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Protecting Youth From Online E-Cigarette Marketing: Findings From a New Study in India, Indonesia and Mexico



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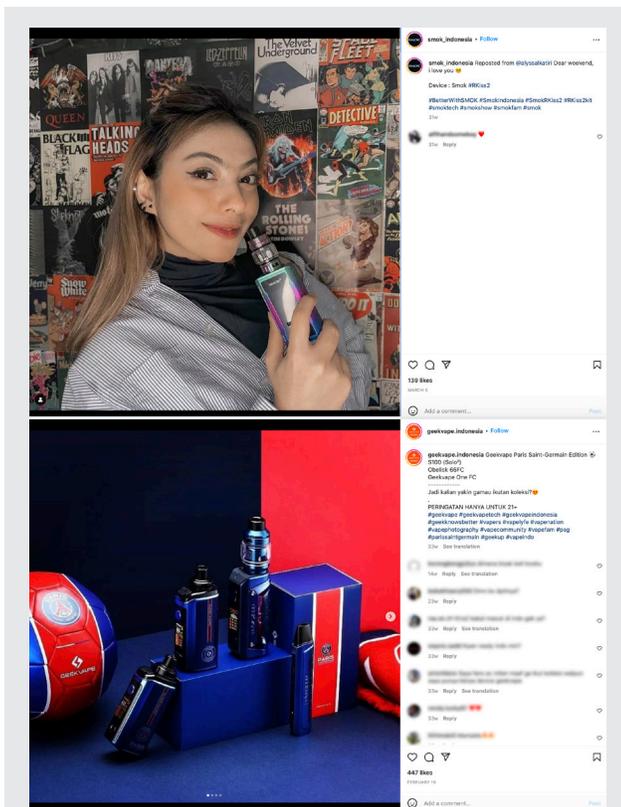
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January 2023

Summary

This is the first study, to our knowledge, to analyze e-cigarette marketing on social media across Mexico, India and Indonesia. It reveals key differences in marketing patterns, such as how much marketing was observed and who was responsible for it, which may be the result of differences in the e-cigarette regulatory context. In Indonesia, where there are effectively no restrictions on e-cigarettes, we found a greater volume of e-cigarette marketing on social media, conducted primarily by product brands. In Mexico and India, where e-cigarettes are regulated or banned, there was less e-cigarette marketing, all of which was conducted exclusively by third-party retailers. Our findings also revealed common patterns in marketing that transcended borders, such as targeting youth with messaging that glamorized e-cigarette use. E-cigarette use was presented as a desirable, peer-sanctioned habit, rather than as a cessation aid or means to reduce the harms of tobacco use.



Content posted to social media accounts was clearly designed to attract young people by featuring other young people in posts; linking e-cigarettes to “trendy” activities such as skateboarding and football; reposting videos of tricks being done with e-cigarettes; and picturing colorful, customized devices and promoting e-cigarette liquid flavors

Source:
SMOK and Geekvape Instagram pages in Indonesia.

Key Findings

- 1. Policies that regulate e-cigarettes may reduce their marketing online.** Most of the e-cigarette marketing observed on social media was in Indonesia, which does not regulate e-cigarettes, and the least e-cigarette marketing was observed in India, where e-cigarettes are fully banned.
- 2. E-cigarette marketing tends to be youth-focused with an emphasis on flavors, colors, and customizable, flashy, “high-tech” product designs.** Marketing for e-cigarettes clearly featured products; this was in contrast to marketing for conventional tobacco products, which tended to be more indirect.
- 3. While e-cigarettes are promoted as smoking cessation aids in policy contexts, this was not reflected in how they were marketed across all three countries.** Rather than being promoted as tools to quit smoking, e-cigarettes were marketed as glamorous, must-have products—similarly to how conventional cigarettes are marketed to acquire new users and young customers.
- 4. In countries with bans or restrictions on e-cigarettes, marketing originated from third-party retailers rather than product brands.** In India and Mexico, where e-cigarettes were banned or restricted, third-party retailers selling a variety of different brands were behind all the observed e-cigarette marketing. Product brands (e.g., VOOPOO, SMOK) were only observed marketing their own brands in Indonesia, where e-cigarettes are not regulated.
- 5. In Mexico, there was more online marketing for e-cigarettes than for other products, amid a shrinking conventional tobacco market.** In India and Indonesia, there was significantly more marketing for conventional tobacco products than for e-cigarettes.
- 6. The e-cigarette market appears fragmented with many different brands available, predominantly from China, which makes tracking it both a challenge and a necessity.** There were at least 63 different product brands observed being marketed across the three countries, but only four product brands that were marketed in all three countries: Vapresso, VOOPOO, UWELL and SMOK.

Introduction

The use of e-cigarettes continues to rise globally—especially among youth.^{1,2} This is concerning because there is evidence that e-cigarettes can cause respiratory disease and other negative health outcomes, and that they triple the likelihood of never-smokers using combustible tobacco products.³ E-cigarette use also contributes to renormalizing smoking among a younger generation, threatening to undo gains in tobacco control.² There is evidence of rising e-cigarette awareness and use in regions around the world.⁴ Marketing, which is increasingly concentrated online—particularly on social media—is a driving force.^{5,6} However, there is very little known about the quantity and nature of e-cigarette marketing on social media in countries with newer and evolving e-cigarette markets and with different policies on e-cigarettes.

