

Mouhamad Bigwanto - Online e-cigarette promotion in Indonesia

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Online e-cigarette promotion in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background The decline in the global prevalence of cigarette smoking has prompted tobacco companies to expand their business by producing and marketing new nicotine-based products in various countries, including Indonesia. The study aims to assess e-cigarette promotional frequency and content on social media in Indonesia.

Methods Monitoring was conducted on Instagram in October 2021. A total of 45 Instagram influencer accounts were monitored to assess the frequency of posting and interactions from 4 to 20 October for InstaStories and from 4 to 31 October for Instagram Feeds. Content analysis was carried out on 310 posts collected from 10 randomly selected accounts from 1 to 31 October (one post per account per day) to evaluate the form, type and characteristics of the promotions.

Results There were a total of 2897327 followers across the 45 Instagram accounts. On average, the 45 accounts posted about 185 stories and 43 feed posts per day. Of the 310 feed posts analysed from 10 randomly selected accounts, 64% featured images of women; 50% highlighted or displayed the product; and 32% showed enjoyment of the product flavours.

Conclusions The tobacco industry has successfully taken advantage of the e-cigarette promotion regulatory void. The Indonesian government needs to ban the promotion of these products, including those on online platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The decline in the global prevalence of cigarette smoking for the past two decades has prompted tobacco companies to expand their business by producing and marketing new nicotine-based products.^{1,2} The rapid changes in the tobacco and nicotine product landscape and new marketing channels, such as online social media, have created policy challenges globally, including Indonesia, where the industry has successfully exploited tobacco control policy grey areas which do not adequately regulate new tobacco products and digital media promotion.³

Despite the claim that e-cigarettes are intended only for adult smokers to quit cigarettes, e-cigarette promotional content, just as for tobacco products, contains elements that make the products attractive not only to adult smokers but also to children and non-smokers.⁴ For this reason, the WHO recommends that e-cigarettes,⁵ well as all other tobacco products, are included as part of a comprehensive approach to tobacco control and that effective advertising, promotion and sponsorship regulations are adopted, including for social media.^{1,7}

Currently, the only existing e-cigarette regulation in Indonesia is the imposition of a 57% excise tax on

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

⇒ There has been a significant increase of e-cigarette use among adolescents and there is a lack of advertising regulations in Indonesia, including on online platforms.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

⇒ Our study shows how a sample of social media influencers and e-cigarettes brands use Instagram to promote vaping.

HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE OR POLICY

⇒ Our study shows the importance of having a government policy that bans all forms of tobacco promotion on online platforms in Indonesia.

e-cigarettes. These electronic nicotine-based products are being sold and marketed freely, including on social media, which is a highly effective communication platform for product promotion.⁸

Social media are powerful and widely used communication platforms that have spread beyond personal and social use, to include product marketing and public policy influence.⁹ Indonesia is home to over 250 million people, of whom 170 million are estimated to have social media accounts. At least 43% of social media users in Indonesia are under 24 years old.¹⁰

Along with the increasing popularity of social media, social media influencers have also emerged in Indonesia.¹¹ Taking advantage of their large follower numbers, marketing agencies and businesses work with influencers to promote products and services by capitalising on their popularity and exploiting the trust built with their followers.¹² This can be particularly challenging for tobacco regulators, as influencer product promotion can be difficult to distinguish from user-generated content. Given this rapidly evolving situation in Indonesia, we assessed e-cigarette promotional frequency and post content from influencers and vape brands on the popular social media platform, Instagram.

METHODS

Monitoring was conducted in October 2021 on Instagram. In 2021, Instagram was reported as the third most-used social media platform in Indonesia.¹⁰ Monitoring focused on the accounts of influencers, stores or brands that promote e-cigarettes regularly (at least three times a week).

