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Tobacco industry misappropriation of American Indian culture and traditional tobacco

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ABSTRACT

Objective Describe the extent to which tobacco industry marketing tactics incorporated American Indian culture and traditional tobacco.

Methods A keyword search of industry documents was conducted using document archives from the Truth Tobacco Documents Library. Tobacco industry documents (n=76) were analysed for themes.

Results Tobacco industry marketing tactics have incorporated American Indian culture and traditional tobacco since at least the 1930s, with these tactics prominently highlighted during the 1990s with Natural American Spirit cigarettes. Documents revealed the use of American Indian imagery such as traditional headdresses and other cultural symbols in product branding and the portrayal of harmful stereotypes of Native people in advertising. The historical and cultural significance of traditional tobacco was used to validate commercially available tobacco.

Conclusions The tobacco industry has misappropriated culture and traditional tobacco by misrepresenting American Indian traditions, values and beliefs to market and sell their products for profit. Findings underscore the need for ongoing monitoring of tobacco industry marketing tactics directed at exploiting Native culture and counter-marketing tactics that raise awareness about the distinction between commercial and traditional tobacco use. Such efforts should be embedded within a culturally sensitive framework to reduce the burden of commercial tobacco use.

INTRODUCTION

The first national company to draw on the 'mystique of Indianness' was Red Man chewing tobacco in 1904.[1] Since then, American Indian imagery has appeared on other tobacco products, such as Geronimo cigarettes, with colourful and attractive packaging designed to appeal to ethnic pride.[2] Recent studies have examined how Natural American Spirit (NAS) cigarettes, which feature Native imagery alongside 'natural' and 'additive-free' text descriptors, may suggest a 'safer' product to consumers.[3 4] Unger *et al*[5] suggest that the use of Native imagery is used to portray commercial tobacco as natural and convey a spiritual experience to consumers by blurring the distinction between commercial and traditional tobacco.

Traditional tobacco, used for spiritual, ceremonial and cultural purposes, plays a central role in the life of many, but not all, Native people. It is important to distinguish between commercial and traditional tobacco use in American Indian communities: commercial tobacco causes death and disease, whereas traditional or sacred tobacco use is guided by protocols and teachings that honour the Creator.[6] This relationship with traditional tobacco dates back to the beginning of time and is embedded within many creation stories.[7] Traditional tobacco currently and historically has been used to honour and welcome guests, to communicate with the Creator, as a prayer offering or to share wisdom.[7] Traditional tobacco can be placed on the ground in offerings, burned for cleansing purposes or smoked in a pipe during rituals.[8]

For centuries, strict protocols have guided practices for cultivating and harvesting tobacco plants.[9] Following colonisation, tobacco seeds were exported to Europe and tobacco use was popularised among non-Native peoples. Cultivation of a commercialised tobacco crop paved the way for the proliferation of manufactured tobacco.[10] At the same time, the extermination and assimilation policies of the US federal government during the 19th and 20th centuries further marginalised cultural practices for Native people.[11 12] Using traditional tobacco was forbidden by the US government until 1978 when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act extended protections to "preserve for American Indians their inherent right to freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions".[13] Despite these challenges and the high prevalence of commercial tobacco use among American Indians relative to the general population,[14] traditional tobacco continues to play a central role in the life of many Native people, and efforts to address commercial tobacco's harms should acknowledge the history and value of traditional tobacco.[8]

The tobacco industry's influence in shaping tobacco disparities among racial and ethnic minority populations is well documented.[15] Marketing strategically targets consumers' values, attitudes and beliefs,[16 17] and tobacco advertising and promotions are directly linked to increased tobacco initiation and consumption.[18] Prior research has also documented the use of cultural attributes and ethnic identities to market tobacco products and create brand identity.[19] For example, tobacco industry documents detail how R.J. Reynolds (RJR) incorporated Spanish language, cultural values and sponsorship of musical and other community festivals as a culturally relevant marketing strategy to target Hispanics.[16] Co-opting culture, including images, ethnic symbols and traditional objects, has been employed to target population subgroups and to increase the appeal of products to a broad range of consumers.[19]

Despite evidence of the industry's marketing tactics to associate tobacco products with valued cultural attributes[20] as well as the long history of using Native imagery on packaging, we are unaware

of any studies to date that have specifically explored the use of Native cultural attributes in industry document archives. This study sought to answer the following research question: To what extent have tobacco industry marketing tactics incorporated American Indian culture and traditional tobacco? Our findings have the potential to fill an existing gap in the literature and inform counter-marketing strategies to reduce commercial tobacco use.