To fill this gap, Vital Strategies' systematic digital media monitoring system, the [Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement \(TERM\)](#), collected and analyzed e-cigarette marketing posts on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok, from Dec. 15, 2021 to March 16, 2022 in three countries where little is known about the e-cigarette marketing contexts and there are different e-cigarette policies: India, Indonesia and Mexico.* These findings were recently published in the journal [Frontiers in Public Health](#). This brief and complementary country fact sheets have been developed to increase awareness of the key findings of this research (see Appendix 1 for a comparative table of findings); for additional information, including methodology, please refer to the full journal article. Click to view the fact sheets for [India](#), [Indonesia](#) and [Mexico](#).

*Please note that this study uses purposive sampling, which means our observations are based on a proportion of the marketing that is actually out there. Specifically, our study relied on text-based searches and was not able to capture any content that solely contains images. This may have led to an undercounting of marketing content on heavily visual media such as YouTube or TikTok.

India



Full ban: A 2019 bill banned the production, manufacture, import, export, transport, sale, distribution and advertisement of e-cigarettes.

Source: Government of India. The Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act (No. 42 of 2019).

Indonesia



No restrictions: There is no national law restricting the sale, use, advertising, promotion and sponsorship, packaging, and labeling of e-cigarettes.

Source: Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. Tobacco Control Laws Legislation by Country: Indonesia—E-cigarettes.

Mexico



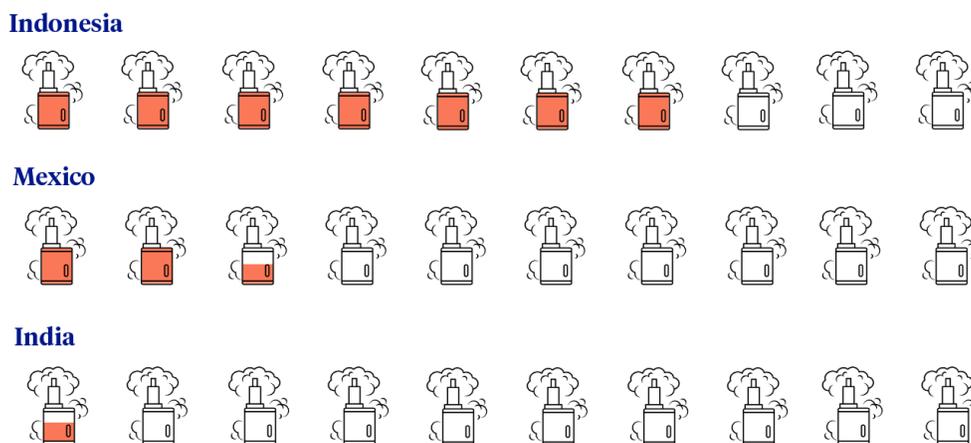
Partially restricted at the time of the study: At the time of the study, the importation of e-cigarettes was banned and the national tobacco control law (revised February 2022) banned the trade, sale, distribution, exhibition and promotion of any product that resembles a tobacco product. In May 2022, the sale of e-cigarettes was completely banned.

Source: Government of Mexico: Decree banning the trade of ENDS (electronic nicotine delivery systems) and devices with similar use (Gobierno de México: Decreto contra cigarros electrónicos y vapeadores).

Most of the e-cigarette marketing observed on social media was in Indonesia, which does not regulate e-cigarettes, and the least e-cigarette marketing was observed in India, where e-cigarettes are fully banned.

Approximately 7 out of 10 of the e-cigarette posts that were observed across the three countries were observed in Indonesia, whereas fewer than 1 out of 10 were observed on Indian social media.

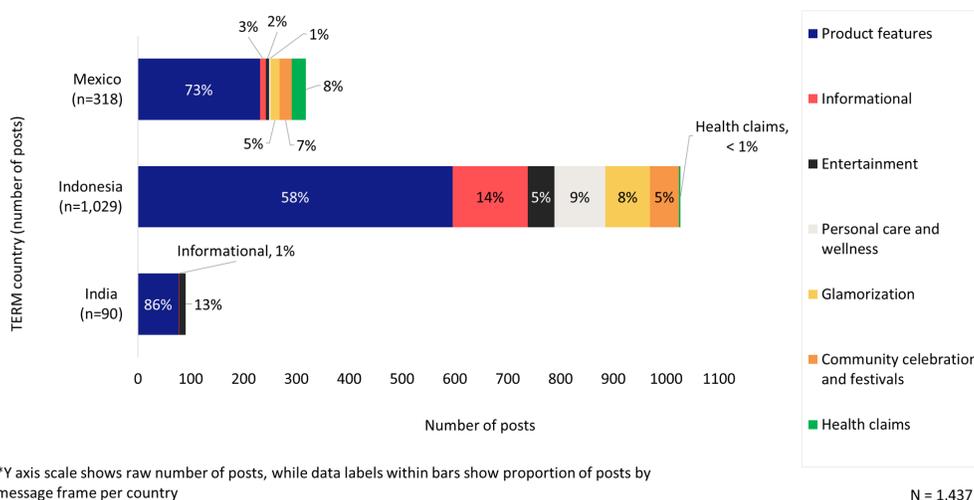
Figure 1.
Volume of online e-cigarette marketing