The selection of influencer accounts on Instagram was completed using the Instagram influencer search application on stargage.com with the initial hashtags 'vaper', 'vape', 'e-cigarette' and 'electronic



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cigarette'. starnage.com has been used in previous studies to identify influencers in Singapore and the USA to conduct consumer research.^{13 14} We searched for registered accounts that promoted vaping activities and that had at least 20 000 followers. Although not all of the influencers' content was about vaping, using a specific hashtag helped to narrow the search and identify the influencers that specifically promoted e-cigarette products. The account being based in Indonesia was an inclusion criterion for the sample.

Our original search identified 25 influencers. We then examined the follower lists of these accounts, and identified another six vaper influencers that had at least 20 000 followers and posted about vaping, but did not use the associated hashtags of our original search. Vape influencers are often connected and have a social network of followers who are also vape influencers.¹⁵

We also tracked any e-cigarette brands mentioned in the influencer content and identified 14 brand accounts, which were also included in our sample. Further screening was carried out to select only public, unlocked accounts from Indonesia. A total of 45 accounts from both influencer and brand accounts met the criteria and were included in our study. Both the InstaStories and Instagram Feed posts were included in the frequency analysis. Data collection for the frequency analysis was conducted from 4 to 20 October 2021 for InstaStories, and from 4 to 31 October 2021 for the Instagram Feed. The first 3 days of October were reserved for monitoring preparation. Due to capacity limitations of the monitoring team, the monitoring period for InstaStories was shorter (17 days) than that for the Instagram Feed (28 days). We counted the frequency of promotional content from InstaStories manually on a daily basis from 20:00 to 22:00 during that period.

We also conducted a content analysis of the Instagram Feed of 10 randomly selected accounts (5 from influencers and 5 from brand accounts), chosen from the original 45, to assess post characteristics. We collected a random sample of 10 posts each day (1 post each day from each of the 10 accounts) from 1 to 31 October 2021. All 310 randomly selected feed posts were analysed and categorised by the form (photo/video), type (challenge, tutorial, giveaway, lifestyle and other) and characteristics of the promotional content, which included images of women, product imagery, product flavour enjoyment and safety or harm claims. The categorisation of content was primarily based on a previous study and the 2014 WHO report on the marketing of e-cigarettes.^{7 16} The additional category regarding images of women was added as a unique category during the monitoring period, as it is inconsistent with gender norms in Indonesia.

Lifestyle-related type of content refers to posts that depicted vaping as a normal product that is used freely in all places, stylish and/or a popular part of day-to-day life. A challenge post is an invitation to followers to post a similar thing. A tutorial is a post that focuses on educating followers about vaping, such as how to refill the liquid on a vaping device, while giveaway posts offer followers a free product with some conditions, such as answering a quiz question correctly.

RESULTS

There were a total of 2 897 327 followers across the 45 Instagram accounts. From 4 to 20 October 2021, the 45 accounts posted 3145 InstaStories related to vaping products or an average of 185 stories daily. For the Instagram Feed, there was a total of 1205 feed posts from 4 to 31 October 2021 with an average of 43 posts per day. The highest level of interaction (a sum of comments on posts and likes) was 79 691 on 9 October 2021.

Table 1 Instagram posts by promotional content characteristics (N=310)

	Images of women		Highlighted or showcased the products		Showed enjoyment of flavours		Vaping safety claims	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Influencer accounts	90	29.1	78	25.2	40	12.9	17	5.5
Brand accounts	108	34.9	77	24.8	59	19.1	23	7.5
	198	64	155	50	99	32	40	13

The feed posts of the 10 randomly selected accounts were also analysed and categorised by their form, type and content characteristics. A total of 310 feed posts were included in the content analysis. In terms of types of posts, 58% (n=180) of posts were lifestyle-related; another 20% (n=62) of the feed posts were challenges, tutorials and giveaways; and the remaining 22% (n=68) were other types of provaping content.

For the promotional characteristics, influencer and brand accounts had some similarities. Most content (64%) included images of women, and half (50%) highlighted or displayed the product or included it in the post in some way. Almost one-third (32%) of feed posts featured flavours, and 13% claimed that new tobacco products were safe to use (table 1).

