

decode Virginia Slims

As both the first and most popular female-specific cigarette brand, Virginia Slims wants women to believe that smoking will help lead them on the road to independence and empowerment.ⁱ At the height of the Women's Liberation Movement, Philip Morris launched Virginia Slims with the slogan "You've Come a Long Way, Baby!"ⁱⁱ

Just six years after the introduction of Virginia Slims and other female-targeted campaigns, the smoking rate of 12-year-old girls increased by 110 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ

Using imagery of young, beautiful women in its advertising, Virginia Slims portrays smoking as part of a glamorous, thin, independent and healthy lifestyle.^{iv} But the promises in the ads contradict the reality of the product. Cigarettes are addictive and render their users dependent.^v Smoking causes disease and death, not a healthy lifestyle.^{vi} Yet, despite decades of evidence that link smoking to death and disease,^{vii} Philip Morris has continued to promote Virginia Slims with the same campaign messages and images for over four decades.

The result of Virginia Slim's and other female-targeted campaigns is clear: more women now die of lung cancer than breast, ovarian and cervical cancers combined.^{viii} Each year, an average of 175,000 women in the US will die from a tobacco-related disease.^{ix} And, countless others will suffer from spontaneous abortions, stillbirths, low birth weight babies, and infertility.^x

Today, while the tobacco industry continues to target women in the US, it has also set its sights on unsuspecting women in developing nations where basic education, let alone tobacco education, is often non-existent or denied to women.^{xi}

LUNG CANCER LEADING CAUSE OF CANCER DEATH FOR WOMEN – Nearly twenty years after the Virginia Slims campaign began, lung cancer surpassed breast cancer as the No. 1 cancer killer among women.^{xii}

PREYING ON WOMEN AND THE ILLUSION OF INDEPENDENCE – Women became a major target of the tobacco industry during the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s. But instead of helping women achieve their independence, smoking has left many dependent on tobacco.^{xiii}

GLAMORIZING TOBACCO USE – If you believe Virginia Slims, female smokers are all beautiful, sexy, sophisticated, independent, athletic and young. But the fact is, smoking contributes to premature wrinkling, yellow-teeth and causes to many life-threatening diseases including heart disease, stroke, and cancer.^{xiv}

EXPLOITING A WOMAN'S DESIRE TO BE THIN – Labeling its products as "slims" or "thins" exploits societal pressures women face regarding their weight and perpetuates the misconception that smoking will help a person lose weight or stay thin.^{xv}

LOSING YOUR VOICE – A recent Virginia Slims advertising campaign suggested that smoking could help you “Find Your Voice.” However, smoking increases the risk of developing throat and larynx cancer, which greatly impairs a victim’s voice. Philip Morris removed the slogan in 2000 after being questioned in a court of law about whether the slogan might be offensive to smokers with throat cancer.^{xvi}

BUYING SILENCE – Women’s magazines that accept tobacco advertising are significantly less likely to publish articles on the dangers of smoking, compared to those publication’s that don’t accept tobacco ads.^{xvii}

THE HIDDEN TRUTH BEHIND “LIGHTS” – Philip Morris was recently found guilty of defrauding “Light” smokers by suggesting that “Light” cigarettes were less harmful. “Light” and “Ultra Light” tobacco products are just as hazardous as regular cigarettes.^{xviii}

TARGETING ETHNIC WOMEN– Similar to past campaigns, Virginia Slims’ latest campaign still aligns smoking with messages of empowerment and independence, such as “I will be many things.”^{xix} Today however, ads target female ethnic groups, especially those that have below average smoking rates, including Asian and Hispanic women.

ⁱ No Author. [Virginia Slims Presentation]. Dec 1967. Philip Morris Collection. Bates Number: 1002916209/6224. <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/utg54e00>. (Retrieved Nov 2003);

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ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Women and Smoking: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Chapter 4: Factors Influencing Tobacco Use Among Women. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General; Washington, DC 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pierce J, Lee L, Gilpin E. “Smoking initiation by adolescent girls, 1944 through 1988: An association with targeted advertising.” *Journal of American Medical Association*, 23 Feb 1994, Vol. 271, No. 8, p.629-30.

^{iv} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Women and Smoking: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Chapter 4: Factors Influencing Tobacco Use Among Women. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General; Washington, DC 2001.

^v National Institutes on Drug Abuse (NIDA). “Nicotine Addiction.” *National Institute on Drug Abuse Research Report Series*, Reprinted August 2001. <http://www.drugabuse.gov/PDF/NicotineRR.pdf> ; (Retrieved Nov 2003).

^{vi} U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Achievements in Public Health, 1900-1999: Tobacco Use – United States, 1900-1999” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, 5 November, 1999, Vol 48, No 43;986. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm4843.pdf>. (Retrieved December 2003).

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