
Big Tobacco is exploiting COVID-19 to market its harmful products



Public health experts have warned that smokers and e-cigarette users face a greater risk for severe illness when confronted with COVID-19.

There is conclusive evidence that smoking increases the risk for respiratory infections, weakens the immune system and is a major cause of chronic health conditions that increase risk for COVID-19, including lung disease, heart disease and diabetes. There is also growing evidence that e-cigarette use harms lung health. Unfortunately, in a dangerous irony, tobacco companies are taking advantage of COVID-19 public health campaigns to promote their products.

Tobacco and e-cigarette companies are engaging in pandemic-themed marketing even as health experts warn that smoking and vaping can increase risk of serious complications from COVID-19.

On social media, Philip Morris International and British American Tobacco – the world’s two largest tobacco companies – are appropriating popular “Stay at Home” hashtags promoted by governments and health authorities to instead market heated cigarette products like Glo and IQOS and e-cigarettes like Vype.

In Spain, British American Tobacco has posted photos advertising Vype e-cigarettes accompanied by the hashtag #FrenaLaCurva (#FlattenTheCurve) and in Italy, Philip Morris has used #DistantiMaVicini (#DistantButClose) to advertise IQOS. The companies have also promoted at-home music series and launched exclusive music videos to promote tobacco products online.

In the United States, e-cigarette makers and vape shops have also turned to social media to promote their products and boost sales during the COVID-19 crisis. Pandemic-related promotions range from free masks with e-cigarette purchases to offering COVID-19 discounts (get 19% off nicotine e-liquids by entering the code COVID-19). E-cigarette makers have also used the pandemic to make unproven and illegal health claims about e-cigarettes. Bidi Vapor claimed on Instagram that “A bidi stick a day keeps the pulmonologist away.”

In Kazakhstan, British American Tobacco provided Glo-branded facemasks to more than a dozen Instagram influencers who posted photos wearing the masks – all with the same caption advertising free Glo masks (#glomask) with the purchase of a Glo device. These and other posts advertising tobacco products were documented in dozens of countries, despite a December 2019 announcement by Instagram and Facebook that the platforms would no longer allow influencers to promote tobacco products online.

Tobacco companies will stop at nothing to sell more products, even if it means capitalizing on a pandemic.

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Never has it been more important for the public and policymakers to see the tobacco industry for what it is: an industry of death and disease.

You can find more information on the examples gathered by the Global Health Advocacy Incubator [HERE](#) [1].

The NCD Alliance thanks to the Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAi), a project of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, for providing this update and permitting us to publish it here.

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[1] https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/media/2020/2020_05_covid-marketing

[2] <https://ncdalliance.org/fr/taxonomy/term/37>

[3] <https://ncdalliance.org/fr/taxonomy/term/295>

[4] <https://ncdalliance.org/fr/taxonomy/term/784>

[5] <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/assets/factsheets/0410.pdf>

[6] <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-big-tobacco-sees-an-opportunity-in-the-pandemic-138188>

[7] <https://ncdalliance.org/fr/taxonomy/term/985>