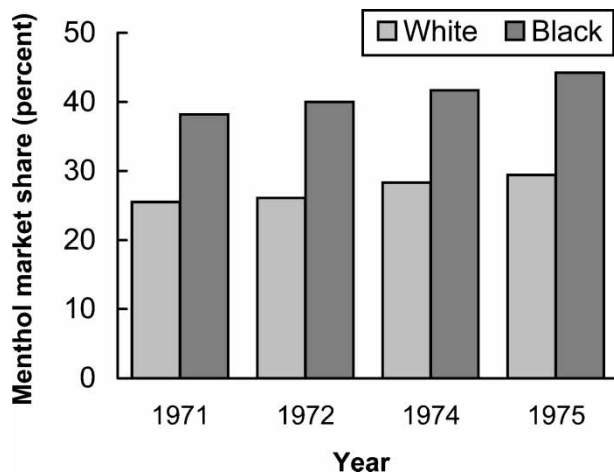
The tobacco industry advertising assault on the African American community was not restricted to television. Elston Howard, an African American player for the New York Yankees baseball during the 1950s and 1960s, was a spokesperson for Kool menthol cigarettes. His picture adorned the pages of ethnic magazines like *Ebony*, stating, “No other menthol cigarette gives you real menthol magic. Come all the way up to the menthol magic of Kool” (Print, 1968). Between 1963 and 1965, cigarette advertising more than tripled in the pages of *Ebony*, one of the main African American magazines (Pollay et al., 1992). By 1962, *Ebony* carried twice as many cigarette ads (57) as did *Life* (28) (Pollay et al., 1992). Moreover, tobacco industry executives knew that African Americans were more likely than Whites to trust advertising and promotional campaigns directed at them (USDHHS, 1998). Surveys from 1961, 1968, and 1979 substantiated the fact that African Americans were consistently more trusting of television and newspapers advertisements, compared with Whites (Bauer & Greyser, 1968; Bullock, 1961; Durand, Teel, & Bearden, 1979).

Brown & Williamson’s Black community strategy paid major dividends. The percentage of African Americans smoking Kool menthols skyrocketed from 14% in 1968 to 38% by 1976 (MSA, Inc., 1978; Figure 5). Additionally, “Kools’ share among 16–25 year old smokers (regardless of race) advanced from 3.0% in 1966 to about 4.5% in 1968 to about 16.0% in 1974”; however, among African American male smokers under 35, nearly 60% used Kool menthols by 1976 (MSA, Inc., 1978). Menthol advertising increased the consumption of menthol cigarettes among not only African Americans but also Whites. In 1971, 25.5% of White smokers were menthol users; by 1975, this group’s consumption of these products had increased to nearly 30% (Thale, 1977). In contrast, African American menthol smoking rates were already at 38% in 1971 and rose to over 44% by 1975 (Thale, 1977).

Brown & Williamson’s advertising strategy was so successful that Kool “sales went up faster than advertising so that the advertising cost per thousand cigarettes sold dropped from a high of 57¢ in 1961 to 42¢ [in 1967]” (Udow, 1968).

#### *African Americans, menthol, and health*

Another contributing factor in the ascension of menthol cigarettes among African Americans was the continued belief that these cigarettes had a potentially healthful effect. The advertising campaigns of Kool in the 1950s still emphasized the supposed health benefits of this menthol product, which had been the mainstay of the industry in the 1930s and 1940s: “Throat raw? Got a cold? Switch from Hots to Kools.” Although this and other menthol messages were not directed primarily at African Americans, this type of advertisement, like the ones from the 1930s and the 1940s, may have been partly responsible for



**Figure 5.** Black vs. White menthol market share. From Thale (1977).

the small but growing differential in menthol use between African Americans and Whites in the 1950s (Roper, 1953). By the 1960s and 1970s, Salem's message focused on "springtime," and Kool's advertising attracted smokers touting "extra coolness," and "come all the way up to the menthol magic of Kool" (MSA Inc., 1978). Although neither of these messages explicitly proclaimed the "healthful nature" of menthol, the horse had been let out of the barn years ago.

