

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 2 897 327 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 promotions.^{3–5}

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.⁶ For this reason, the WHO recommends that e-cigarettes, as 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 starnage.com with the initial hashtags ‘vaper’, ‘vape’, ‘e-cigarette’ and ‘electronic



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