



Episode Details:

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Title: Episode 11: Hookah Tobacco at the Point of Sale

Description: In this episode, we take a closer look at hookah. Learn about general trends in hookah tobacco use, hookah industry marketing and promotional strategies at the point of sale and point of consumption, examples of current state and local-level regulations, and point-of-sale policy options.

Transcription:

Allie Rothschild: I'm Allie Rothschild.

Mollie Mayfield: And I'm Mollie Mayfield and you're listening to the Counter Tobacco Podcast. Today we're going to focus on hookah at the point the sale. We'll discuss some general trends in use, some industry marketing and promotional strategies at the point-of-sale and point-of-consumption, what some states and cities are currently doing to counter these tactics, and what point-of-sale policy options there are out there. We have with us today Allie. She's a staff member working on social media and content, and a new co-host of this podcast, but she's also our special guest today because she spent part of the summer researching and writing a report on hookah at the point of sale and consumption. Now before we dive in, can you first tell us a bit about what hookah is?

Allie Rothschild: Hookahs go by a few names (narghiles, argilehs, shisha pipes, hubble bubbles), but all are water pipes, consisting of a head, body, water bowl, and hose, that are used for smoking flavored tobacco or other substances.^[6,4] Shredded tobacco leaf smoked through a hookah, which is often called hookah tobacco, shisa, or the Arabic term Maassell is most commonly flavored and sweetened with molasses, honey, or dried fruit but it's sold in a wide variety of flavors.^[4,5] The hookah device is used by heating tobacco on the head of the pipe with hot charcoal, which then causes smoke to pass through the water in the water bowl before being inhaled through the hose.^[4]

Mollie Mayfield: There are a lot of misconceptions out there, especially with youth and young adults, that hookah is less addictive, safer and associated with lower health risks than smoking cigarettes. I remember first getting exposed to hookah in college and a friend telling me that it was better for you than smoking, that the water just filters all the bad stuff out. Can you tell us if those claims hold true?

Allie Rothschild: Understandable why people would think that – the sweet smoke tends to be less harsh and less irritating on the throat, and because the smoke passes through a water bowl, many people believe there's some kind of filtration going on removing the toxins and addictive nicotine. But in fact, hookah smoke has been found to be at least



as toxic as cigarette smoke, with more than 82 different toxic agents and carcinogens. That filtration system people often discuss – it only filters out as little as 3% of those toxins and less than 5% of the nicotine. The water is really there to cool the smoke, making it easier for people to smoke more tobacco over longer periods of time. Usually people end up smoking for an hour or more, which means the amount of smoke inhaled over one session is about the same as 100 cigarettes.

Mollie Mayfield: So it sounds like it's still pretty harmful – does it lead to the same type of health consequences as other tobacco use?

Allie Rothschild: That's right. The various ingredients in the smoke of the hookah tobacco AND the charcoal used have been known to cause various cancers and heart disease. Hookah smokers also have to worry about increased risk of infectious diseases like herpes and tuberculosis from sharing the mouth piece. Hookah smokers are also more likely than non-hookah smokers to start smoking cigarettes, which comes with its own set of risks.

Mollie Mayfield: How popular is hookah?

Allie Rothschild: Well, globally, it's extremely popular with an estimated 100 million daily hookah users. In the US, it's not as popular but rates have really grown in recent years – about 12% of US adults have smoked hookah at least once, and about 8% of those between the ages of 12 and 17 have. Hookah use is pretty popular across gender, race, age, location and socioeconomic status but rates of use are by far the highest among urban youth, college students, and young professionals. Those aged 18-24 actually account for 55% of all US hookah smokers.

Mollie Mayfield: Why is that?

Allie Rothschild: Well first of all, access. Hookah smoking establishments tend to be clustered in large urban areas, within 3-9 miles of college campuses, and in locations with large Middle Eastern and young adult populations. At the same time, many in this age group also believe hookah smoking to be safer than cigarette smoking, as well as less addictive. There's also the social element – hookah smoking is generally done in the company of friends and is considered socially acceptable by peers. Cigarettes, on the other hand, can be stigmatized in this age group. And of course we also have all the flavors that can be sampled and mixed. Young adults and youth mention a range of other reasons, but these are the big ones.

Mollie Mayfield: You mentioned before that access is a big driver of use. Can you explain that a little more?