Surveys conducted by the tobacco industry during the 1960s attest to the fact that African Americans thought menthols were safer than regular cigarettes. In "A Pilot Look at the Attitudes of Negro Smokers Toward Mentholated Cigarettes," Philip Morris reported that African Americans felt that menthols were the best to smoke with a cold, easier on the throat, and better for one's health (Tibor Koeves Associates, 1968). The report went on to state, "There are indications that menthols tend to be considered as generally 'better for one's health.' That impression refers not only to the health of the respiratory tract, but the whole organism. The majority view is that menthols are 'less strong' than regular cigarettes, and that a cigarette which is 'less strong' is better for a person's health" (Tibor Koeves Associates, 1968). These testimonials reflect the penetration of the healthful advertising messages, which all menthol cigarette manufacturers, especially Kool, pushed from their inception.

This same report noted that women smokers were more likely to prefer and use menthol products, compared with men, and that, in this sample of African Americans, some men mentioned having learned to smoke menthol from their wives. The identification with women "does not 'devalue' them or make it less desirable to smoke by males (many sociologists suggest that much of the Negro society is a matriarchal one)" (Tibor Koeves Associates, 1968). Menthol cigarette producers were aware that women preferred menthols, especially Salem, since it was lighter than Kool (Kluger, 1996). However, during the 1960s, when Kool mentholated cigarette use surged among African Americans, men were the majority users of this product (MSA, Inc., 1978). The tobacco industry suggests that the reason that African American males bucked the feminization of the menthol trend was that Kools were stronger (read: more tar and nicotine, see Figure 3) than the other menthol brands of the time (Johnson, 1966; Kluger, 1996; MSA, Inc., 1978).

*Cool (Kool) resonates in the Black community with the Civil Rights movement*

One of the most salient aspects of the adoption of Kool cigarettes by the African American community was its resonance with large sectors of youth, many of

whom were part of the growing Civil Rights movement. In some respects, Kool became identified with rebellion, youth, and modern forward thinking and was in many ways in tune with the emerging Black Power movement. It was not so much the direct pandering of the tobacco industry to the Civil Rights movement; rather it was the "new" cigarette of the 1960s that many young Blacks latched on to. Surveys from the 1960s and 1970s showed that Kool cigarette users were identified by their African American peers with attributes of bravery, toughness, ambition, and daring (Thale, 1977). These same qualities were the ethos of the mass African American liberation movement that was sweeping away and dismantling the main props of segregation and demanding fair housing, equal job and education opportunities, and an end to police brutality.

Cigarette manufacturers, determined not to miss the boat, began to use African American male models with darker complexions and more pronounced African American features (the same was not true for African American women) to advertise their cigarettes, including menthols (Pollay et al., 1992). Afro hairstyles were used extensively by Lorillard to promote their menthol brand, Newport, and many advertising messages of the late 1960s and early 1970s drew their content from African American popular culture of the time. James Brown's recording, "Papas got a brand new bag," was morphed by Lorillard into, "Newport is a whole new bag of menthol smoking" (MSA, Inc., 1978). These messages, coupled with culturally tailored images, resonated with large sections of African American youth.