METHODS

A textual analysis was conducted on documents from the Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library (https://industrydocuments.library.ucsf.edu/tobacco/) between 1 September 2016 and 1 July 2017. No date or collection restrictions were imposed. We used widely accepted iterative 'snowball' sampling techniques, which have been detailed in previous tobacco industry document research.[21 22] Searches began with broad terms such as 'American Indian', 'Native American' and 'traditional tobacco'. Subsequent searches included more specific terms around imagery, cultural terms for 'tobacco' and both formal and stereotypical descriptors for Native people, including 'red willow', 'peace pipe', 'headdress', 'Indian Country', 'Indian chief' and 'Indian squaw'. Search terms were entered independently and, in the case of 'traditional tobacco' and 'sacred tobacco', in combination with 'American Indian'. A full list of search terms is available in online supplementary table 1. Each tribe has its own language for tobacco[11] and additional search terms were generated from conversations with diverse tribal members.

Initial searches yielded thousands of documents. Following similar techniques to those identified by other industry document researchers,[21] only the first 200 search results for each keyword, sorted by relevance, were carefully examined for inclusion. Documents were reviewed and common themes were identified. As part of the iterative process, authors reviewed related and relevant documents (using adjacent Bates numbers, project names and brand names) and verified information on company websites to better contextualise results. Native community member (NV) input guided the interpretation of results[23] to ensure findings were interpreted with cultural competency and sensitivity.

RESULTS

A final collection of 76 documents dating from 1935 to 2002 were included for analysis, with the largest number of documents (n=30) dating from the 1990s. Documents came from Philip Morris (PM) (28%), the Tobacco Institute (17%), RJR (11%), Lorillard (11%), American Tobacco (AT) (11%), Brown & Williamson (B&W) (9%), Pollay Ads (6%), British American Tobacco (5%) and other collections (2%). Documents in tobacco company collections did not always reference their own products. For example, documents obtained from PM contained marketing materials for Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (SFNTC) and their product, NAS cigarettes.

During the period covered, a general pattern emerged: the earliest documents (1930s–1970s) included the use of Native cultural symbols and imagery. Later documents (1980s–1990s) made explicit connections to the historical context of traditional tobacco use, whereas the most recent documents (1980s–2001) promoted tobacco as natural.

Use of American Indian cultural symbols and imagery

Forty-nine tobacco industry documents indicated use of American Indian cultural symbols and imagery as a marketing tactic. The earliest documents focused primarily on using Native imagery to sell products. One of the most commonly referenced images before the 1950s was the traditional Native headdress. As evidenced in a 1939 ad for Velvet cigarettes, the tagline 'Heap fine flavor' featured an image of a man wearing a traditional headdress (figure 1).[24] A 1949 Lorillard collection ad for Old Gold cigarettes featured a wooden statue of an Indigenous man in headdress with text "No heap big medicine talk".[25] Promotional materials for Coupon cigarettes similarly featured a man in full traditional clothing, including a headdress and beaded regalia.[26] In addition to the use of headdresses in print ads, fictionalised encounters with Native people in traditional clothing and stereotypical language such as "me dumb Injun"[27] were used for product promotions on radio and in other media.[28 29]

In the 1950s, products continued to use radio ads depicting American Indians,[30] using narrative describing cultural symbols. Commercials from the 1960s used images of American Indians, including a Kent 'cowboys and Indians'-themed commercial selected for market testing in 1967.[31] The commercial included 'Indians' approaching a pioneer wagon train as though about to attack, but then showing the cowboys that their 'peace pipe' was broken and they wanted to trade for Kent cigarettes (figure 2).

An overall shift in the tone occurred during the 1980s and early 1990s. Rather than relying on negative American Indian stereotypes, ads instead began to convey a sense of reverence towards Native people and their use of tobacco. For example, a 1980 pitch for 'Indian country cigarettes' from AT stated: "In the more sophisticated atmosphere of the 1980s, there should be an opportunity to use the image of America's original frontiersman: THE INDIAN. The Indian is also the original cultivator of tobacco and the American Tobacco symbol".[32]

Figure 1 Examples of American Indian images used in tobacco industry marketing.[24–26 34 42]

Figure 2 Script for Kent cigarettes television commercial 'Wagon Train'.[31]

