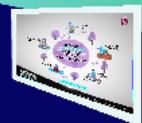
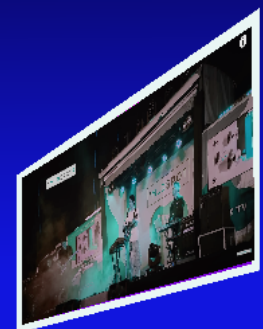


November 2023

# The Next Frontier in Tobacco Marketing: The Metaverse, NFTs, Advergames and More



## Acknowledgements

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## Summary

Marketers of unhealthy products reach two-thirds of the global population by exploiting an underregulated online environment (1). Unhealthy commodities like tobacco are regularly promoted on digital media platforms, which include social media, video streaming platforms, podcast hosting platforms and mobile apps, among others.<sup>1</sup> This marketing is highly effective because it is ubiquitous, interactive and often personalized. Next-generation digital technologies—such as virtual reality, augmented reality and blockchain technology—and the growth of new digital spaces like the metaverse will offer evolving opportunities to promote and sell tobacco. They will present new challenges for addressing the public health effects of tobacco.

Government regulators and tobacco control advocates must understand tobacco marketing tactics on existing digital platforms and those that the next generation of the internet will bring, so they can act early and efficiently to prevent tobacco companies from exploiting this unregulated environment to market their products unchecked. This report describes the latest marketing tactics used to promote tobacco online and offers evidence and insight about how these tactics might evolve with new technologies, in order to support governments in developing policies to address them. Evidence is drawn from Vital Strategies' digital media monitoring system, the [Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement \(TERM\)](#), which scans for and analyzes tobacco marketing on social media platforms and news sites in India, Indonesia and Mexico.

## Summary of Digital Marketing Tactics

- 1. Tobacco is promoted online via a range of marketing tactics.** Avenues for promoting tobacco are restricted in traditional media but with ongoing innovations in digital tools, new forms of marketing have emerged and existing forms have evolved. These include:



**Advergaming** – Online games that are designed with the intention of advertising a brand or product. TERM found that an engaging, youth-oriented online game developed in connection with a nontobacco brand in India indirectly promotes tobacco.



**Astroturfing** – A tactic used to create the impression of grassroots public support, when in fact the agenda is supported by a company or organization. TERM discovered an initiative to promote Philip Morris International's heated tobacco products in Mexico using digital platforms to make it seem as if they are representing the Mexican public's demand for alternatives to cigarettes.



**Entertainment marketing** – Depictions of tobacco in entertainment media such as films, broadcast television shows and streaming platforms, through product placement, sponsorship and other tactics. On social media in India, TERM encountered movie posters for action films that featured famed actors smoking, thereby amplifying the reach of content that glamorizes tobacco use.



**Community marketing and event promotions** – Use of popular activities, such as those involving sports or music, to indirectly promote tobacco products, especially through live events. TERM has observed the use of community marketing in Indonesia, where brands focusing on music, sports and adventure are used to indirectly promote a company's tobacco brands. This is largely through the sponsorship of events that appeal to youth such as concerts, competitions to attend sports matches and more. The brands have a significant presence across social media and other digital media platforms and use these platforms to promote events.



**Content marketing** – Entertainment content developed by a tobacco company that serves as a stand-alone promotion for their tobacco brand and tobacco use. TERM identified a Spotify podcast and a YouTube web series in Indonesia that use lifestyle topics to indirectly promote tobacco to millions.



**Influencer promotions** – Influential social media users are paid by companies to promote their brands and products to the user's followers. TERM observed influencer promotions in Indonesia, which included conducting "vape tricks" that entice young people to use electronic cigarettes.

<sup>1</sup> Reference to tobacco in this report includes cigarettes, electronic cigarettes and heated tobacco products, unless otherwise distinguished. Reference to the tobacco industry also includes the electronic cigarette industry, unless otherwise distinguished.



**Surrogate marketing** – A promotional strategy to advertise products that government regulations otherwise ban or restrict from being widely advertised. To get around this, companies advertise another permissible product they make, to increase brand awareness. TERM identified social media platforms in India that are being used to amplify this tactic.



