

Promoting New Tobacco Products in Social Media in Pandemic Times

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A Promoção de Novos Produtos de Tabaco nas Redes Sociais à Luz da Pandemia

La Promoción de Nuevos Productos de Tabaco en las Redes Sociales a la Luz de la Pandemia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Sophisticated marketing strategies are used to attract young consumers to smoking and promote social acceptance of tobacco use. In Brazil, advertising and sales of electronic smoking devices (ESD) are banned since 2009, but initiatives have been detected recently to promote these products in the social media. **Objective:** To register and analyze marketing strategies for tobacco products on social media during the pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). **Method:** Through a qualitative approach, this study analyzed the use of the social network Instagram by ESD users and sellers, especially stickers created by the applicative during the COVID-19 pandemic period. **Results:** The Instagram sticker was used improperly and favored the advertising and promotion of ESD in the social network by its users, despite the prohibition by the Brazilian legislation. **Conclusion:** The social network has a high degree of allegiance, 33% of its users are aged between 13 and 24 years old, an age group targeted by the tobacco industry and sellers of ESD marketing strategies. In addition to holding who made the post accountable, Instagram's co-responsibility must be considered for upholding this type of initiative. **Key word:** Tobacco Use Disorder; Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems; Tobacco Products; Tobacco-Derived Products Publicity.

RESUMO

Introdução: Sofisticadas estratégias de *marketing* têm sido utilizadas para atrair o público jovem para o consumo de produtos fumígenos e promover a aceitação social do tabagismo. No Brasil, a venda e publicidade de dispositivos eletrônicos para fumar (DEF) é proibida desde 2009, mas foram detectadas iniciativas para promover esses produtos nas redes sociais. **Objetivo:** Registrar e analisar ações de *marketing* de produtos de tabaco nas redes sociais durante a pandemia da doença pelo coronavírus 2019 (*coronavirus disease* 2019 – Covid-19). **Método:** Por meio de uma abordagem qualitativa, este estudo analisou a utilização da rede social Instagram por usuários e comerciantes de DEF, especialmente o uso de *stickers* criados pelo aplicativo no período da pandemia de Covid-19. **Resultados:** O adesivo do Instagram foi usado indevidamente e possibilitou a propaganda e a promoção de DEF em rede social por parte de seus usuários, apesar da proibição das normas brasileiras. **Conclusão:** A rede social apresenta alto grau de engajamento e tem 33% dos usuários em idade entre 13 e 24 anos, faixa etária alvo das estratégias de *marketing* da indústria do tabaco e comerciantes de DEF. Além da responsabilidade de quem realizou a postagem, há que se considerar a corresponsabilidade do Instagram ao não coibir esse tipo de iniciativa. **Palavras-chave:** Tabagismo; Sistemas Eletrônicos de Liberação de Nicotina; Produtos do Tabaco; Publicidade de Produtos Derivados do Tabaco.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Se han utilizado sofisticadas estrategias de *marketing* para atraer a los jóvenes a fumar y promover la aceptación social del tabaquismo. En Brasil, la prohibición de la publicidad de dispositivos electrónicos para fumar (DEF) se contempla legalmente desde 2009, sin embargo, se detectaron esfuerzos para promocionar estos productos en las redes sociales. **Objetivo:** Registrar y analizar acciones de *marketing* de productos del tabaco en las redes sociales durante la pandemia del coronavirus 2019 (*coronavirus disease* 2019 – Covid-19). **Método:** Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo, este estudio analizó el uso de la red social Instagram por parte de los usuarios y vendedores de DEF, especialmente el uso de *stickers* creadas por la aplicación durante el período pandémico de la enfermedad por Covid-19. **Resultados:** El adhesivo de Instagram se usó de manera ilegal e hizo posible la publicidad y promoción de DEF en una red social, a pesar de la prohibición de la normativa brasileña. **Conclusión:** La red social tiene un alto grado de participación de jóvenes: el 33% de los usuarios tienen edades comprendidas entre 13 y 24 años, grupo de edad blanco de las estrategias de *marketing* de la industria tabacalera y comerciantes de DEF. Además de la responsabilidad de la persona que lo publicó, se debe considerar la corresponsabilidad de Instagram, ya que no actúa en contra de este tipo de iniciativa. **Palabras clave:** Tabaquismo; Sistemas Electrónicos de Liberación de Nicotina; Productos de Tabaco; Publicidad de Productos Derivados del Tabaco.

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INTRODUCTION

This brief communication is intended to address the theme of advertising of electronic smoking devices (ESDs) in the social network Instagram, especially from the analysis of an initiative adopted during the coronavirus disease 2019 – COVID-19 pandemic.

A shared risk factor between cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases, smoking kills more than eight million persons per year in the world¹. This pandemic led the World Health Organization (WHO) to approve the Framework-Convention Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2003, the first public health treaty ratified by the European Union and 181 countries, including Brazil².

