

# UC Merced

## UC Merced Previously Published Works

### Title

Natural American Spirit Brand Marketing Casts Health Halo Around Smoking.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5393s2dc>

### Journal

American Journal of Public Health, 107(5)

### ISSN

0090-0036

### Authors

Epperson, Anna E

Henriksen, Lisa

Prochaska, Judith J

### Publication Date

2017-05-01

### DOI

10.2105/ajph.2017.303719

Peer reviewed

## Natural American Spirit Brand Marketing Casts Health Halo Around Smoking

In the 2008 romantic comedy, *Definitely, Maybe*, the lead actor chides an attractive woman for paying more for her “American Eagle Blue” cigarettes than he does for his “Marley Reds.” When she asserts, “They don’t put as many chemicals in them,” he asks, “So, those are healthy cigarettes?” Her coy response is “Something like that.” Outside the store, the two inhale in unison, at times blowing smoke rings—a moment reminiscent of the tobacco industry’s early efforts to teach the art of smoking. The movie is rated PG-13.

American Eagle Blue, although a Hollywood creation, has a real-world equivalent that is a genuine and growing public health concern. An increasingly popular brand of cigarettes, Natural American Spirit, uses health-oriented marketing terms; it is marketed as “100% additive-free natural tobacco,” “made with organic tobacco,” and grown by local and small US farms.<sup>1</sup> Introduced in 1985, the branding features an American Indian warrior in ceremonial headdress smoking a peace pipe. Natural American Spirit’s product packaging and advertising

names the manufacturer as Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (SFNTC), obscuring its ownership by the second largest US tobacco company, Reynolds American (Reynolds), which acquired SFNTC in 2002. Two Reynolds brands have increased market share by more than 400% since 2002, even as US smoking prevalence has declined.<sup>2</sup> They are Pall Mall (from 1.7% to 8.9%), which competed by discounting price, and Natural American Spirit (from 0.3% to 1.7%), which competed by discounting risk perceptions.<sup>2</sup>

are addictive-free (an unfortunate permutation of “additive-free”). Research has indicated that people have stronger reduced harm beliefs about Natural American Spirit than about other brands.<sup>3</sup> In the US Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health Study, smokers whose usual brand was Natural American Spirit were 22 times more likely to falsely believe that their cigarette brand is safer than were smokers of other brands.<sup>3</sup> In focus groups, adolescents and adults expressed similar false notions about health benefits of natural, additive-free cigarettes when examining Natural American Spirit advertisements; furthermore, they did not notice or believe the mandatory warning statement, “Organic tobacco does not mean a safer cigarette.”<sup>4</sup>



*Note.* Reynolds American uses repeated health-oriented and pro-American language in the brand name and pack design and claims of “100% additive-free natural tobacco,” “made with organic tobacco,” and “US grown tobacco,” combined with imagery of an American Indian warrior in headdress, peace pipe in hand, and a soaring eagle overhead.

**IMAGE 1—Reynolds American With Their Natural American Spirit Cigarettes**

### RISK PERCEPTIONS

In our interactions with smokers clinically, in research, and on our university campus, we have heard numerous and repeated statements about reduced risks attributed to the brand. Assertions include that Natural American Spirits are less harmful than are other cigarettes; that they are American made of natural, pure tobacco; and that they

### Health Halo

Consumers perceive products marketed as natural, organic, or additive-free to be healthier and will pay more than for products without these labels.<sup>5</sup> Thus, marketing creates a health halo effect that increases product demand. That is, one aspect, even a single word in the brand name or image in a logo, has a prevailing influence on consumers’ perceptions of the product, over

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anna E. Epperson, Lisa Henriksen, and Judith J. Prochaska are with the Stanford Prevention Research Center, Department of Medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, CA.

Correspondence should be sent to Judith J. Prochaska, PhD, MPH, Stanford Prevention Research Center, Medical School Office Building, 1265 Welch Road, Stanford, CA 94305-5411 (e-mail: jpro@stanford.edu). Reprints can be ordered at <http://www.ajph.org> by clicking the “Reprints” link.

This editorial was accepted February 9, 2017.

doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2017.303719

and above other considerations, such as actual ingredient and nutritional value.<sup>5</sup> The extent to which American Indian imagery in packaging and advertising for Natural American Spirit contributes to reduced harm perceptions is unknown. However, brand imagery of an American Indian warrior and his peace pipe could evoke associations with smoking tobacco for medicinal uses, and SFNTC has been criticized in the past for use of this imagery by American Indian tribes (<http://bit.ly/2jsce2g>).

## All Natural

Tobacco companies have reported the use of nearly 600 additives, including menthol. Curiously, Natural American Spirit's additive-free marketing is applied even to their menthol varieties. Cigarettes that are 100% additive-free and contain tobacco grown organically may contain fewer added chemicals; however, there is no evidence that these cigarettes when burned and smoked are any safer, considering the addictiveness of nicotine and the innate harms of combustible tobacco.

## WHAT IS OLD IS NEW

The marketing tactics of tobacco companies to allay consumer concerns of smoking-related harms are decades old. In the 1930s and 1940s, tobacco industry advertising emphasized that “more doctors” preferred certain brands; they advertised cigarettes in medical journals; and Reynolds even created a Medical Relations Division to lead their aggressive physician and health claims promotional strategy.<sup>6</sup> The use of physicians in cigarette campaigns died out in the early 1950s as tobacco's

harms became apparent. Of significance was Wynder's 1953 experimental finding of tumor growth when tobacco tar was painted on the backs of shaved mice, followed by the landmark 1964 Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health.