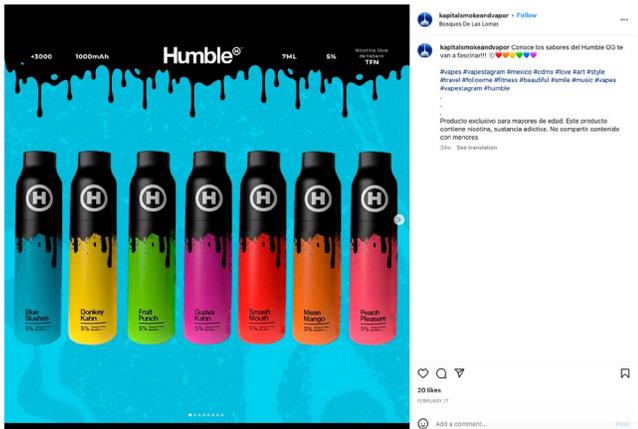


E-cigarette marketing tends to be youth-focused with an emphasis on flavors, colors, and customizable, flashy, “high-tech” product designs.

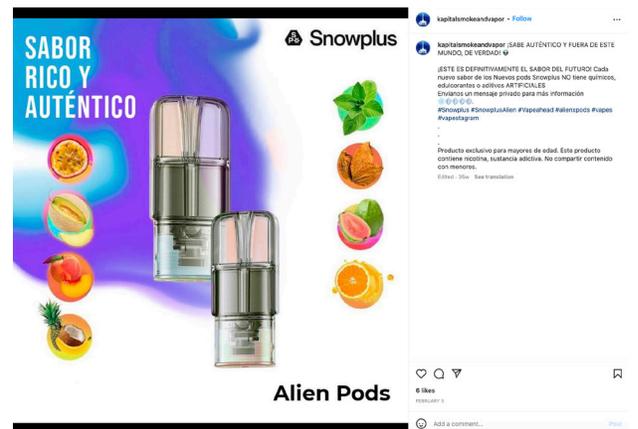
Across all three countries, most of the messaging focused on product features that would most appeal to youth and that highlighted the range of choices consumers have. This included device design that offered different colors and customizations; e-liquid flavors, which included playful spins on fruity flavors (“mean mango,” “blue slushee”) or were named after ultra-processed foods (“cheezz delight,” “custard man”); technical specifications, such as battery power; and the usability of products, including how easily portable they are for daily use.

Figure 2.
Volume of e-cigarette marketing by message framing

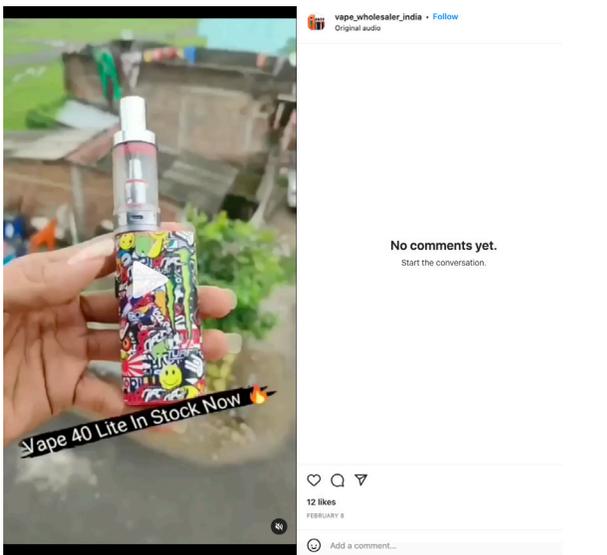




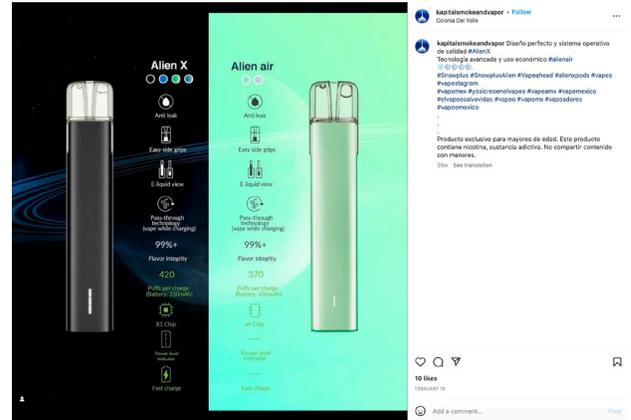
This colorful image was used to promote e-liquid flavors with playful names for fruit-inspired flavors on the *kapitalsmokeandvapor* Instagram page in Mexico.



This post to the *kapitalsmokeandvapor* Instagram page in Mexico promotes “fruity flavors.” The caption claims that no artificial flavors were used.



A e-cigarette device designed to appeal to youth being directly marketed on the *vape_wholesaler_india* Instagram in India.