In 1978 the authors of "The Growth of Menthols, 1933-1977" posed the question "What started the shift to Kool in 1963-1965?" Along with the growth of "Black consciousness," the authors noted that "[the] use of marijuana by young people was growing particularly among children of the post war baby boom. The oldest of these were just beginning to enter college in 1963-1965" (MSA, Inc., 1978). The authors speculated that "Kools also became the most popular cigarette among blacks, perhaps partially for the same reason, but perhaps also because the images of the word 'cool' in the black vocabulary" (MSA, Inc., 1978). The tobacco industry was quite aware of the relationship of menthol cigarette smoking and marijuana use among African Americans. Al Udow, from the Philip Morris Consumer Research Department, pointed out, "Although more people talk about 'taste,' it is likely that greater numbers smoke for the narcotic value that comes from the nicotine" (Udow, 1972). Udow went on to state that "information we have from focus group sessions and other sources suggest that Kool is considered to be good for 'after marijuana' to maintain the 'high,' or for mixing with marijuana, or 'instead'" (Udow, 1972). These quotes demonstrate that representatives of the tobacco

industry were well aware of the narcotic effect of their products, especially when used by Kool smokers, a majority of whom were young and Black.

As noted above, the word *cool* itself played no small part in the positioning of Kool cigarettes within the Black community. The advent of the Cool Jazz movement led by Miles Davis and John Coltrane in the 1950s and 1960s already had established cool as the hep (1950s) and hip (1960s) thing to be. Being “cool” in African American lexicon was and is no small matter; using Kool menthol cigarettes was thought by some to reinforce a slick and sophisticated image. The Cool Jazz movement, similar to Kool cigarettes, was seen as modern, current, fresh, avant-garde, and distinctly African American. Even though the tobacco industry did not take full advantage of this understanding at the time, they did not miss the connection. By the 1980s, Brown & Williamson launched the “Kool Jazz Festival,” followed by Parliament’s World Beat concert series, Benson & Hedges’s blues and jazz concerts, and Philip Morris’s Superband Series, all bringing leading Black musical acts to African Americans, while all the time promoting mainly menthol cigarettes (USDHHS, 1998).

#### *Tobacco industry philanthropy*

At the same time the tobacco industry was openly and adeptly exploiting the segregated market to promote menthol brands, they also were dispersing money directly to Black community organizations and some civil rights organizations (Gardiner, 2001; Robinson, Pertschuk, & Sutton, 1992; USDHHS, 1998; Yerger & Malone, 2002). Starting with Richard Joshua Reynolds’s support of Winston Salem University in North Carolina in 1891, the tobacco industry has over a 100-year track record of providing financial support for historically and predominantly African American colleges and universities (USDHHS, 1998). Philip Morris, though not historically first, is now by far the largest donor among tobacco companies for all groups and causes, including contributions to the African American community. Starting in 1956, the Philip Morris “family of companies” has been making grants to local, national, and international nonprofit organizations (Philip Morris, 2001). Today, the tobacco industry is estimated to spend conservatively about US\$25 million a year in the Black community (Gardiner, 2001).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the tobacco industry made sure that civil rights organizations, especially the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) and the National Urban League, received generous contributions. And as recent scholarship by Yerger and Malone pointed out, the tobacco industry developed ties with virtually every African American leadership organization for three

specific business reasons: “to increase African American tobacco use, to use African Americans as a frontline force to defend industry policy positions, and to defuse tobacco control efforts” (Yerger & Malone, 2002).

The tobacco industry’s philanthropy in the African American community is cited not to suggest that civil rights organizations were promoting menthol cigarettes to their clientele. On the contrary, the tobacco industry took up supporting education and cultural events in the African American community back in the 1950s and 1960s when most corporations would not touch Black-only issues. Because the industry was based in the South, and the majority of Black people lived and worked in the South, even as many migrated to urban centers, it was to the advantage of the tobacco industry to develop a strategic relationship with the African American community. Moreover, the tobacco industry was one of the first major corporate employers to hire and promote African Americans, not just in the processing of tobacco but also as executives (Gardiner, 2001; Robinson & Sutton, 1994).

Some tobacco industry executives may have felt it was fine to challenge segregation and other forms of racial discrimination; however, these same executives clearly did not want the African American community to attack cigarette manufacturers. The campaign to hook the African American community on menthol cigarettes is one unfortunate indication of the success of the tobacco industry’s marketing acumen skillfully coupled with strategic and substantial largesse.