**Brand extension** – Use of the same established brand name, logo or trademark on nontobacco products that is used for a company's tobacco products. TERM saw evidence of this tactic on social media platforms in India.



**Corporate social responsibility** – Initiatives that seek to portray tobacco companies as responsible corporate citizens. TERM observed a short YouTube film in India that was used to promote a tobacco company's social initiatives in primary education, sustainable agriculture and women's empowerment, despite the company's production of a product that undermines progress in all these areas and kills millions.



**Online retail** – A form of online e-commerce that allows consumers to buy goods online and use tools that facilitate purchases. TERM has found that social media accounts link to websites and e-commerce platforms where customers can purchase products, but also encourage customers to reach out via direct messages in the apps themselves (e.g., Facebook Messenger) to facilitate tobacco sales.

## 2. Tobacco is already being promoted using next-generation internet tools, such as nonfungible tokens (NFTs) and the metaverse. It is likely this trend will grow as use of NFTs and the metaverse increases.



**Nonfungible tokens (NFTs)** – NFTs represent ownership over unique digital assets, such as artwork or videos, that exist on a blockchain and cannot be duplicated. TERM found an NFT developed and promoted by a tobacco company in India to celebrate the company's 93rd anniversary.



**Metaverse** – A more three-dimensional (3D), gamelike version of the internet that uses augmented and virtual reality. In Indonesia, TERM observed an account associated with a tobacco company using metaverse art to promote partying and smoking. In India, a tobacco company sponsored the first metaverse wedding and Diwali celebration with its juice and chocolate brands.

## Recommendations for Governments

### ✓ **Restrict**

Prohibit all forms of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship on all media platforms, as recommended by the World Health Organization. The policy should broadly and comprehensively define marketing and types of media to include the latest tactics and forms of media described in this report, including those based on newer technologies.

### ✓ **Monitor**

Learn about new technologies and tools to enable early and efficient action to prevent tobacco companies from exploiting them to market their products unchecked. Establish media monitoring systems that identify emerging trends in tobacco marketing, particularly those employing new technologies.

Work collaboratively with multiple stakeholders including consumers, civil society organizations and other economic actors to monitor tobacco marketing instances and support regulations. Collaboration must also occur across borders to strengthen policies and policy enforcement to curb cross-border tobacco marketing.

### ✓ **Enforcement**

Consider which agencies have jurisdiction to regulate different forms of media and the appropriate mechanisms to do so. This must be established for new and emerging technologies, including next-generation digital spaces that use virtual and augmented reality (e.g., the metaverse) or are based on technologies that are hard to trace to a single source of ownership (e.g., NFTs).

## Background

There are now nearly 5.2 billion internet users globally, amounting to approximately two-thirds of the world's population (1). Social media, including Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, among other platforms, alone has 4.8 billion users (1). Internet users are increasingly getting their news, doing their shopping and connecting with peers on these digital platforms.

As people have shifted to using digital over traditional media platforms, marketers have followed. This includes promoters of unhealthy commodities like tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed foods and drinks, who benefit from these newer and evolving digital platforms being less regulated than traditional platforms and more challenging for regulators to monitor. Digital marketing, which is marketing conducted through digital platforms, including websites, apps, social media and games, may be more effective than traditional media marketing because it is ubiquitous, interactive and often highly personalized (2).

Tobacco marketing is a leading reason why people use tobacco products (3), which is one of the top causes of preventable death, claiming 8 million lives each year (4). It is well established that tobacco is being promoted on social media (5); yet, less is known about the range of tactics and how other digital tools are being used to market tobacco. This includes those based on next-generation digital technologies that are still evolving. It is important that stakeholders understand the many ways in which tobacco is marketed, including via the use of next-generation technologies, so they can act early and effectively to prevent it. This report puts a spotlight on the wide variety of ways in which tobacco is marketed online and offers insight into how next-generation internet technologies may be used to market tobacco. Please note that reference to tobacco in this report includes cigarettes, electronic cigarettes and heated tobacco products, unless otherwise distinguished. Reference to the tobacco industry also includes the electronic cigarette industry, unless otherwise distinguished.