Smoking is a disease characterized by nicotine addiction but also commonly referred as non-communicable disease whose vector is social marketing³. Tobacco industry (TI) utilizes sophisticated marketing strategies to seduce consumers and create social perception that smoking is normal and acceptable. Advertising aims to link tobacco use with values and behaviors looked up by youth, such as popularity, independence, glamour and sexual appeal and innovation, minimizing (when not neglecting) health risks.

Although the industry claims it does not promote their products to the young public, TI internal documents clearly show youth is its target-public. The CEO of RJ Reynolds, for instance, stated in 1973 that [“if our company is to survive and prosper, over the long term we must get our share of the youth market”⁴. A systematic review of the literature conducted by Lovato et al.⁵ with more than 29 thousand adolescents concluded tobacco advertising and promotion increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to smoke.

In Brazil, since 1996, restrictions of tobacco advertising are foreseen in the law updated and ruled by the Brazilian National Regulatory Agency (ANVISA) in 2011 and 2018, respectively. The ANVISA Resolution of the Board (RDC/ANVISA) number 213/2018⁶ defines tobacco product’s advertising and bans any form of advertising, other than the exposure of the pack at points of sale. These measures comply with Article 13 of the WHO FCTC that addresses tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

In order to continue profiting billions, the TI innovates constantly. An example of this are the electronic cigarettes and heat-not-burn heterogeneous tobacco products – called in this brief communication as ESDs – using a battery-powered heating system that, in their overwhelming majority contain nicotine liquid or parts of tobacco.

The industry claims that ESDs are harm reduction products targeted to smokers who do not want/succeed

in quitting smoking. Nonetheless, the international experience shows that in the countries where these products are marketed, there was an exponential increase of use among youth to the extent that in the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) stated it was an epidemic with growth of 135% in the period 2017-2019⁷.

In Brazil, RDC/ANVISA number 46/2009⁸ bans the commercialization, importation and advertising of any ESD, especially those that claim to be a substitute for other tobacco products or an alternative to quit smoking.

Within the current COVID-19 pandemic context, tobacco products advertising becomes even more important since tobacco smokers may be more vulnerable to contracting pulmonary and vascular diseases, systems equally damaged in those infected by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 – Sars-CoV-2⁹⁻¹¹.

Illegally, ESDs manufacturers and retailers are developing “sneaky” marketing initiatives in social networks¹². Youth are assiduous visitors of digital media and posts can turn them more susceptible to trying and using these products¹³.

Therefore, the record and analysis of this activity, especially during the pandemic, are relevant to public health because they may potentialize youth initiation of the use of harmful products that cause dependence.

METHOD

Through a qualitative approach, this study analyzed how ESDs users and retailers utilized the social network Instagram, especially stickers created by the Application during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers captured Instagram published images, in Stories of Brazilian public profiles and analyzed their potential damages for the National Tobacco Control Policy in Brazil.

RESULTS

Since social distancing measures were adopted, Instagram developed stickers to be used in Stories posting. The sticker “Stay home” is about the guidance of physical distancing as a measure to impede Sars-Co-V-2 transmission. The sticker “Thank you” praises health professionals who are in the front line.

In May, the platform created the sticker “Support small business”, as a form to stimulate users to purchase products and services from local retailers that were more impacted economically by the rules of commercial lockdown (Figure 1)¹⁴.

The initiative may seem laudable at first, but a few days after its launch, vapers (ESDs users) and resellers

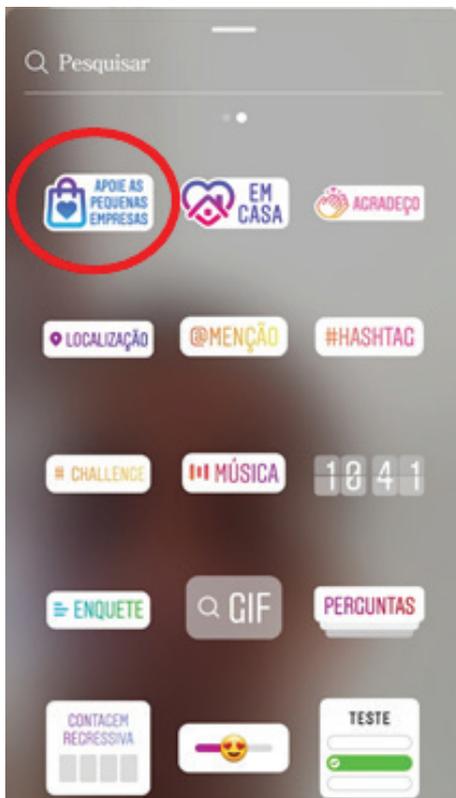


Figure 1. List of sticker of Instagram Stories

Note: The sticker “Support small business” appears highlighted as the first sticker.

profiles of these products started to adopt the sticker to promote products and retailers. The records show e-juices or e-liquids (substances utilized in the devices to add flavor and aroma), accessories for vapes, devices to vape and/or any other vaping-related image.

The sticker is added to the original image identifying a second user, probably the supplier of the promoted

product. Each posting remains visible in Stories of the first user for 24 hours. The user-supplier is notified and can share as appreciation and to promote his business, certainly, prolonging the marketing action for the time they wish (Figure 2).