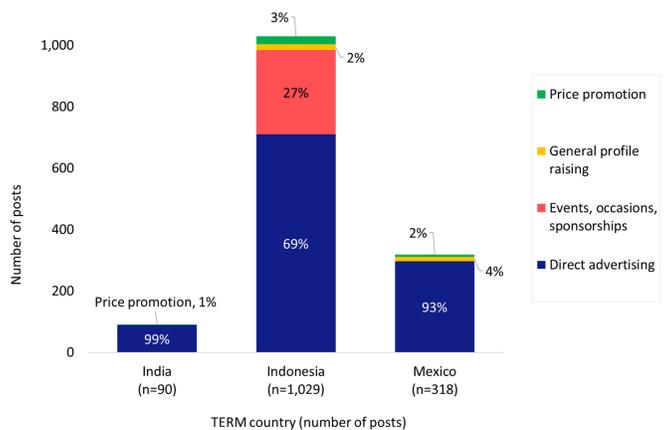


This post to the Mexican e-cigarette retailer *kapitalsmokeandvapor*'s Instagram page compares the specifications of two Snowplus products and promotes their technical capabilities.

Marketing for e-cigarettes clearly featured products; this was in contrast to marketing for conventional tobacco products, which tended to be more indirect.

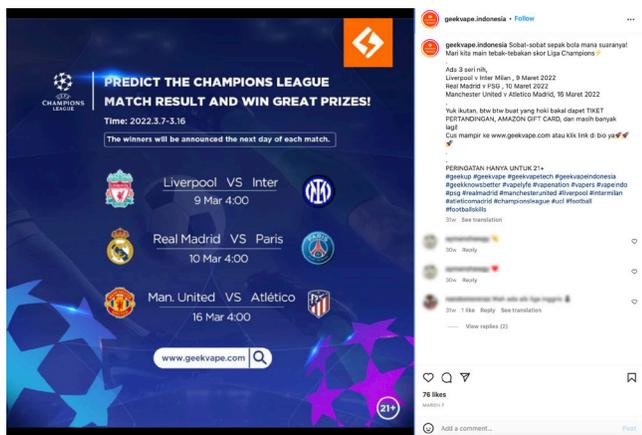
In all three countries, e-cigarettes were mostly marketed with the product clearly pictured to make sales. In Indonesia, where product brands engaged in social selling—selling the brand and e-cigarette lifestyle and not just products—marketing linked to events and sponsorships was also a popular tactic used by advertisers (27% of total marketing tactics).

Figure 3.
Marketing tactics used to promote e-cigarettes



*Y axis scale shows raw number of posts, while data labels within bars show proportion of posts by marketing tactic per country

N = 1,437



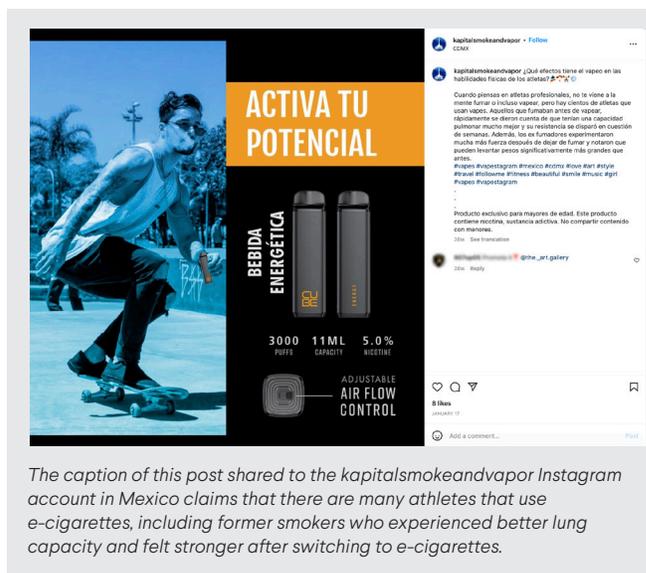
(Left) This post to the *geekvape.indonesia* Instagram page solicits viewers to predict the Champions League result, in which the football team that GeekVape sponsors, Paris Saint-Germain, was participating, to win prizes. (Right) This post also promotes their co-branded products, which were launched in February 2022.
⁷ Paris Saint-Germain is the first football club to partner with an e-cigarette brand.⁸



This post to the *voopoo_indonesia* Instagram page in Indonesia wishes account followers a happy Nyepi (day of silence) via Instagram—and by doing so, links a day of peace and reflection with e-cigarettes.

While e-cigarettes are promoted as smoking cessation aids in policy contexts, this was not reflected in how they were marketed across all three countries.

Rather than being promoted as tools to quit smoking, e-cigarettes were marketed as glamorous, must-have products—similarly to how conventional cigarettes are marketed to acquire new users and young customers. Health claims-related messaging was observed most in Mexico (8%), where it was often accompanied by the hashtag #elvapeosalvidavidas (vaping saves lives), which is commonly seen on e-cigarette messaging in Mexico. This type of messaging made up only 0.3% of messaging observed in Indonesia and was not observed at all in India.

