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Cultural commodities alongside commercial tobacco targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia

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This Ad Watch raises concern over the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural commodities and imagery prominently displayed and sold alongside commercial tobacco and nicotine products. In March 2025, two tobacconists in New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD) prominently displayed Indigenous artwork, fishing shirts featuring Indigenous designs, and the Aboriginal flag (figure 1). These cultural items function as prominent visual merchandising to promote tobacco and nicotine products, commodifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and reinforcing ongoing colonial harms. The intentional placement and display are not merely an aesthetic choice but a conscious strategy to decorate addiction and link cultural identity, safety and well-being with commercial tobacco and nicotine.

Commercial tobacco is a leading cause of preventable death and disease for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Commercial tobacco smoking accounts for 50% of all deaths among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 45 years and over, resulting in an estimated 240 000 years of life lost.^{1,2} Commercial tobacco and nicotine-related diseases not only devastate individual health

but endanger Indigenous community health and well-being. Connection to culture, community and country has shown protective value in reducing initiation or use of harmful substances such as tobacco and smoking products within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.^{3–5} Over half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population resides in NSW and Queensland, where there are currently no regulatory measures to prevent display of cultural commodities, symbols and imagery next to commercial tobacco and nicotine products.⁶ By linking cultural identity with tobacco and nicotine, the industry and commercial tobacco retailers in Australia demonstrate a deliberate intention to sustain colonial harm and risk intergenerational addiction, for corporate profit.

This is a sophisticated form of place-based marketing, using tactics such as cultural symbols and identifiers tailored to local communities to increase uptake and brand loyalty (figure 2).⁷ The strategy co-opts Indigenous cultural values, symbols and imagery to sell addiction and consumption. These tactics directly undermine Indigenous-led public health efforts and community initiatives to uphold human rights to health.^{8,9} Notably, an online search of tobacconists' websites found no such 'Indigenous' items, raising further concerns of intentional exploitation. By drawing on the familiar



Figure 1 Tobacco Station Group (TSG) Tobacconist in Regional QLD, Australia, March 2025. Points of interest include National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) shirts, fishing shirts with Indigenous designs, and the Aboriginal flag displayed above smoking products, suggesting a deliberate visual association between cultural identity and tobacco consumption.



Figure 2 FREECHOICE Tobacconist in NSW, Australia, March 2025. Points of interest include active promotion of 'Aboriginal Art' on store front signage for purchase adjacent to tobacconist branding.



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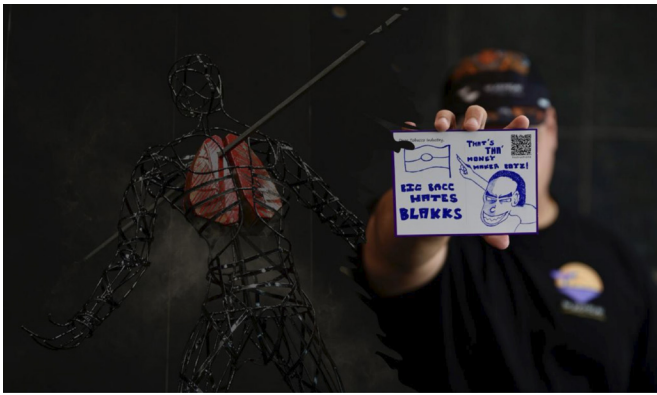


Figure 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resistance to the commercial tobacco and nicotine industry. The SWELL Sculpture Indigenous Artist Award-winning work 'Kilung Morunbul Jum' ('Death by Smoke') by Left Ear Experiment—Shannon Best, Allen Lucini and Fredrick Beel—is shown on the left. On the right, 'Postcard to the Tobacco Industry' amplifies community voices resisting industry harms. Photo credit: Claudine Thornton Creative.

and the symbolic, the industry blurs the line between culture, harm and commerce while increasing the reach of their harmful products as a targeted visual merchandising strategy.¹⁰

The tobacco industry has an extensive history of targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These include overtly racist campaigns such as 'Get your own black' referring to 'premium' or 'black' label tobacco cigarette product lines directed toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the 1980s to recent efforts to co-opt Indigenous organisations to endorse e-cigarettes.^{11 12} The industry's ongoing presence and influence remain pervasive and insidious. These actions sustain structural and racialised harm, even as the industry projects self-proclaimed allyship in reconciliation rhetoric. This behaviour masks real-time racial and structural harms.¹³ Their legal responsibility is to their shareholders and not the communities that their products destroy. As a RJ Reynolds Tobacco representative said in 1998, "We don't smoke the shit. We just sell it. We reserve the right to smoke for the young, the poor, the black and the stupid".¹⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have expressed clear resistance to industry presence by advocating directly to the industry to stop targeting their communities and especially their youth.¹⁵ As expressed in community-led postcard campaigns and submissions, there is a clear and collective message: the tobacco and nicotine industry is not welcome in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (figure 3). Regulatory reforms, with appropriate enforcement, are required to restrict the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander commodities and imagery in the marketing and sale of tobacco and nicotine products. This form of commercial cultural appropriation perpetuates intergenerational harms and contradicts tobacco control strategies. We call for the eradication of tobacco-related and nicotine-related harms, not mitigation, as the only real solution to uphold the human right to health.¹⁶

Contributors DPH conceptualised the ad-watch article, collecting the images and determining their relevance to the commentary on tobacco marketing targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia. He was responsible for curating the data, overseeing the creation of the commentary and ensuring that the final version accurately reflected the intended message. DPH also supervised the writing and reviewed the manuscript to ensure it met the publication's

guidelines. AD contributed to the conceptualisation of the article, assisting in the selection of relevant images and the framing of the commentary. AD also played a role in reviewing and editing the text, helping to ensure clarity and coherence throughout the piece. LW provided guidance on the cultural context, ensuring that the commentary was sensitive to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. She also reviewed the manuscript and provided feedback to enhance its cultural relevance. SA assisted with the review and editing of the manuscript and provided critical insight into community interests and needs in the context of industry-based manipulation and targeting. RM contributed to the conceptualisation of the piece, providing strategic input on its direction. He also reviewed and edited the manuscript, ensuring that the commentary maintained its focus. All authors contributed to the selection of the images and the writing and revision of the commentary. They approved the final version of the manuscript for submission and publication. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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