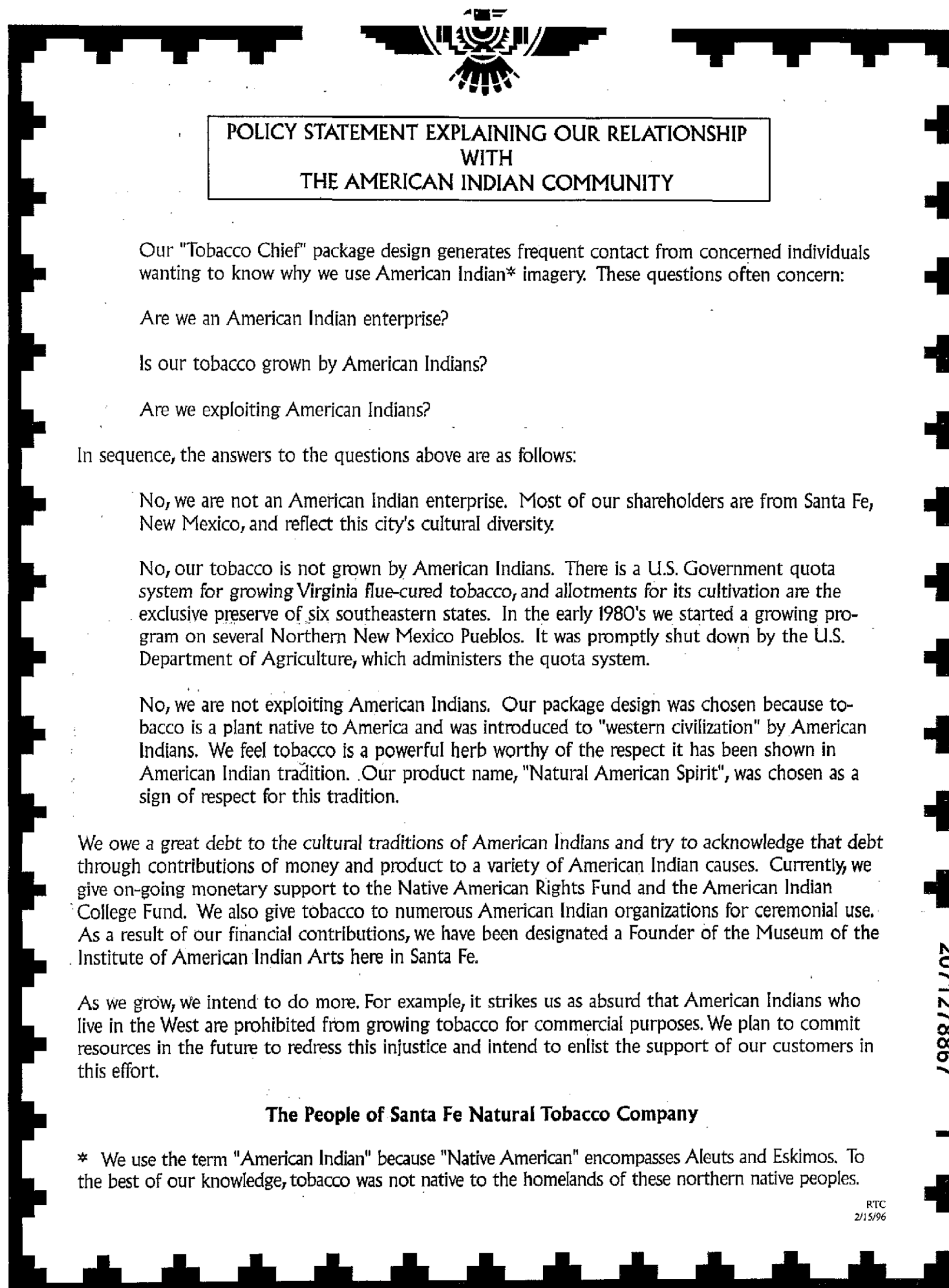
This continued with images portraying American Indians on packages. One 1990 B&W advertising document described a low-tar cigarette as:

> The American Indian (western U.S.) man. A romanticized loner in the American West. Modern-day, but with traditional values and concerns. A noble, historic—but real—figure. More of a symbol than a man with a personality…. Noble, brave, free. The American Indian.[33]

Both AT[34] and SFNTC[35] packaging displayed a man in traditional headdress, and in the case of SFNTC smoking a 'peace pipe' (figure 1). Reverence towards Native culture culminated with the emergence of SFNTC in 1982. Native imagery featured prominently in all NAS marketing materials and on the SFNTC logo and product packaging. In 2000, SFNTC executives dismissed criticisms about the use of AI imagery on packaging while citing the various American Indian funds the company supported: "We'd like to think that we're giving something back to these people in exchange for using this imagery' (figure 3).[36 37]

Cultural and historical significance of traditional tobacco

The cultural and historical significance of tobacco to American Indians appeared in a total of 40 documents. Documents in this theme mentioned the use of traditional tobacco as central to the



POLICY STATEMENT EXPLAINING OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH
THE AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITY

Our "Tobacco Chief" package design generates frequent contact from concerned individuals wanting to know why we use American Indian* imagery. These questions often concern:

Are we an American Indian enterprise?