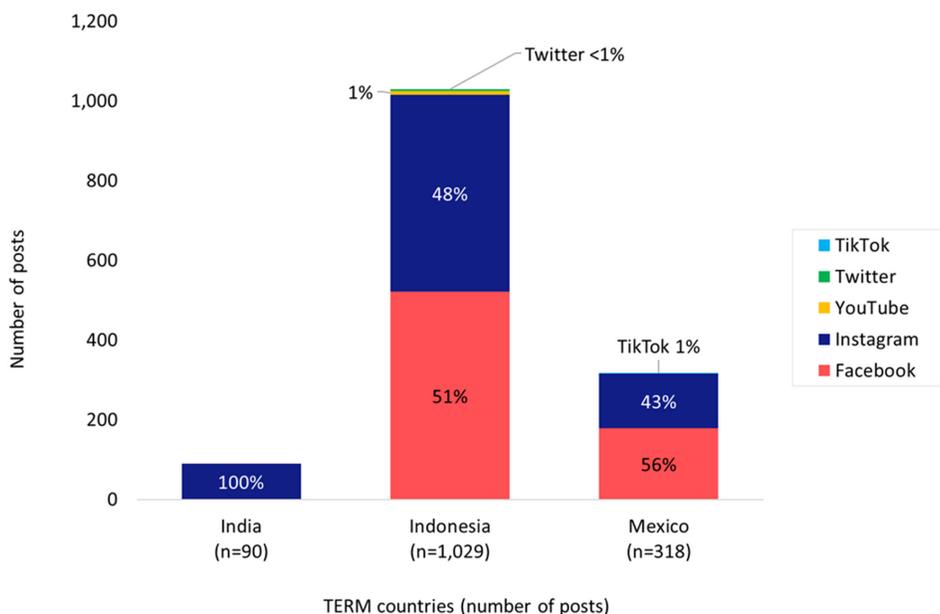


The caption of this post shared to the kapitalismokeandvapor Instagram account in Mexico claims that there are many athletes that use e-cigarettes, including former smokers who experienced better lung capacity and felt stronger after switching to e-cigarettes.

In all three countries, most marketing was observed on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram).[†]

In India, all marketing was observed on Instagram (100%), whereas in Indonesia and Mexico the majority was observed on Facebook (51% and 56%), followed by Instagram (48% and 43%). More marketing may have been observed on these platforms because they are the most-used platforms in all three countries after WhatsApp.⁹ Globally, they are also the platforms of choice for marketers.¹⁰

Figure 4.
Percentage of e-cigarette marketing by social media platforms



*Y axis scale shows raw number of posts, while data labels within bars show proportion of posts by platform per country

N= 1,437

[†]This may represent a limitation of our study, which relied on text-based searches and was not able to capture any content that solely contains images. This may have led to an undercounting of marketing content on heavily visual media such as YouTube or TikTok.

User engagement tended to be highest for content shared to video-based platforms. The type of messaging that received the most engagement varied by country.

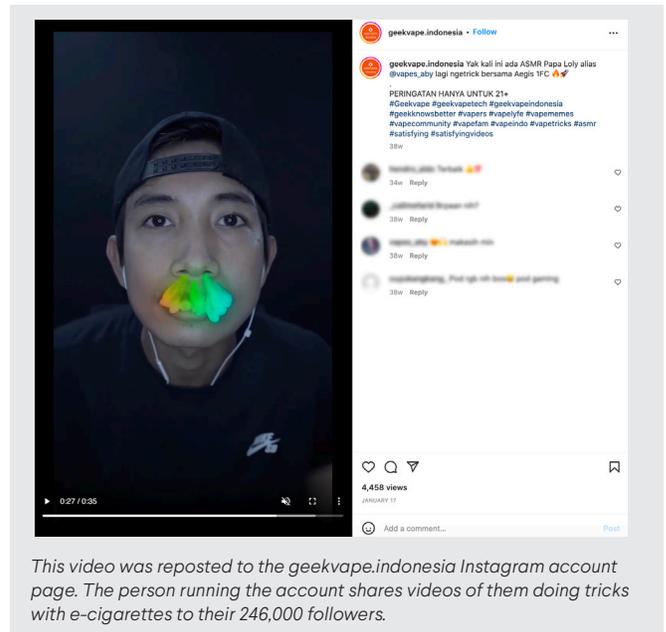
In both Indonesia and Mexico, posts on video-based platforms generated the most engagement. Video content tends to produce more engagement than static content,¹¹ which may explain in part why these platforms had higher average engagement rates than those sharing both types of content and highlights the importance of monitoring these popular video-based platforms.

Engagement was measured by adding up likes/loves, reshares and comments. In Indonesia, viewers interacted the most with videos on YouTube (484). Across platforms, users in Indonesia interacted more with content that promoted products or the company brand as being entertaining and fun (322), including user-submitted videos of e-cigarette tricks. Being able to do tricks with e-cigarettes has been found to be a motivating factor behind younger people using them.¹² In Mexico, videos on TikTok, which is a platform that has recently become very popular in the country, especially with younger audiences,¹³ generated the highest user interaction (89). Messaging that focused on e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation aid was the most popular among users (14). We could not analyze which platform had the highest engagement in India, where 100% of the marketing was on Instagram. In terms of message framing, in India posts touting product features garnered the most engagement (132 likes/loves, reshares, comments on the top post).

In countries with bans or restrictions on e-cigarettes, marketing originated from third-party retailers rather than product brands.

In India and Mexico, where e-cigarettes were banned or restricted, third-party retailers selling a variety of different brands were behind all the observed e-cigarette marketing. Product brands (e.g., VOOPOO, SMOK) were only observed marketing their own brands in Indonesia, where e-cigarettes are not regulated.

The marketing that originated from product brands tended to be more interactive (e.g., reposted videos or photos that pictured e-cigarette users, influencers, contests) and appeared to aim to not only sell products, but also to promote the brand and e-cigarette lifestyle.