While attempting to denounce this ESD advertising, the researchers received automatic messages from the platform informing it would not be possible to review the complaint because of COVID-19 imposed overload, only “content with more damaging potential” would be analyzed” (Figure 3). Although Instagram had updated its term of use in the end of 2019 “to include clearer rules for paid promotion of certain goods and services such as vaping, tobacco (...) [not allowing] “branded content that promotes goods such as vaping, tobacco products”, users of the platform are unable, currently, to denounce ESDs advertising¹⁵.

DISCUSSION

Instagram sticker was inappropriately used and favored part of its users to advertise and promote ESDs in the social network, despite the clear banning established by the Federal Law and RDC/ANVISA.

Ratneswaran et al.¹⁶ concluded that electronic cigarette advertising encourages both e-cigarette and conventional cigarette use in young smokers and non-smokers. A Forrester’s analysis indicates Instagram as the social network that most promotes the loyalty of consumers with brands at a rate of 4.21%¹⁷. This high level of loyalty is especially worrying as 31.4% of Instagram users are aged 13 and 24 years old¹⁸, the target age-range of TI and ESDs manufacturers marketing strategies.

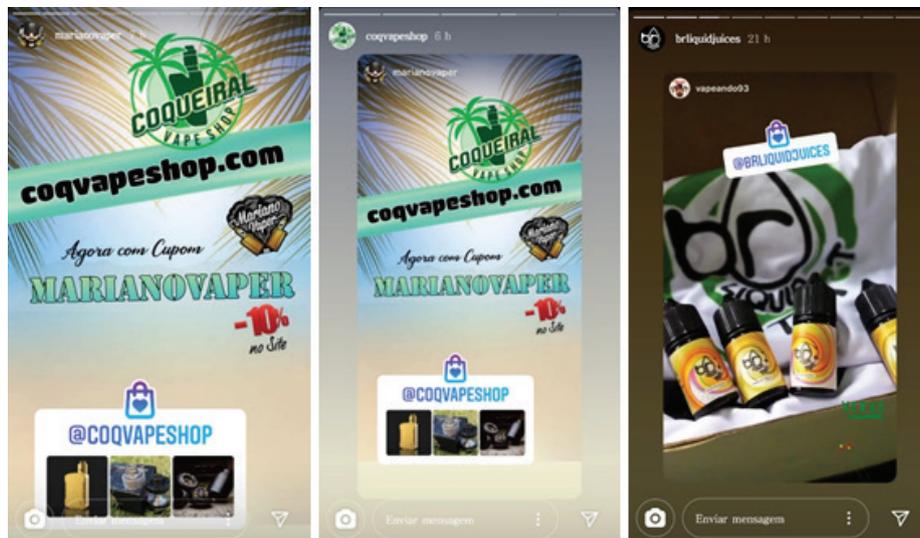


Figure 2. Original and shared posts with the sticker “Support small business”

Note: On the left, the original post from @marianovaper. The central image shows the shared posting by supplier-user (@coqvapeshop). On the right, the sticker in its reduced form in a shared image by user-supplier (@brliquidjuices).



Figure 3. Instagram automatic response to the complaints of ESDs advertising content

Digital marketing creates a responsibility gap further to regulatory uncertainties. The formulation, approval and implementation of control policies can be a morose process, but adjustments are urged to be made and constantly revised following the evolution itself of the technology and media in addition to regulation monitoring and implementation.

Further to the responsibility of who made the posting, Instagram accountability comes into attention while not banning this type of initiative. The mere exclusion of ESDs advertising in its policy remains ineffective. In the current context, this is worrying as the platform failed to respond to the complaints filed.

In the same way that this initiative was identified, it is important to monitor and expose other activities of undue promotion of tobacco products, either in social media or in other vehicles in order to watch for the compliance with the current legal framework and prevention of smoking, especially by youth.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the private sector is affirming its commitment in helping sanitary and economic crisis. Although initiatives to help are welcome, caution is advised. Some sectors see, “opportunities” to be explored in this context, using values of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). However, these actions must be understood as marketing actions¹⁹.

CONCLUSION

The Brazilian National Policy on Tobacco Control establishes several prevention measures to the initiation of tobacco and positive results on reduction of the percentage of smokers have been reached. However, actions impeding its advance, such as social network advertising, can result in youth trying and becoming adult smokers that will lose their lives early.

It is unacceptable that, in addition to infringing the existing legislation, social network users utilize inappropriately the initiative created to favor local retailers during the COVID-19 pandemic. And it is also unacceptable that Instagram social network effaces itself in face of this illegal advertising.

We are witnessing not only the illegal promotion of these products but also the omission of one of the most accessed digital platforms nowadays. Caring for people and their health necessarily includes taking responsibility for allowing attempts to attract users, especially young people, for experimentation and regular use of ESD.

CONTRIBUTIONS

All the authors contributed for the study conception and/or design, gathering, analysis and interpretation of the data as well as wording and critical review; the authors approved the final version to be published.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There is no conflict of interests to declare.

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