Is our tobacco grown by American Indians?

Are we exploiting American Indians?

In sequence, the answers to the questions above are as follows:

No, we are not an American Indian enterprise. Most of our shareholders are from Santa Fe, New Mexico, and reflect this city's cultural diversity.

No, our tobacco is not grown by American Indians. There is a U.S. Government quota system for growing Virginia flue-cured tobacco, and allotments for its cultivation are the exclusive preserve of six southeastern states. In the early 1980's we started a growing program on several Northern New Mexico Pueblos. It was promptly shut down by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the quota system.

No, we are not exploiting American Indians. Our package design was chosen because tobacco is a plant native to America and was introduced to "western civilization" by American Indians. We feel tobacco is a powerful herb worthy of the respect it has been shown in American Indian tradition. Our product name, "Natural American Spirit", was chosen as a sign of respect for this tradition.

We owe a great debt to the cultural traditions of American Indians and try to acknowledge that debt through contributions of money and product to a variety of American Indian causes. Currently, we give on-going monetary support to the Native American Rights Fund and the American Indian College Fund. We also give tobacco to numerous American Indian organizations for ceremonial use. As a result of our financial contributions, we have been designated a Founder of the Museum of the Institute of American Indian Arts here in Santa Fe.

As we grow, we intend to do more. For example, it strikes us as absurd that American Indians who live in the West are prohibited from growing tobacco for commercial purposes. We plan to commit resources in the future to redress this injustice and intend to enlist the support of our customers in this effort.

The People of Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company

* We use the term "American Indian" because "Native American" encompasses Aleuts and Eskimos. To the best of our knowledge, tobacco was not native to the homelands of these northern native peoples.

RTC
2/15/96

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Figure 3 SantaFe Natural Tobacco Company. Answers to your questions about Natural Americancigarettes. Philip Morris Records. February 1996.[37]

lives of many American Indians. Many of these documents used traditional tobacco to justify the use and existence of commercially available tobacco by identifying it as an American tradition pre-dating the tobacco industry by centuries.

A 1951 Lorillard book chronicling the history of the company and its relationship to tobacco referred to the debt owed to the 'red man' for introducing the world to tobacco—stating that it is "their race's gift to grateful humanity".[38] The document claimed that because American Indians were the first to grow and smoke tobacco, it was only appropriate that Lorillard, as the oldest tobacco company, acknowledged them through images including their own logo as an 'enduring tribute'.[38] A B&W document from 1998 claimed that the tobacco trade introduced to early colonists by Native peoples was what created the economic foundation for US independence.[39]

An AT document from 1980 pitched the concept of an 'Indian Country' product with the tagline 'the cigarette more American than the cowboy' and the rationale that "The first Americans to smoke were Indians. It's time they took back the credit for inventing the cigarette and got back the country the cowboys took away".[32] This product was envisioned as a biodegradable[40] competitor to the iconic 'Marlboro Man'.[32] Similar use of culture was reinforced in another 1989 Kent ad with a Native elder using a 'peace pipe'.[41] The ad, written from the elder's perspective, says he smokes because he "happen(s) to enjoy smoking".[41] Although the ad is for Kent cigarettes, the elder is using a 'peace pipe', with a plea to respect his right to smoke: "I will abide by the rules that you have set. All I ask is that you let me enjoy my Kents, on my turf, in peace".[41]

Among other references to the sacred uses of tobacco were NAS sage smudge sticks,[42] and 'pow-wow blend', which SFNTC said was used in Native ceremonies[36] and contained amounts of sage, mint, bearberry and red willow[42 43] (ingredients sometimes used with sacred tobacco for ceremonial purposes). SFNTC also sold and distributed other products associated with American Indian culture, such as Vignette Fact Cards containing stories of tribal leaders[44] and a 'Book of Elders' collection of interviews with elders across the USA and Canada,[45] and distributed at least one mailing including a Pueblo tale of sacred tobacco.[46]