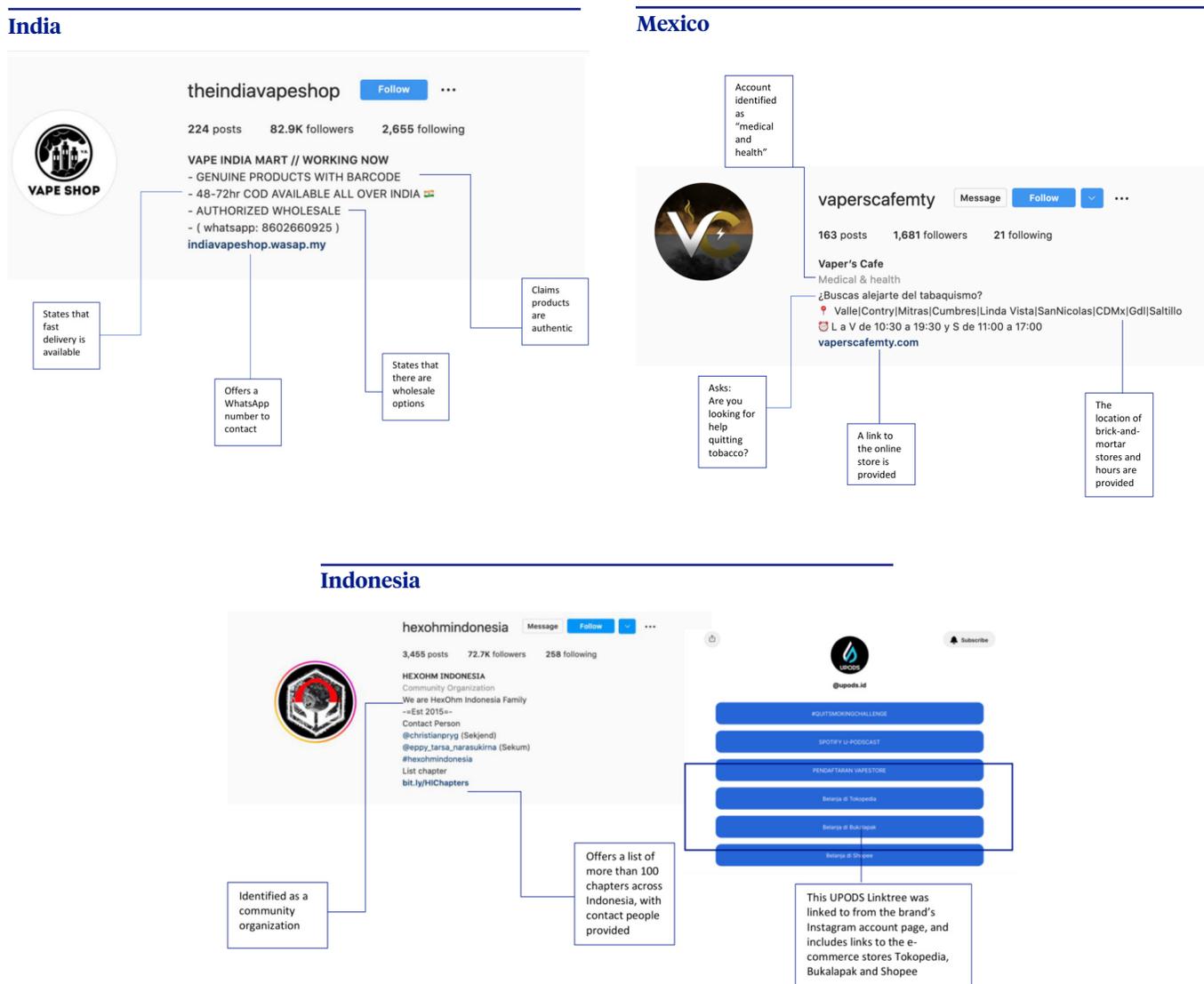


This video was reposted to the geekvape.indonesia Instagram account page. The person running the account shares videos of them doing tricks with e-cigarettes to their 246,000 followers.

In India, accounts offered fewer and more covert options for sales, whereas in Indonesia and Mexico, accounts offered more options for sales.

In India, likely given the stricter policy context, third-party retailer accounts engaged in more covert ways of selling products, such as by providing phone numbers, often via WhatsApp. In Mexico and Indonesia, accounts provided links to online stores or locations where products could be purchased in person. In Indonesia, linking to e-commerce sites (Tokopedia, Shopee) via tools such as Linktree was also popular. Beyond sales avenues, product brands' Linktree accounts also offered other forms of interaction with the brand, such as Upods' podcast and "quit smoking" challenge and Geekvape's Tiktok Program, which solicited participants with large followings to produce TikTok videos about e-cigarettes.