Evidence presented in this report is drawn from Vital Strategies' digital media monitoring system, the Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM), which scans for and analyzes tobacco marketing on social media platforms and news sites in India, Indonesia and Mexico.

## About TERM

Vital Strategies' [Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement \(TERM\)](#) is an AI-powered, human-expertise-driven digital media monitoring system built in response to the tobacco industry's exploitation of the power of digital platforms. TERM tracks and analyzes tobacco marketing online using news and social media listening. It packages findings into actionable, easy-to-read reports for governments, media, tobacco control advocates and others. TERM is currently operating in India, Indonesia and Mexico.

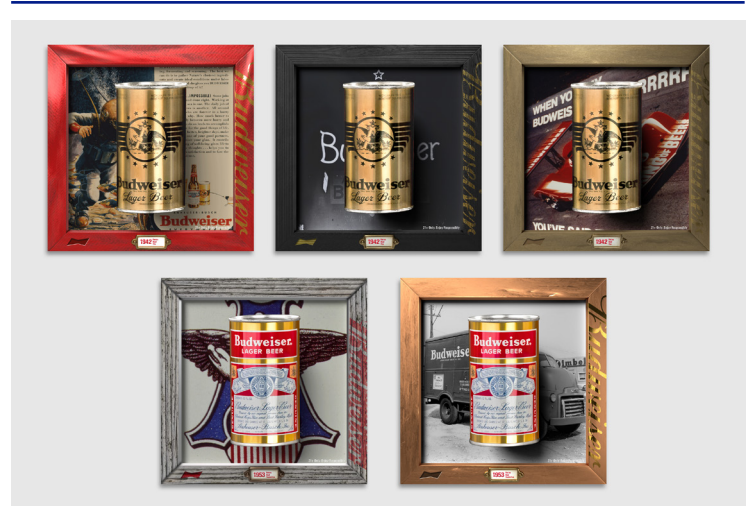
## How Might Tobacco Marketing Evolve as New Technologies Are More Widely Adopted?

The next era of the internet will bring more decentralization to existing platforms, and will also spur the creation of more immersive, user-controlled, decentralized virtual spaces and tools (6). In this new digital reality, marketing may occur even further out of regulators' eyesight and in spaces where jurisdiction is unclear, posing additional challenges to addressing it. Next-generation digital technologies including blockchain (a decentralized ledger that stores the record of ownership of digital assets), virtual reality (a three-dimensional environment in which people can interact with virtual surroundings), and augmented reality technology (which integrates digital information, such as photos or audio, into people's real-life environments) are being invested in as the way of the future. These technologies have shaped the development of nonfungible tokens (NFTs), which are units of data stored in a blockchain that can be sold and traded, and the metaverse, an augmented virtual reality that may change the way we experience the internet (7, 8). To date, there is little to no evidence of how these new tools have been used to market tobacco (see page 18 for the evidence TERM identified). However, there is research that establishes why they are coveted by marketers and how they are being used to promote alcohol—another unhealthy commodity that shares a similar marketing playbook with tobacco (9).

### What are NFTs?

NFTs are nonfungible tokens that represent ownership over unique digital assets, such as artwork or videos, that exist on a blockchain and cannot be duplicated (10). They hold speculative value that is determined by the community rather than the creator and can be bought and sold. Most NFTs certify ownership over digital assets, but they can also represent ownership over tangible items like art or clothes (8).

Marketers are using NFTs to promote their brands because they offer several benefits including: being able to provide virtual products, which don't have the challenges of physical products (shipping costs, etc.); and being able to sell products anywhere globally, rather than being confined to the geographic restrictions of the platforms they generally use (11, 12). Ultimately, NFTs are used to establish a closer relationship between the brand and customer by inviting customers to own a unique piece of it (11, 12). There is already evidence of NFTs being used to market unhealthy commodities: for instance, alcohol brands are using NFTs to release rare bottles and to sell digital designs of "heritage" product packaging from across the years (13).



In 2021, Anheuser-Busch InBev's beer brand, Budweiser, launched its first nonfungible token (NFT) collection featuring nearly 2,000 digital designs of "heritage" beer cans as digital assets.