Emphasising tobacco as 'natural'

The final theme identified in the analysis was emphasising tobacco as 'natural' and providing smokers a spiritual or sacred connection to the world, which appeared 22 times. Documents related to SFNTC poignantly illustrate how Native imagery, culture and beliefs were integral to the company's marketing plan. In a 1983 report on competitor activities, RJR shared documents about NAS, the new niche product that used Native imagery and tapped into increasing public interest in all things natural and healthy.[47] SFNTC Founder Bill Drake was motivated by his beliefs that the pesticides and additives in commercial tobacco were more harmful than tobacco alone.[48 49] PM research in 1995 found that the message of a pesticide-free and additive-free product resonated with consumers, as the American Indian imagery served as a "reminder of tobacco's original use in its natural state."[35]

In a 1995 media profile on SFNTC, CEO Robin Sommers credited his "fascination with American Indian culture"[36] for inspiring the marketing concept.

> The initial thought had to do with American Indian use of tobacco in its natural state, honoring tradition, the respectful nature surrounding the American Indian use of tobacco. Inherent in that concept was tobacco without additives.[36]

SFNTC created an image of their brand NAS as a specialty product too exclusive to be sold in the same venues as other commercial tobacco.[50] NAS was sold directly to a small number of retailers, focusing on "health food stores, smoke shops… coffee bars, independent grocers, and gift stores"[50] to further reinforce the 'natural' aspect of tobacco and join the broader health-conscious movement of the 1980s and 1990s.[50] Part of this image was carefully cultivated by marketing products as 'additive-free' and using only certified organic tobacco.[36] In 1996, SFNTC management recognised that consumers were becoming more interested in what they were putting into their bodies and started showing preference for organic and chemical-free options. SFNTC saw an opportunity to fill that niche within the cigarette world.[50]

Research conducted by industry competitors found that the use of American Indian imagery by SFNTC served to "bond people with America's origins".[35] PM found that the logos and graphics on NAS packaging led consumers to believe that smoking cigarettes was a normal human activity and that they were supporting a worthy Native cause (assuming that the brand was under American Indian ownership).[35] Focus groups held by consultants for B&W found that the use of American Indian imagery contributed to consumers' perceptions that SFNTC was a small company creating a healthier, more natural product.[51] PM concluded that the images used by SFNTC contributed significantly to smokers' emotional connection and loyalty with these products.[35]

In one 1994 promotional document,[42] SFNTC referred to the use of 'natural' tobacco as being closer to the way it was intended to be used—as part of American Indian traditions—and completely separate from nicotine addiction. The connection between traditional tobacco and the 'natural' marketing technique seemed to resonate with one customer in particular, who was featured in a SFNTC promotional document and said (of her husband):

> … his desire to smoke is as old and natural as humanity itself. It is his spirit saying, 'I need … to step aside and get in touch with the peace within.' … They have put the 'Spirit' back into his smoking—as it should be.[42]

SFNTC paired Native imagery with descriptors such as 'natural' and 'organic', but also included statements that additive-free products were not safer than other forms of commercial tobacco.[52] Despite this, SFNTC included testimonials from customers who reported they were smoking a less harmful product because it was 'natural'.[42]

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first systematic examination of tobacco industry documents focused on how marketing tactics incorporated American Indian culture and traditional tobacco. Findings demonstrate that the tobacco industry used American Indian imagery and symbols in its branding, portrayed harmful stereotypes in its advertising, and exploited relationships with sacred tobacco, thereby misappropriating tradition and culture. The tobacco industry co-opted cultural traditions that are integral to the lives of many American Indians, similar to tactics that have been used in other racial/ethnic minority communities,[15] but in this instance, directed at the very core of American Indian values and belief systems.[7]

Our results suggest industry marketing incorporated Native imagery and cultural objects for decades. Earliest depictions commodified cultural symbols such as headdresses and peace pipes. Descriptors such as "noble, brave, and free",[33] as well as offensive portrayals of colloquial language such as Lorillard's "no heap big medicine talk"[25] (figure 1) may reinforce public misconceptions of Native people while ignoring the rich history that traditions and words have for many Native cultures.[53]