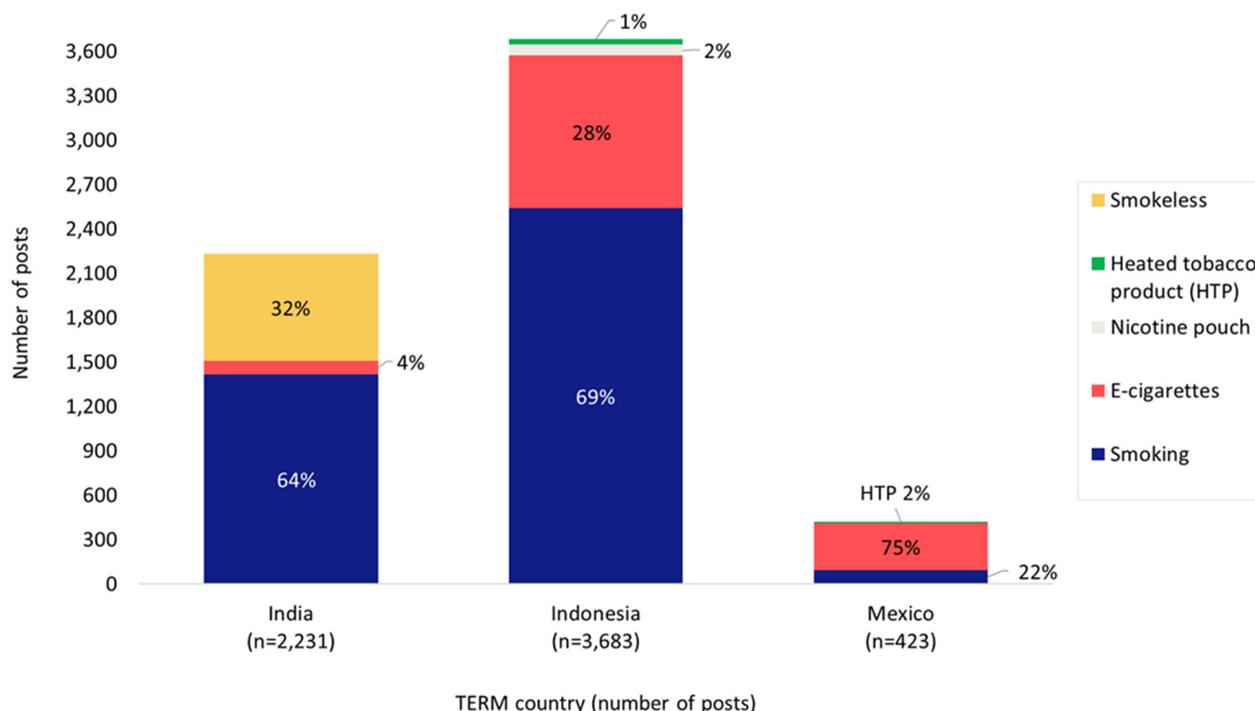
Figure 5.
Avenues for purchase of e-cigarettes promoted in Instagram posts



In Mexico, there was more online marketing for e-cigarettes than for other products, amid a shrinking conventional tobacco market. In India and Indonesia, there was significantly more online marketing for conventional tobacco products than for e-cigarettes.

In Mexico, three-quarters of the tobacco/nicotine product marketing that was observed online was for e-cigarettes. This may be because there are not many key players in the conventional smoking tobacco market, which is facing declining sales, and because marketing of conventional tobacco products is not permitted.¹⁴ In India and Indonesia, which have among the world's largest tobacco markets, there was a smaller proportion of e-cigarette marketing compared to other products (4% and 28%); most of the marketing observed online in both countries was indirect marketing for smoking tobacco products (64% and 69%). Marketing of conventional tobacco products is not permitted in India and is partially regulated in Indonesia.^{15,16}

Figure 6.
Volume and proportion of tobacco marketing by product type



*Y axis scale shows raw number of posts, while data labels within bars show proportion of posts by tobacco product type per country

N= 6,337

The e-cigarette market appears fragmented with many different brands available, predominantly from China, which makes tracking it both a challenge and a necessity.

There were at least 63 different product brands observed being marketed across the three countries, but only four product brands that were marketed in all three countries: Vaporesso, VOOPOO, UWELL and SMOK. There were 48 e-liquid and e-cigarette product brands observed being marketed in Mexico, 16 product brands observed in Indonesia, and 9 in India. The country of origin of the products promoted was predominantly China (77%), followed by the U.S. (18%). In Indonesia, there was one instance of a locally owned e-cigarette brand being promoted (4%). Of the four products that were marketed across countries, researchers have identified Vaporesso and SMOK as brands that heavily collaborate with global influencers on Instagram. ¹⁷



Influencers with upward of 74,000 followers promote SMOK products in posts shared to the brand's Instagram page in Indonesia.

Recommendations

- 1. Protect youth:** Strengthen or introduce marketing restrictions to prevent youth from becoming dependent on e-cigarettes. Marketing restrictions should cover all new tobacco and nicotine products and apply across all media and to all parties.
- 2. Reject voluntary commitments:** Voluntary commitments, such as those by social media platforms, do not work alone; government action is necessary.
- 3. Counter industry messaging:** Disseminate accurate, youth-focused health information on digital platforms where young people gather to counter e-cigarette and conventional tobacco marketing claims. Campaigns may also be used to make policymakers aware of the dissonance between claims being made in policy contexts that e-cigarettes are a harm reduction device and the marketing messages that are being produced, which primarily frame them as desirable and harmless products.
- 4. Strengthen monitoring and enforcement:** Develop or strengthen rapid and continuous digital media monitoring surveillance systems to track players, marketing trends and policy interference efforts, with mechanisms for enforcement. Citizen-led reporting may be used to complement these efforts.

The benefit of campaigns countering industry messaging on e-cigarettes

There is emerging evidence that campaigns on the harms of e-cigarettes, like those that preceded them about conventional tobacco products, are effective in lowering youth's susceptibility to use e-cigarettes;¹⁸ increasing their belief that e-cigarettes and nicotine addiction are harmful to health; and in fostering attitudes that are less positive toward e-cigarettes (See Appendix 2 to learn about Vital Strategies' work in this area).