Source: AdAge/Anheuser-Busch InBev

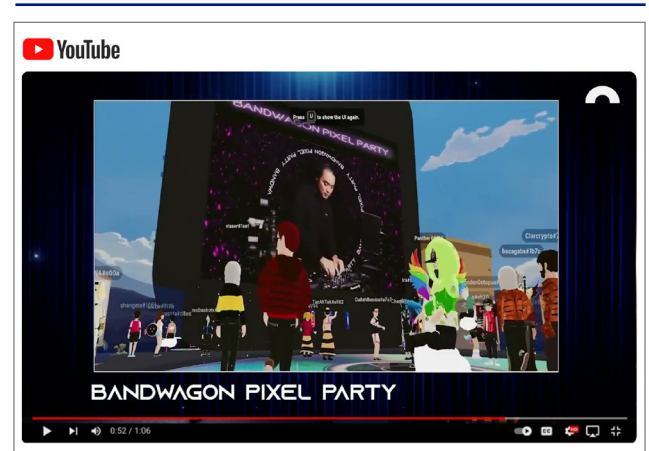
## What is the metaverse?

The metaverse is essentially a more three-dimensional, gamelike version of the internet. Unlike walled gaming platforms like Roblox or Fortnite, the goal is for the metaverse to be a space like the open internet, with no oversight and only partial control by media owners and platforms. It uses virtual reality, augmented reality and other technologies to enable people to have an immersive, realistic experience online (14). People adopt “avatars” that serve as their online identity, as they shop, socialize, work and learn in these digital spaces (15).

Advertising in the metaverse, fueled by increasing use of virtual and augmented reality technology, is expected to continue to grow each year to a market size of nearly 4 billion by 2030, with many experts predicting that by 2040 it will be a fully immersive, daily part of life for half a billion or more people around the world (16, 17). The NFT market is also projected to grow considerably, with an anticipated 19.3 million users by 2027 (18). Other predictions suggest that widespread adoption of these tools may take some time; however, additional tools built on the same or similar technologies will likely emerge (19, 20).

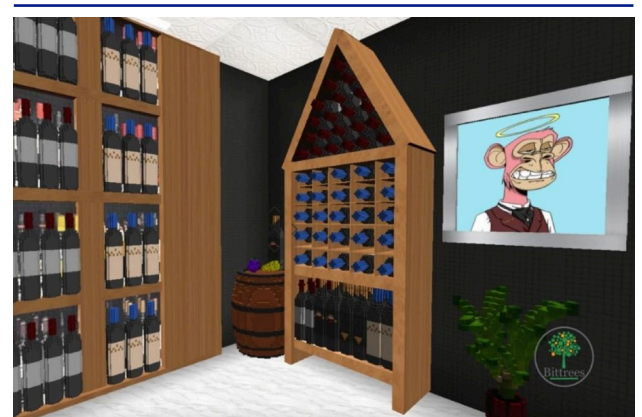
The metaverse poses both promise and peril to public health. On one hand, these virtual, interactive spaces can aid public health research and interventions. For example, some researchers have suggested that they could save resources by investigating the potential effects of large-scale interventions in virtual rather than in-person studies (21). But this technology may enable commercial entities to promote unhealthy commodities like tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed foods and drinks in a more interactive and engaging way, in a space that is not yet regulated. They may do so via branded virtual spaces and immersive brand experiences, potentially linked with real-life sales, and virtual meet-and-greets or product launches with influencers (8, 22).

The metaverse is still in its infancy, and there is little research about what its widespread adoption could mean for the marketing of unhealthy commodities. However, initial research shows how the metaverse has been used and will potentially be used to promote alcohol (8, 23). For example, the metaverse has taken e-commerce one step further by enabling alcohol to be sold via virtual liquor stores. Avatars enter virtual stores or bars, interact with virtual store clerks or bartenders and order alcoholic drinks that will be delivered to their location (23). The metaverse also hosts immersive events to promote alcohol products—for example, the alcohol company Pernod Ricard developed a new metaverse platform to promote its Absolut brand during a virtual Coachella event (8). Other likely activities include influencers and celebrities using the metaverse to host branded concerts and other events, and the development of branded items using NFTs that can be sold and traded in the metaverse (23). The many tactics used by companies now to cultivate brand awareness of their unhealthy commodities through experiences and events may be replicated and even more personalized in the metaverse.