#### **Discussion**

This historical overview shows how social factors during the 1960s and 1970s were manipulated by the tobacco industry to foster the demand for mentholated cigarettes among African Americans. Exploiting the small differences in use in the 1950s, Brown & Williamson launched a “bold” new strategy, centered on television advertising to position their menthol brand, Kool, and seized control of the new, expanding, segregated urban Black cigarette market. The health beliefs associated with menthol cigarettes and the identification of Kool by black youth, many of them participants in the Civil Rights movement, allowed this product to establish its preponderance within the African American community. Although the total number of White Americans who used menthols during the 1960s and 1970s was greater than that of African Americans, the proportion of menthol use among African Americans was very large, reaching over 60% among 16–24 year olds by 1976 (MSA, Inc., 1978). Given the history recounted and the disproportionate use of menthols by Blacks, a strong



case has been made for the African Americanization of menthol cigarette use in the United States by the tobacco industry.

In looking back at the rise of menthol cigarettes among African American smokers, the tobacco industry clearly brought an overwhelming arsenal to bear. One might even argue that menthols were forced on the Black community for the sake of market share. The bottom line is that African Americans prefer menthol cigarettes because the tobacco industry pushed these products on and created the demand among this population. Did the industry do this on purpose? The answer to this question is an unequivocal yes.

#### *The African American community: still the target*

The meteoric rise of Kool in the 1960s and 1970s firmly established menthols as the cigarette of choice within the African American community. However, menthol brands continue to be introduced and aimed at the African American community, fortunately not all the time successfully. The inglorious introduction and demise of Uptown cigarettes in 1990 and "X" in 1995 are cases in point.

The pilot marketing of Uptown cigarettes, the new, slick, and Black offering from R. J. Reynolds, crashed and burned in the city of Philadelphia when a coalition of tobacco control activists accused manufacturers of targeting the Black community with a deadly product (Robinson, & Sutton, 1994; Sutton, 2001). Similarly, in 1995, an independent firm based in Boston attempted to market "X" brand cigarettes, capitalizing on the then-popular motion picture and reemerging social recognition of Malcolm X in the Black community. "X" brand was packaged in the African American liberation colors of red, black, and green, but this initiative also faced stiff community resistance and was ultimately abandoned (Tobacco.org, 2001).

In a surprisingly candid assessment of the Uptown failure, an R. J. Reynolds analyst asserted, "Had Blacks across various strata been asked to respond to this issue (a cigarette targeted specifically at Blacks), undoubtedly, researchers would have discovered or been reminded of the fact that an underlying distrust exists among blacks for institutions, governments, industries and companies controlled by whites. A white-owned tobacco company, targeting a cigarette to Blacks, a product widely accepted as harmful to one's health, would undoubtedly surface that inherent distrust inevitably described as 'institutional genocide.'" (The Wellington Group, 1990).

These failed attempts by the industry were just two of the latest in a long history of pushing menthol tobacco products on the African American community. Given the industry's historical and ongoing targeting of menthols to African Americans, coupled

with Blacks' disproportionate cancer mortality rates, continued research and scholarship in this area is a must.

#### *Some outstanding questions*

No matter how convincing the evidence presented in this article has been concerning the African Americanization of menthols, one among many of the central questions in the menthol drama remains unanswered: Did the tobacco industry consciously push menthol products on the African American population because they knew these products were more addicting and deadly? The tobacco industry will tell you unequivocally that menthol has no carcinogenic properties (Hopp, 1993). However, scientists knew early on that menthol possesses unique attributes that increase the insult to the airways and mucus. In 1944, Givaudan-Selawanna, Inc., working at the behest of Brown & Williamson, pointed out, "When the naturally occurring l-menthol is applied to the nasal mucous membrane for 9 months in a dilution of 5%, it causes definite destructive changes in all layers of the nasal membrane. Even with dilutions as low as 1%, some degenerative changes may occur" (Givaudan-Selawanna, Inc., 1944).