Allie Rothschild: So studies on cigarette use have found that a greater density of tobacco retailers is associated with higher levels of smoking in the area. A similar study has yet to be done on hookah establishments, but there's definitely been some studies showing an association between access to hookah bars and hookah smoking initiation and use. Studies of college students have shown that about 60% of student smokers started smoking hookah at a hookah bar or lounge, and over half of student hookah users smoke hookah more frequently at a hookah bar or lounge than anywhere else. Another study, that looked at close to 1,500 colleges in the US, found that over 1/3



had one or more hookah establishments within 3 miles of campus and about half of colleges had one or more within 9 miles. Setting up shop close to campus like this is a known and marketed tactic in the industry; some websites that provide advice on opening hookah establishments specifically recommend doing so in close proximity to campuses mentioning it's easy to attract curious college students, especially those under legal drinking age who are looking for an alternate form of nightlife. So it's pretty clear that the location of these establishments really targets this population in particular.

Mollie Mayfield:

So it sounds like, since most youth and young adults smoke at hookah establishments, these locations become the industry's focus for point-of-sale and point-of-consumption marketing strategies?

Allie Rothschild:

Exactly. Young adults frequent these establishments often and spend great lengths of time on premise, so tactics are really aimed at getting people in the door and once there smoking the hookah tobacco. One of the biggest ways these establishment lure in customers is by creating different smoking atmospheres, especially for college aged students. For instance, some are more café-like and offer a pleasant, relaxing study space with comfortable seating, coffee, and free wifi. Other establishments are more bar or club-like and create a more social and going out environment with alcoholic drinks, food and events like belly dancing or live music.

Mollie Mayfield:

And how do the establishments encourage smoking hookah tobacco, not just spending time at the establishment?

Allie Rothschild:

Promotions, price discounts (like hookah happy hours with discounted smoking sessions) and financial incentives like coupons, sweepstakes, and specials tend to be heavily advertised on establishment premises and in print, and a lot of these specifically target college students. Some of these promotions and incentives (like a back to school sale with 15% off smoking sessions) only work if you have a student ID or bring in a coupon from a student coupon booklet or the school newspaper.

Mollie Mayfield:

Wow. Do they advertise these promotions online, too?

Allie Rothschild:

Yes, hookah establishment websites also tend to heavily promote and encourage hookah use. There was actually an assessment completed of 144 hookah establishment websites from across the US. The researchers found that while most of the websites advertised that food and alcohol were offered on premise, none had an 18+ age requirement to view the website, only 1 had a warning of the health effects of smoking tobacco on the first page, and only 6 had a tobacco-related warning anywhere on the website. In fact, only about half of the websites even mentioned tobacco at all and 16% of the sites directly suggested that hookah smoking was safer than cigarette smoking. Nearly ¾ of the websites talked about all the flavors available and many establishments used the first page to highlight special deals, discounts, and events. Deemphasizing tobacco like this while also promoting hookah establishments as social



and fun environments can influence perceptions of hookah smoking as harmless and safe.

Mollie Mayfield: The variety of flavors – that’s got to be a big draw.

Allie Rothschild: Yep, it’s one of the biggest tactics used in the industry to attract youth and young adults. In the US, almost the entire retailer market and nearly all sales from establishments stem from flavored hookah products. And studies have shown that approximately 90% of youth and young adults first smoked, and currently smoke, flavored hookah tobacco. It makes sense – the sweet tobacco sold in colorful packages in flavors like watermelon and chocolate help blunt the harshness of the smoke. There was actually a really fascinating research study done on this at a large southeastern university back in 2015.

Mollie Mayfield: Oh yah?

Allie Rothschild: The experiment with college students examined how flavor options, nicotine content, price and the presence of health warnings on hookah establishment menus influenced students’ selection of products.^[38] They found that the large majority of students selected a hookah tobacco product from the menu, not based on price or nicotine content, but based on flavor. Participants, especially women and non-cigarette smokers, were significantly more likely to choose flavored products over non-flavored products. Interestingly, women were also more likely to select products with cryptic flavor names, like Blue Mist or Pirate’s Cove; these ambiguous flavor labels like this are not only used to intrigue and lure customers but to also circumvent flavor bans and regulations. Another interesting finding from this study was that receiving a hookah menu with a health warning was associated with not selecting any options, or the student opting-out from the choosing a hookah tobacco product completely.^[38]

Mollie Mayfield: Really interesting. So would requiring health warnings on the hookah tobacco packages be a policy solution to consider?