Concerts and other forms of music entertainment will increasingly occur in the metaverse. This virtual Bandwagon Pixel Party via Decentraland featuring the Indonesian DJ Dipa Barus is an example of metaverse rave parties. Iceperience, which is associated with Djarum LA Ice clove cigarettes, promoted Bandwagon Pixel Party events to its community of electronic music lovers.

Source: Bandwagon YouTube



A virtual liquor store in the metaverse.

Source: European Centre for Monitoring Alcohol Marketing (EUCAM) summary of “Big Alcohol Bets Big on Metaverse to Push Alcohol Availability,” an article from Movendi International.

# The Latest in Digital Tobacco Marketing

## Advergaming

Advergaming is the development of online games to advertise a brand or product; this differs from product placement, when brands pay to have products placed in existing games (24). Advergaming facilitates more interaction with the brand—which is then seen as fun and playful—and this form of advertising is especially targeted to children and youth (25). The marketing of unhealthy food and drinks through advergaming is common and has been found to increase children’s requests for and consumption of products (25). In India, TERM observed marketing for a gamified mobile ad created for the smokeless tobacco company DS Group’s Pass Pass Pulse candy brand, which was reported to have reached close to 5 million users (26). DS Group and other tobacco companies in India have employed this tactic of producing nontobacco products under the same company name they use for tobacco products (also known as “brand extension.” See page 15 for additional details.) In the DS Group’s advergence, as users grab Pulse candies, the company’s logo is displayed on the screen, fostering associations with its well-known tobacco brands.

### DS Group’s Pulse Candy extends on-ground activity with gamified mobile ad



The Indian smokeless tobacco company DS Group developed and promoted a gamified mobile ad for its extended candy product, Pass Pass Pulse. The game prominently features the DS Group logo, which fosters associations with the company’s well-known tobacco brands.

Source: *Adgully news*

## Astroturfing

Astroturfing is a tactic that is used to create the impression of grassroots public support, when in fact a company or organization is behind the effort (27). In Mexico, TERM has observed social media posts from Futuro sin Humo (Smoke-free Future) that to the untrained eye seem to represent the demands of Mexicans for “smoke-free” alternatives to cigarettes, when in fact it is a Philip Morris International (PMI) initiative to promote its heated tobacco products (28).



A post from Futuro sin Humo (a PMI initiative to promote the company’s heated tobacco products) makes it appear that there is a movement pushing for a smoke-free Mexico. The handwritten sign says: “Do they want Mexicans to stop smoking, or not?,” which refers to permitting the use of alternative smoking products, like heated tobacco products, in the country.

Source: *Futuro sin Humo México Facebook*



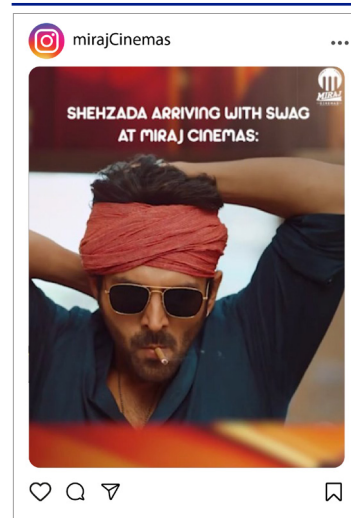
### Entertainment Marketing

The depiction of tobacco in entertainment media such as films, broadcast television shows and streaming platforms, through product placement and sponsorship, are long-established tobacco marketing tactics (29, 30). Exposure to positive portrayals of tobacco in these media, especially featuring popular actors, has been linked to increased tobacco use (31). Content on digital streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime has been found to have more tobacco scenes than traditional entertainment content (32, 33). These platforms have become an important way for the tobacco industry to reach audiences, particularly youth. For example, the tobacco industry watchdog STOP found that Netflix streamed more than a billion minutes of tobacco brand imagery in the fourth season of “Formula 1: Drive to Survive,” its docuseries about the sport (34). STOP reported that Formula 1 also heavily uses social media and esports for promotions, including for the Netflix series.