Moreover, a literature review conducted in 1967 by Richard Thomson of R. J. Reynolds' Scientific Information Division noted, "Haggard and Greenberg (1941) have reported on the systematic effects of mentholated cigarettes but no carcinogenic studies were conducted. It should be pointed out, however, that the year was 1941 and that experimental protocols have unequivocally improved since that time" (Thomson, 1967). The industry almost comes out and says that if the studies had used up-to-date scientific protocols, then an association between menthol in cigarettes and cancer might have been detected. Additionally, the National Institutes of Health found no carcinogenic effects of menthol. However, the latter study didn't look at the burning of menthol in cigarettes, and the industry studies mentioned above are at best self-serving, given the poor track record of the tobacco industry on admitting and disclosing the dangers associated with their products. The study of menthol's contribution to the myriad toxins and carcinogens inhaled from a burning cigarette remains to be done. Once we know the actual biochemical properties of burned and inhaled menthol, we can begin to unravel the relationship of African Americans' disproportionate menthol use with African Americans' disproportionate cancer rates.

Another question that begs for more research is the affinity of African Americans for menthol. Even with the bombardment of menthol advertising on the African American community, the question still remains as to why this message resonated so broadly

within this community. Rates of menthol cigarette use among Whites also increased during the 1960s and 1970s but not in the same magnitude as the rates of menthol use among African Americans (Thale, 1977). An examination of African American folk medicine remedies dating from slavery and the early days of Jim Crow could shed some light on prior menthol use in this community. This type of research might illuminate the use of menthol and mint leaves in herbal preparations used by Blacks who have been historically excluded from mainstream healthcare.

### Limitations

This article did not trace the entire history of the development of menthol cigarettes, with the attendant numerous brand extensions and the ongoing competition between tobacco companies for the lucrative menthol franchise. Even though some mention was made of developments in the 1990s, this article focused on the events in the history of menthol cigarettes before 1980 and, therefore, did not trace the continued rise of menthols among African Americans after this period. The question of why menthol use stabilized at around 25% in the mid-1970s is not answered. It certainly was not the lack of promotion by the tobacco industry of these products as “lights” and 100s. Another limitation is the cursory mention of the role of women in the rise of menthols. It seems appropriate that another article focusing specifically on this issue is in order. Point-of-sale advertising, billboards, and vending machines were not reviewed here, and these mechanisms probably played a role in pushing menthol cigarettes on the Black community.

Finally, it would be myopic to try subsuming all of the health disparities faced by African Americans into the caldron of menthol. Many, if not most, health differentials faced by this population emanate from racial discrimination in health care, housing, and employment; “the race- and class-biased performance of the health care system is widely accepted. Indeed, it has been part of the status quo for over 380 years...” (Byrd & Clayton, 2000). However, even factoring in all the discrimination faced by African Americans, it will remain important to tease out the role of menthol cigarettes, if any, in this population’s disproportionately high tobacco-related disease, mortality, and cancer rates.

### Conclusion

From its meager origins with Lloyd Spud Hughes, menthol cigarette use became synonymous with African Americans within 50 years. However, the sociology of menthol use is not a static thing; rather, it is a growing and changing phenomenon. Today, along with African Americans, many young Hispanics,

Asians, and Whites have, in part, adopted the use of mentholated cigarettes (Garten & Falkner, 2001b; Sutton, 2001).

Still, menthol targeting has changed little since the 1960s: African Americans continue to be bombarded with menthol slogans and advertisements. Now, along with mentholated cigarettes, mentholated cigar brands like Swisher Sweets are being pushed by the tobacco industry on the African American community (National Association of African Americans for Positive Imagery, 2001). Even though the tobacco industry has added new demographic groups and products to its menthol “hit” parade, the industry remains acutely aware that African Americans are its core menthol constituency.

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