The industry shifted to a focus on filtered cigarettes. This new technology created an illusion that filters removed harmful elements from inhaled smoke. Some advertising campaigns likened cigarette filters to hospital air filtration systems. With rapid growth, the market share of filtered cigarettes grew from less than 1% in 1950 to 87% in 1975. Next came marketing “light” and “ultralight” cigarettes in the 1970s, with simply an extra row of ventilation holes added to cigarette filters to allow fresh air to dilute and lighten the apparent harshness of the smoke.

By the late 1990s, the promotion of light cigarettes constituted half of the tobacco industry's advertising budget (<http://bit.ly/2kHoxNa>). Ultimately, the filters were shown to be ineffective; the ventilation holes, which lowered yield levels in standard machine testing, resulted in compensation (deeper inhalation, more frequent puffs) and blocking of the vents by smokers' lips or fingers.<sup>7</sup> Notably, biomarkers of exposure to tobacco toxins were no different than regular cigarettes.<sup>7</sup>

## REGULATORY ACTIONS AND INDUSTRY RESPONSE

In 2009, the US Food and Drug Administration banned the misleading “light” and “mild” product labels, although the tobacco industry uses color

coding to perpetuate the idea that some cigarettes are healthier: typically, it is gold for light, blue for mild, and silver for ultralight.

“Additive-free” first appeared in the late 1990s on Reynolds's top-selling Winston brand. Brown & Williamson's Project Green sought to create a competitive cigarette brand with an “environmentally friendly perception.” Concepts included organically grown tobacco, biodegradable filters, recyclable packaging, and additive-free tobacco. Settlements with the Federal Trade Commission in 1999 and attorneys general from 33 states and the District of Columbia in 2010 required disclaimers on all future advertisements, including those for Natural American Spirit cigarettes, indicating that organic tobacco and lack of additives did not result in a safer cigarette.

In August 2015, the US Food and Drug Administration issued warning letters to three tobacco companies, including SFNTC, to cease and desist using the terms “additive-free” and “natural” in marketing. An agreement reached in January 2017 permits SFNTC to retain “Natural” in its brand name and to characterize its ingredients as “tobacco and water.” Also unaddressed are the potential harms associated with the term “organic” and the co-opting of American Indian imagery.

## CONCLUSIONS

Research indicates that the use of positive health-oriented terms such as “natural,” “100% additive-free,” and “organic” convey a market advantage and allay consumers' health concerns. The strategy has been successful for Natural American Spirit, with

notable growth in market share despite a higher price point and declines in the number of smokers in the United States. What may be particularly insidious about Natural American Spirit is the combined effect of marketing terms that imply harm reduction with imagery that coopts American Indian cultural references.

The extent to which using health-oriented marketing terms, alone or in combination with American Indian imagery, contribute to a health halo effect for Natural American Spirit warrants continued and increasingly severe regulatory action to address concerns about false advertising. Furthermore, public health consequences of the combined effect of this brand's marketing elements deserve investigation. *AJPH*

*Anna E. Epperson, PhD*

*Lisa Henriksen, PhD*

*Judith J. Prochaska, PhD, MPH*

## CONTRIBUTORS

All of the authors contributed equally to the editorial.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) supported A. E. Epperson (postdoctoral training grant T32 HL007034). L. Henriksen's research is funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) grants R01CA067850, U01CA054821 and the State of California's Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program (TRDRP); grants 23RT-0017, 22RT-0142, 25IR-0026). J.J. Prochaska's research is funded by the NCI (grant R01CA204356), the NHLBI (grant R01HL117736), and the TRDRP (grants 24RT-0035 and 25IR-0032).

**Note.** The views expressed in this editorial are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent those of their institution or funding agencies. The funders played no role in the preparation, review, or approval of the editorial. A. E. Epperson is an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (a federally recognized American Indian tribe). L. Henriksen is a contractor for the California Tobacco Control Program and has consulted for the US Food and Drug Administration's Center for Tobacco Products. J.J. Prochaska has consulted for Pfizer, which

makes smoking cessation medications, and has been an expert witness for plaintiffs' counsel in court cases against the tobacco companies.

#### REFERENCES

1. Moran MB, Pierce JP, Weiger C, Cunningham MC, Sargent JD. Use of imagery and text that could convey reduced harm in American Spirit advertisements. *Tob Control*. 2016;Epub ahead of print.
2. Sharma A, Fix BV, Delnevo C, Cummings KM, O'Connor RJ. Trends in market share of leading cigarette brands in the USA: National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2002–2013. *BMJ Open*. 2016; 6(1):e008813.
3. Pearson JL, Johnson A, Villanti A, et al. Misperceptions of harm among Natural American Spirit smokers: results from wave 1 of the Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health (PATH) study (2013–2014). *Tob Control*. 2016;Epub ahead of print.
4. Byron MJ, Baig SA, Moracco KE, Brewer NT. Adolescents' and adults' perceptions of "natural," "organic," and "additive-free" cigarettes, and the required disclaimers. *Tob Control*. 2016; 25(5):517–520.
5. Lee WJ, Shimizu M, Kniffin KM, Wansink B. You taste what you see: do organic labels bias taste perceptions? *Food Qual Prefer*. 2013;29(1):33–39.
6. Gardner MN, Brandt AM. "The doctors' choice is America's choice": the physician in US cigarette advertisements, 1930–1953. *Am J Public Health*. 2006; 96(2):222–232.
7. Kozlowski LT, O'Connor RJ. Cigarette filter ventilation is a defective design because of misleading taste, bigger puffs, and blocked vents. *Tob Control*. 2002; 11(suppl 1):I40–I50.