Marketing through these platforms is reaching people even in countries like India that comprehensively ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, including in entertainment media and related promotional assets like posters. TERM has observed movie posters featuring famous actors smoking that are promoted on social media in India, amplifying the reach of content that glamorizes tobacco use.

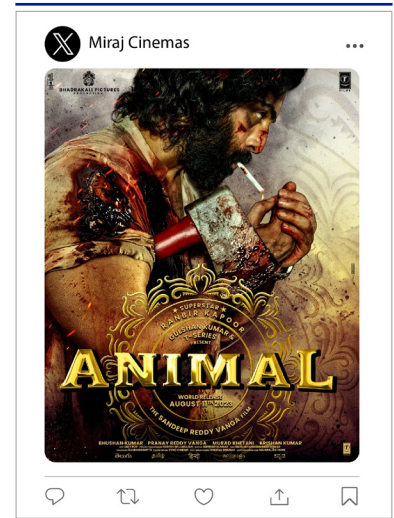
### Community Marketing and Event Promotions

Marketers use popular activities, such as those involving sports or music, to indirectly promote tobacco products, especially through live events. TERM has observed this in Indonesia, where tobacco companies are associating themselves with activities that are popular among young people and creating campaigns related to these interests to build brand awareness and a following. For example, the campaign “Super Soccer” seizes on people’s love for soccer (or football) to promote Djarum Super kretek<sup>2</sup> cigarettes.



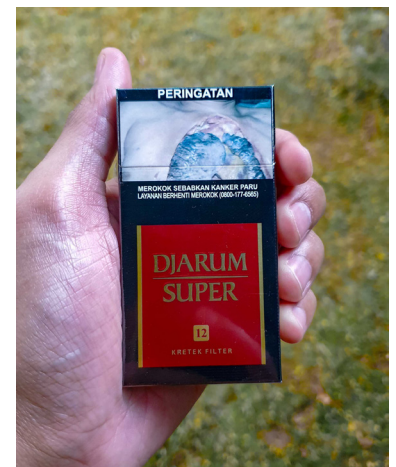
This gif, which promotes the action film “Shehzada” and features the actor-producer Kartik Aaryan, associates smoking with adventure and having “swag.” Miraj Cinemas is part of the entertainment wing of Miraj Group, a manufacturer of smokeless tobacco products.

Source: mirajCinemas Instagram



A poster for the action film “Animal” featuring the actor Ranbir Kapoor associates smoking with bravery.

Source: @mirajCinemas Twitter



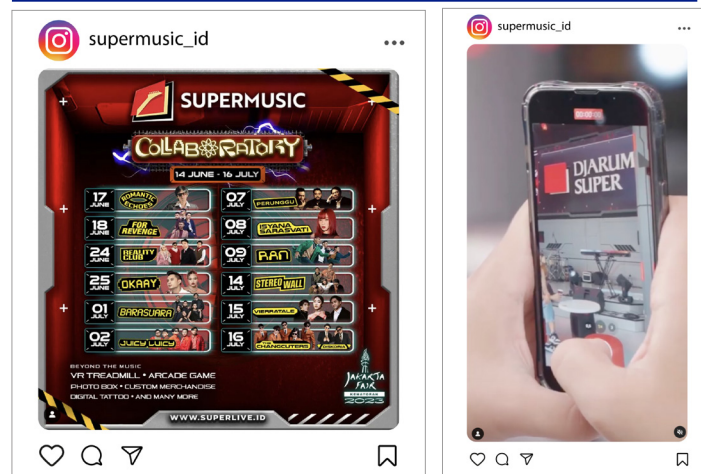
Note that the Super Soccer brand colors and logo (red and black) in this post (left) match the Djarum Super brand colors (right).

Source: Left: mysupersoccer Instagram. Right: Vital Strategies.

<sup>2</sup> Kreteks are clove-flavored cigarettes made in Indonesia.