A fascination with the romanticised ideal of Native culture prompted the marketing concept for NAS. However, these types of representations dehumanise diverse peoples and cultures, contributing to ignorance among non-Natives, and could result in Native people internalising negative perceptions of their culture.[1 54] Misappropriation and misuse of American Indian names, signs and symbols are not limited to tobacco products[55]; previous research has identified commodification of American Indian images on products like Crazy Horse Malt Liquor[56] and Big Chief Sugar,[54] as well as sports teams' mascots, which have prompted much debate in recent years.[57] Given historical trauma and continued disenfranchisement of Native people, there is a need for the immediate end to discriminatory and degrading use of Native imagery that takes a toll on health and undermines the intellectual property rights of Indigenous communities.[55 57]

In many industry documents, there was acknowledgement of tobacco's connection to Native culture. The tobacco industry used this knowledge to validate the claim that Native tobacco practices were the foundation for the creation of the tobacco industry. In doing so, the tobacco industry also capitalised on the connection between Native peoples and tobacco in their use of Native imagery as symbols and logos for marketing purposes.

We noted a transition from stereotypical and often negative representations of Native people in the mid-1900s to later documents portraying a reverence for Native heritage and spiritual

beliefs as a way to tie commercial tobacco back to its historical origins, and finally marketing commercial tobacco as a natural product. It is notable that SFNTC, more than any other company, explicitly referenced the distinction between sacred and commercial use and tobacco's traditional role in American Indian communities. Native culture was featured in packaging and advertising, and also woven into the company's positioning as a natural, additive-free product.

SFNTC sold products such as smudge sticks and pow-wow blend tobacco and prominently featuring ceremonial regalia and pipes in branding. These depictions do not consider the cultural significance of these sacred objects, but are solely focused on the sale of a commodity.[10] However, for Native communities, there are strict protocols for wearing a traditional headdress or being gifted a pipe. There are also specific instructions around growing and harvesting traditional tobacco, which can only be done by certain community members under protocols. These misrepresentations of significant cultural practices outside their traditional context illustrate commodification of culture to market commercial tobacco. Future studies should explore how Native imagery, especially when paired with descriptors such as 'natural' and 'additive-free', contributes to public perceptions about the safety of these products. Research is also needed to understand the impact of cultural misrepresentations on high rates of commercial tobacco use among American Indians. Additionally, future research examining how the tobacco industry may have specifically targeted American Indians as well as how these tactics compare with those used towards other consumer groups is needed.

Our findings have several implications for advocacy and practice. This study reinforces the need to counter tobacco industry tactics directed at exploiting Native culture as part of a comprehensive framework to reduce the burden of commercial tobacco use. The *Stop the Sale of our Image: Don't Buy the Lie* campaign (figure 4) from California offers an example of a community-based campaign to counter pro-tobacco influences.[58] In Minnesota, the *Keep Tobacco Sacred* campaign also emphasises the original intention of tobacco among Native people and honouring traditional tobacco as a sacred gift (figure 5).[59] Community-based strategies, framed within an assets-based context, can promote health and healing in Native communities and contribute to a broader movement to restore traditional tobacco and reclaim Native culture.[7]

Our study has several limitations. Because some of the industry documents are restricted (due to confidential information) and of the sheer volume of documents, we were unable to determine whether all documents relevant to our research question were included. For example, we were unable to find any internal documents from SFNTC prior to 2002 (when SFNTC was acquired by RJR) because they were a small, private company and not subject to the disclosure requirements of the Master Settlement Agreement.[60] Given the scope of our research question, we excluded documents regarding the complex issues of sovereignty and tribally owned tobacco entities. These issues warrant further examination and need to be respectfully considered in light of the complex political and economic realities facing American Indian tribes.[7,61]

The tobacco industry utilised American Indian history, culture and images for marketing and commodified a culture and people deeply connected to traditional tobacco, but also disproportionately impacted by the harms of commercial tobacco use.[14] Our findings underscore the need to counter tobacco industry influence as part of a comprehensive approach to addressing commercial tobacco use, by monitoring tactics that misrepresent culture and co-opt tradition. Such efforts, embedded within a culturally sensitive, community-driven approach, may help reduce the burden of commercial tobacco use.

Figure 5 Minnesota example of counter-marketing strategy against tobacco industry misappropriation of American Indian tradition.[59]

Figure 4 California example of counter-marketing strategy against tobacco industry misappropriation of American Indian tradition.[58]

What this paper adds

- The tobacco industry has used cultural attributes to market its tobacco products.
- No previous literature has examined the extent to which the tobacco industry incorporated American Indian culture and traditional tobacco in their marketing tactics.
- Documents revealed that the tobacco industry used Native imagery in their advertising, commodified sacred tobacco and other cultural objects, and misrepresented cultural practices to sell commercial tobacco.

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