Allie Rothschild: It’s definitely still important to focus on hookah tobacco packaging and traditional point-of-sale policies , but it’s important to remember that consumers of hookah tobacco at hookah establishments, which is a large portion of hookah smokers, do not come into contact with the tobacco package itself as staff generally prepare the hookah out of view of customers.

Mollie Mayfield: Are states or cities doing anything policy wise to counter these hookah industry tactics?

Allie Rothschild: Yah! So at the federal level, there is no preemption in regard to regulating advertising and sale of non-cigarette tobacco products, meaning states and local authorities have the power to regulate hookah tobacco promotion and advertising and warn consumers of the dangers of smoking hookah. So far, Providence, RI has banned the sale of flavored hookah tobacco, and California proposed to do the same, but that was stalled



– there was a bill moving through the CA state legislature earlier this year to ban the sale of all flavored tobacco products – but an exemption for hookah was introduced, after which the bill’s author withdrew the bill (and rightly so – clearly, given the dangers that hookah presents, it should be included in any policy restricting the sale of flavored tobacco products. Illinois, Michigan, and North Carolina have all banned or required certain stipulations for a hookah establishment to sell food or alcohol on premise. New York City has the most comprehensive hookah control policy as of now. They passed an ordinance prohibiting the sale of all flavored non-cigarette tobacco products, including hookah tobacco, in flavors other than mint, menthol, and wintergreen. They also require all hookah establishments to have a permit or license, only sell non-tobacco hookah products, and display warnings about the health risks of hookah smoking. Retailers also can’t sell or serve hookah tobacco or non-tobacco hookah products to those under 21, and those under 21 can’t enter hookah establishments.

Mollie Mayfield: Ok so changing the environment, banning flavors, displaying health warnings – what other options are there?

Allie Rothschild: Those are definitely some of the big ones. I’m going to go into a little more detail on them because there are some nuances.

Mollie Mayfield: Absolutely.

Allie Rothschild: There’s a few routes to take to ban the sale of flavored hookah tobacco. Jurisdictions can either prohibit the sale of flavored hookah tobacco including those ambiguously named products that still have flavor profiles (like Blue Mist or Pirates Cove), or they can restrict the sale of flavored hookah tobacco to certain locations (like those that are 21+). Or they can prohibit the sale of flavored hookah tobacco to establishments that are a set distance from youth-centered locations.

Jurisdictions could also require health warning signage at hookah establishment and include warnings on the establishment menus, the hookah devices, and the hookah accessories provided to patrons. Health warnings signage could be required in any retail environment that sells hookah tobacco, hookah devices, or accompanying accessories. And stricter requirements could be made for the size, wording, and messaging of these health warnings.

Mollie Mayfield: Licensing for tobacco retailers is one of the most foundational policies that we recommend localities and state start with – can licensing be used to regulate and keep track of retailers selling hookah, too?

Allie Rothschild: These are great options as well. A licensing system for hookah retailers and establishments can serve as a regulatory platform to enforce any sales restrictions on hookah tobacco and can help create a list of retailers and establishments which can then be used to organize site inspections and track compliance. And zoning laws can



be utilized to help regulate the density and location of hookah establishments and retailers, especially near campuses.

Mollie Mayfield: The idea being that these laws would make it harder to for youth and young adults to access hookah tobacco, and ultimately reduce hookah use?

Allie Rothschild: Exactly. There's just a few other policy options I want to mention. The minimum age to purchase hookah tobacco and enter a hookah establishment could be raised to 21, like what has been done in NYC. Price discounts and coupon redemption at hookah retailers and establishments that entice users and make hookah use more affordable, especially for students on a budget, can be prohibited. The pictures of fruit and candy on hookah tobacco packaging that attract youth could also be banned. And lastly, all jurisdictions, moving forward, can make sure that their policies have clear wording that directly defines hookah as a tobacco product, since it is one.

Mollie Mayfield: Those are some great options that communities and the people who make up those communities can advocate for. Thanks for taking the time to share what you've learned with us! Now before we sign off, where can people find more information on this?

Allie Rothschild: You can find the whole evidence summary on hookah at the point of sale on CounterTobacco.org. The report goes into a little more detail on what we talked about, and also looks at hookah brand marketing on social media and depictions of hookah smoking and use on social media. You can also find references to all the studies and research I referenced here.

Mollie Mayfield: Perfect. Thanks so much, Allie!