TERM has seen marketing from many campaigns developed by Djarum, one of Indonesia’s largest kretek companies, to align itself with these different interest areas, including music, adventuring, football and other interests (e.g., Super Music, Super Challenge, Super Soccer). A central website (superlive.id) houses digital content for each brand, including news, digital television and more. Each brand then has a range of social media platforms, including Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, featuring content that is largely designed with the red and black colors of Djarum’s Super cigarette brand. The social media content advertises sponsored in-person events such as festivals, sporting events, concerts and singing competitions (Image 1), as well as contests to win tickets to live events (Image 2), in order to encourage people to interact with the brands at venues where Djarum tobacco brands are often promoted (35, 36). Promotions for esports competitions and virtual concerts also appear on Djarum’s social media platforms (Image 3). Social media permits these opportunities to be promoted farther and wider than ever before to encourage attendance and entry into contests, and it enables people to interact with the event online even if they do not attend.

Image 1



Super Music sponsored a series of rock and pop concerts on a stage at Jakarta Fair, a large annual fair, to promote Djarum Super cigarettes.

Source: supermusic\_id Instagram

Image 2



Super Soccer promoted a chance to win a trip to Thailand to watch the Euro Futsal championship for those who register with their soccer community.

Source: mysupersoccer Instagram

Image 3



Super Music, a community account associated with Djarum Super kretek cigarettes, promoted a 360° live virtual concert via YouTube.

Source: supermusic\_id Instagram

In addition, TERM has observed a series of campaigns associated with Djarum's L.A. cigarettes. There is a central website (LAzone.id) with links to separate websites for each brand. One example is Iceperience (to promote the L.A. Ice cigarette brand), which focuses on electronic music, while LensA Community promotes the L.A. Lights cigarette brand, with a focus on photography. These accounts promote digital and in-person events such as concerts, workshops, sporting events and more, via their social media handles.



Lensa Community holds photography workshops through its Lensa Academy (note how attention is drawn to the L and A letters in the logos to correspond with L.A. Lights cigarettes). At this workshop in Banjarmasin, Indonesia, participants took photos of models, including the one pictured here with L.A. Lights cigarette branding.

Source: LAZone ID YouTube

The Djarum Coklat brand, which focuses on independent music as an advertising mechanism for its Coklat cigarettes, has a digital television channel on YouTube, a digital radio station and a magazine (djarumcoklat.com). The brand's social media channels livestream and promote music content in these media (Image 1). TERM also found marketing for in-person events, including festivals and concerts (Image 2), and for international band tours (Image 3).

Image 1



The hosts of an online radio show about reggae are pictured smoking in a promotional post.

Source: dcdc.official Instagram

Image 2



Djarum Coklat sponsored the "Sound of Kretek Festival," a free music festival in Bandung that claimed to be "a means of preserving kreteks as an Indonesian cultural heritage."

