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A Flavoring Seen as a Means of Marketing to Blacks

By [STEPHANIE SAUL](#)

No one really knows how the African-American preference for menthol [cigarettes](#) developed in the first place.

Some scientists speculate that cultural and taste preferences provide a partial explanation. The Rev. Jesse Brown, an antismoking advocate in Philadelphia, calls it a “chicken and egg” conundrum.

But tobacco industry marketing has played a role. The migration of African-Americans to urban manufacturing centers after World War II, coupled with the emergence of black-oriented newspapers and magazines, created various opportunities for niche marketing. In the case of cigarettes, with research showing a slight black preference for Kools, a menthol brand, the industry saw an opening to appeal to black smokers.

Or at least that is the explanation central to a paper on the history of menthol marketing by Phillip S. Gardiner, the research administrator of a tobacco disease program at the University of California, Oakland.

The paper notes that Elston Howard, who became the first black player for the New York Yankees in 1955, was hired as a Kool spokesman. By 1978 Lorillard, Newport’s maker, had borrowed the singer [James Brown](#)’s hit single, “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” for its marketing message, “Newport is a whole new bag of menthol [smoking](#).”

Dr. Gardiner’s [paper](#), published in 2004 in the journal [Nicotine and Tobacco Research](#), also notes that by the 1980s, Brown & Williamson, the maker of Kool, had started its Kool Jazz Festival to appeal to the same market.

More recently, hip-hop artists have helped promote Kool, now the third-biggest menthol brand, which was acquired in 2004 by R. J. Reynolds.

Dr. Brian A. Primack, assistant professor at the [University of Pittsburgh](#) School of Medicine and the author of a study published last year on the concentration of tobacco signs and billboards in African-American neighborhoods, said observational evidence suggested that about three-fourths of outdoor cigarette advertising in African-American neighborhoods was for menthol brands.

Magazine advertising for cigarettes has declined since the 1998 tobacco industry settlement with state attorneys general. But the portion devoted to menthol brands — only 12 percent in 1998 — had grown to 76 percent by 2006, according to an recent analysis by the Tobacco Control Research Program at Harvard.

Lorillard’s Newport, the country’s second-biggest selling cigarette and the leading menthol brand, is the best seller among African-Americans.

“It’s very much marketed with youth orientation, and the primary distribution is in delis and bodegas,” said K. Michael Cummings, the chairman of the department of health behavior at the Roswell Park [Cancer Institute](#) in Buffalo.

The tobacco companies do not agree that black smokers are a special target for menthol marketing. A Lorillard spokesman, Michael W. Robinson, said that Lorillard, a subsidiary of [Loews Corporation](#), marketed its product across a wide array of ethnicities to adult smokers. “Lorillard wants the widest customer base possible among adults,” Mr. Robinson said. He said that only 15 percent of the company’s advertising budget is directed at the African-American market segment.

David P. Howard, a spokesman for R. J. Reynolds, a unit of [Reynolds American](#), which markets menthol brands including Kool and Salem, said his company also advertised to a wide range of audiences, because with so many more white smokers than black, only 18 percent of R. J. Reynolds’ menthol sales are to African-Americans.

But he acknowledged that the company does try to appeal to black smokers: “Would we like African-Americans to choose R. J. Reynolds brands? Yes, we would. Do we have marketing and communications that that audience can identify with? Yes, we do.”

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