Evolving regulatory mechanisms

Internet tobacco marketing and marketing for newer products such as e-cigarettes is an evolving issue, and many countries are looking to regulate these products or keep them out of their markets. Monitoring online tobacco/nicotine product marketing, either as part of enforcement efforts for existing regulations or to inform the development of new ones, is not nearly as established as monitoring mechanisms for other types of advertising and is complicated by the expansive and user-controlled nature of the internet.¹⁹ However, there are some examples of evolving regulatory mechanisms:

- Bahrain has assigned seven public health inspectors in their Ministry of Health to monitor violations of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS) on social media. Monitoring is conducted daily, using relevant keywords to find accounts. Public health inspectors then identify the responsible party and refer them to the enforcement agency.²⁰
- Singapore prohibits tobacco advertisements from being published electronically from anyone inside or outside the country. A team of officers conduct cyber surveillance and internet trawling based on keyword searches for online activities related to tobacco; they then investigate companies and shut down accounts.²⁰
- In 2021, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which is responsible for regulating e-cigarettes at the national level, submitted letters of inquiry into the social media marketing practices of four e-cigarette brands (Aspire, Joyetech, Vaporesso and VOOPOO) that were observed having large followings, actively posting and not using age restriction tools.²¹

Appendix 1: Cross-country comparison of e-cigarette marketing on social media

Measure	India	Indonesia	Mexico
Volume of e-cigarette marketing	90 posts (6%)	1,029 posts (72%)	318 posts (22%)
Share of e-cigarette marketing compared to other tobacco/ nicotine products observed	4%	28%	75%
Number of e-cigarette device and e-liquid product brands	9	16	48
Type of accounts observed	100% third-party retailers	86% product brands 12% community groups affiliated with product brands 2% third-party retailers	100% third-party retailers
Sales channels offered by accounts	Few options: phone numbers, often via WhatsApp	Many options: Websites, other social media accounts, e-commerce sites, in-person store locations, emails/phone numbers, other ways to interact with brand	Multiple options: other social media accounts, in-person store locations, emails/phone numbers
Platforms where marketing was observed	Instagram: 100%	Facebook: 51% Instagram: 48% YouTube: 1% Twitter: <1%	Facebook: 56% Instagram: 43% TikTok: 1%
Marketing tactic used	Direct advertising: 99% Price promotion: 1%	Direct advertising: 69% Events, occasions and sponsorships: 27% Price promotion: 3% General profile raising: 2%	Direct advertising: 93% General profile raising: 4% Price promotion: 2%
Types of messaging used in posts	Product features: 86% Entertainment: 13% Informational: 1%	Product features: 58% Informational: 14% Personal care and wellness: 9% Glamorization: 8% Community celebration and festivals: 5% Entertainment: 5% Health claims: 0.3%	Product features: 73% Health claims: 8% Community celebration and festivals: 7% Glamorization: 5% Informational: 3% Entertainment: 2% Personal care and wellness: 1%
Highest average engagement by platform and message framing	Platform: N/A Message framing: product features (132 likes/loves, reshares, comments)	Platform: YouTube (484 likes/loves, reshares, comments) Message framing: Entertainment (322 likes/loves, reshares, comments)	Platform: TikTok (89 likes/loves, reshares, comments) Message framing: Health claims (14 likes/loves, reshares, comments)

Values may not add up to 100% due to rounding off.

Appendix 2:

To date, Vital Strategies has released several campaigns warning about the risks of e-cigarettes. These have included: [No Safe Smoking](#) (Ukraine, 2021) and [We Are Not Smoke Friendly Here \(Ukraine, 2022\)](#). In 2020, Vital Strategies conducted a series of focus groups to test e-cigarette messages in Viet Nam, Ukraine and India. The results of the message testing study, which will soon be released, will add to the growing evidence to inform the development of similar campaigns as more countries look to stem the rising threat from e-cigarettes.

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Methodology

The Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM) is a digital media monitoring system that offers rapid, qualitative insights into online tobacco marketing. The primary purpose of TERM is to identify instances of tobacco marketing, a known public health risk. TERM does not allege or attempt to identify whether these tobacco marketing instances are in violation of local or international laws.

This report summarizes information gathered from publicly available social media posts posted from Dec. 15, 2021 to March 16, 2022. Tobacco marketing posts were gathered using an artificial intelligence-driven monitoring tool from social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok; e-cigarette-related posts were then extracted for analysis. Data coding was first conducted automatically and was then reviewed by Vital Strategies researchers using a theory-driven codebook. The analysis was restricted to content in English, Hindi, Indonesian and Spanish. Read the full methodology in the original journal article.

About the Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement

Vital Strategies' [Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement \(TERM\)](#) is a real-time digital media monitoring system that tracks tobacco marketing online on social media platforms and news sites. TERM is currently operating in India, Indonesia and Mexico.

About Vital Strategies

Vital Strategies is a global health organization that believes every person should be protected by equitable and effective public health systems. We partner with governments, communities and organizations to reimagine public health, and the result is millions of people living longer, healthier lives. Our goal is to build a future where better health is supported across all facets of our lives, in our families, communities, in our environment and our governments.

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