



HOW E-CIGARETTE COMPANIES ARE TARGETING YOUTH IN SOUTH AFRICA WITH PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES AND HOW THE NEW TOBACCO CONTROL BILL CAN HELP

BACKGROUND

Tobacco promotion is an umbrella term encompassing three broad groups of activities designed to entice consumers and potential consumers:

Personal selling

Personal selling involves a direct, two-way connection between an e-cigarette marketer and a potential consumer. This is what might happen when a new customer walks into a vape shop.

Advertising

Advertising involves conveying promotional messages without any direct contact with the potential consumers and could occur online (digital advertisements such as web or email advertisements), or offline (traditional outlets such as TV, radio, or print media).

Public relations

Public relations (e.g., through corporate social responsibility) is a third form of promotion that seeks to earn positive mentions of e-cigarette/tobacco industry by a third party. This has been increasingly used by the electronic cigarette industry during COVID-19.

THE ISSUES

Personal selling

- In the 4 years between 2016 and 2020, the number of vape shops in South Africa almost quadrupled, from 70 to 240.
- 39% of identified South African vape shops were within a 10km radius of a college/University campus, and 65.3% within a 20km radius. This suggests targeted marketing to youth and young adults who make up 75.93% of current e-cigarette users in South Africa.
- Living near a vape shop was associated with use of e-cigarettes among youth and young adults, in a recently published South African study.

Advertising

- Youth have reported past exposure to glamorous e-cigarette advertising on channels currently prohibited for cigarettes, e.g., TV and radio.
- Of South Africans reporting any exposure to e-cigarette advertisements in a recent survey, the top 5 places where exposure occurred were stores, 40.7%; television, 32.5%; malls, 30.9%; magazines, 22.1%; and radio, 19.9%.
- 1 in 4 South African teens aged 16-19 years old were exposed to e-cigarette advertising from at least one source, the highest of any age group.
- 3 in 5 South Africans aware of e-cigarettes were concerned that “e-cigarette advertisements and promotion may make adolescents think of smoking traditional cigarettes” (Figure 1).

Public relations

- Johann Rupert and family (major shareholder in BAT, South Africa) made ZAR 1 billion (US \$50 million) donation to a COVID-19 fund to help local businesses. BAT is the owner of Twisp, one of the leading e-cigarette brands in South Africa.
- BAT also recently announced they were working on research and development for a “plant-based COVID-19 vaccine using tobacco leaves”.

- This red herring tactic falsely instills perceptions that tobacco is healthy, while generating earned media, even as the industry’s espoused values are inconsistent with their enacted values.
- These efforts are indeed questionable: globally, 3.89 million people have died from COVID-19 in the 1.5 years the pandemic started; yet almost twice this number (7 million) die annually from use of tobacco products manufactured by the same companies.

POPULATION SUPPORT FOR POLICY

Figure 1. Beliefs and support in relation to e-cigarette use and regulation among South African adults, 2017
South African Social Attitudes Survey



- » 3 in 5 South African adults aged 16 years or older support that “e-cigarette advertisement and promotions should be banned just as with traditional cigarettes”.
- » Such comprehensive bans can benefit public health and protect South African youth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Personal selling

- » Zoning policies that set minimum distances between e-cigarette vape shops and schools.
- » Minimum age restrictions that limit to whom e-cigarettes can be sold within vape shops.

Advertising

- » The urgent enactment of the new tobacco control bill, The Control of Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Bill, can restrict advertisement.
- » Reporting requirements should be established for e-cigarette companies to report annual advertising expenditures.

Public relations

- » De-normalizing the industry’s “corporate social responsibility” activities as these are a form of sponsorship intended to influence policy makers and to whitewash the harm their products cause to society.
- » “Sunshine laws” that require the industry to disclose all lobbying and philanthropic activities in a transparent manner, and for public officials to disclose all industry interactions in records that are made publicly available, together with the implementation of all other provisions of Article 5.3 guidelines of the WHO FCTC.

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