DISCUSSION

This study's findings add to previous findings where Indonesia was reported having the second largest share of vaping posts on Instagram in the world.¹⁷ Although other factors such as price, flavours and accessibility to the products also contribute to e-cigarette use, exposure to vape promotional activities on social media plays a significant role in youth susceptibility to vaping.^{18 19} Within only 2 years, the use of e-cigarettes among youth aged 10–18 years in Indonesia has increased almost 10 times from 1.2% in 2016 to 10.9% in 2018. This is much higher compared with the increase among adults in the same period (from 2.0% to 2.7%).^{20 21} This trend shows how popular these products are with young people.

The study also found that the vape influencers regularly post content that demonstrates and promotes the use of electronic nicotine-based products as a lifestyle choice, echoing previous findings from 2013.²² The use of women's images as a model for the promotional content has been long recorded as one of the tactics used by the tobacco industry in promoting cigarettes.²³ The use of these images could be a strategy to attract more men to engage with the contents due to higher e-cigarette use among young men,²⁴ but it can also target women by making vaping among women appear socially acceptable and feminine.⁶ The smoking and vaping rates among women in Indonesia are relatively low compared with those among men.^{20 21 25 26} While the rate of smoking among women is stagnant (2.7% in 2011 and 2.3% in 2021), the trend of e-cigarette use is increasing. The 2021 Global Adult Tobacco Survey reported that 0.3% of women aged 15 years and above use e-cigarettes, whereas in the 2011 survey, there were no identified women who used e-cigarettes in Indonesia.^{25 26}

Our study also found that e-cigarette flavours and safety claims are common promotional elements. Flavoured tobacco products have been consistently associated with youth and

novice tobacco use and could increase the risk of addiction²⁷; safety claims have also been used in the past on 'mild' and 'light' cigarette products to reduce smokers' concerns about health.²⁸ The industry has successfully revived these old promotional strategies to promote new products.⁵

Showing the use of or showcasing cigarette products for promotion or advertising materials is prohibited in Indonesia under Government Regulation number 109/2012, but the regulation does not apply to e-cigarette products. Our study shows half of the promotional content intentionally highlighted or displayed the products. Even though Instagram's parent company (Meta) has a policy that bans all forms of tobacco product promotion in their advertising tools, including e-cigarettes,²⁹ those who track the industry activity reported facing difficulty in determining which influencer posts come under the 'advertising tools' category.³⁰ This policy seems to apply only to sponsored/paid content on the platform, not user-generated content. The characteristics of content used by the e-cigarette brand accounts were similar to those of influencers. However, even though the brand accounts clearly carry the brand name and directly promote the products, no action has been taken by the social media platform.³¹

Considering²¹ that e-cigarette products are being freely promoted on channels that appeal to young¹² people, regulation is urgently needed. Although Indonesia is not a party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), the Indonesian government has an obligation to protect future generations from addictive substances, including nicotine, as mandated in Article 113, Law Number 36/2009 about health. The government could adopt WHO FCTC Article⁹ best practice recommendations, including implementing a comprehensive ban on all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.³²

The study also exposes how voluntary social media content policies do not adequately protect users from e-cigarette promotions. Any action taken against content violations will very much, depending on the legal and regulatory framework of the country concerned.³⁰ As is the case in Indonesia, there is no specific regulation that bans the promotion of electronic nicotine-based products on social media. At a minimum, these products⁹ should be treated like any other tobacco product, and all forms of advertising, promotion and sponsorship, including in the electronic media, should be prohibited through regulation.

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Contributors MB provides direction and supervision of the data collection process, XAW determines Instagram accounts that meet the criteria, and FAR performs data collection and initial reports of results. MB wrote the initial manuscript. All authors were involved in the revision process.

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Competing interests MB is a doctoral student of social psychology and FAR is a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Public Health. XAW currently serves as²⁰ a research assistant for communication studies at the University. MB and FAR currently assist the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance (SEATCA) as project assistants for Indonesia⁵. XAW is a 2021 SEATCA fellowship participant.

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