Source: dcdc.official Instagram

Image 3



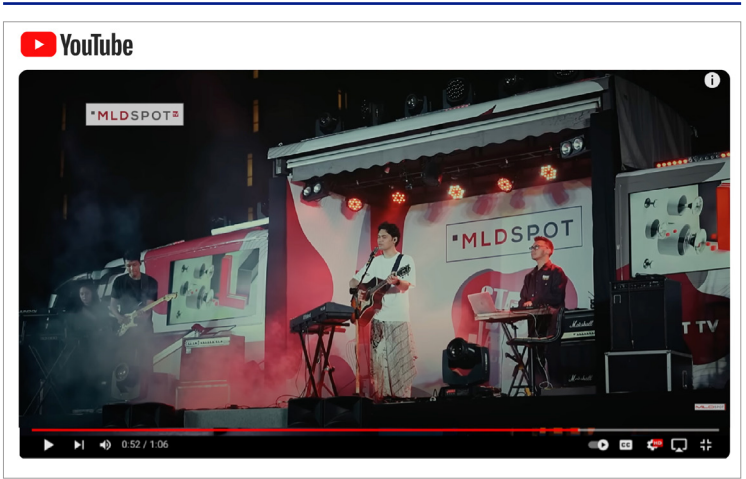
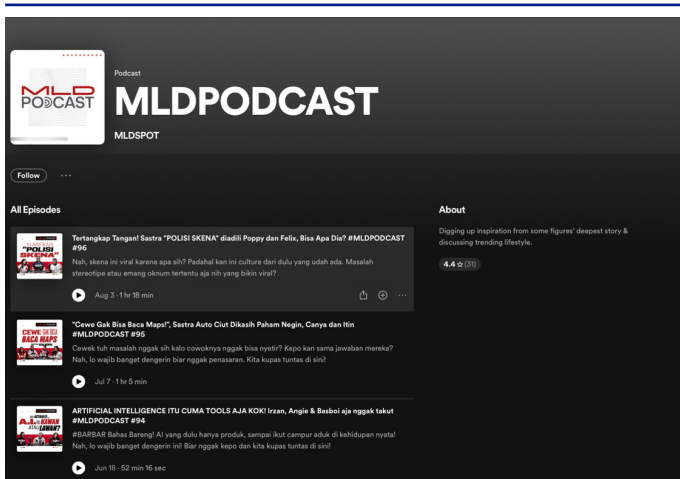
Djarum Coklat was one of the sponsors of this international tour of Europe and the U.K. by the Indonesian punk band Turtles Jr, including countries where tobacco sponsorship is banned.

Source: dcdc.official Instagram

An analysis of the independent music scene in Indonesian cities found that nearly the entire independent music scene in Bandung is controlled by cigarette companies as a means of promoting their products, including Djarum Coklat (DCDC) and Djarum's Super Music and Super Generation (37). Tobacco companies sponsor some of the country's most anticipated music festivals popular among youth, such as Soundrenaline (sponsored by Sampoerna) and Synchronize (sponsored by Gudang Garam). A study of the 2016 Soundrenaline festival found that there was heavy promotion of the Sampoerna Mild cigarette brand via free cigarette giveaways, product sales, performer endorsements, billboards and other means (38). Sampoerna publicized the festival on a website page and social media platforms. Hashtags used at the event generated more than 25,000 posts, further expanding the reach of the promotional tactics employed at the festival.

**Content Marketing**

Traditionally, cigarette companies have paid to place products in entertainment content, such as films, television shows, music videos, games and more, with electronic cigarette brands now following suit (29, 39, 40). However, tobacco companies are increasingly using digital technologies to develop entertainment content as stand-alone promotions for the company or brand, its products and product use. In Indonesia, TERM has observed this in a Spotify podcast and a YouTube web series from MldSpot that use lifestyle topics as a means to promote Djarum's Super MLD cigarette brand.



A Djarum MldSpot (Super MLD cigarette brand) podcast on lifestyle topics is hosted on Spotify and YouTube.

Source: MLDPODCAST Spotify

A Djarum MldSpot original web series called Stage Bus Jazz Tour is hosted on YouTube. It tells a story about music and friendship in a tour through various Indonesian cities. It has been viewed at least 1.6 million times.

Source: MLDSPOT YouTube

### Influencer Promotions

This tactic involves companies paying influential social media users to promote brands and products to the user’s followers. In recent years, cigarette companies’ use of social media influencers to promote their products has been noted (5, 41), but now this tactic is also being used for newer products like heated tobacco products and electronic cigarettes (42, 43).

Researchers have found that marketing from influencers is perceived as more authentic than ads directly from brands (43). Influencers often have large followings and a lifestyle that appears glamorous and appealing to youth, enabling brands to reach wider audiences and associate their products with a glamorous lifestyle.

Although TERM does not monitor influencer accounts, the monitoring system captures content that is reposted to electronic cigarette accounts in Indonesia from what appear to be accounts of influencers and potential paid endorsers.

Research has identified a highly connected global network of electronic cigarette influencers—many of whom are from Indonesia—who have collaborated with more than 600 brands (43). This is attributable to Indonesia’s lax tobacco control laws, highlighting the importance of collaboration between countries to strengthen laws to restrict tobacco advertising and to enhance their enforcement.

Videos of young people, many of whom have large followings, doing tricks with electronic cigarettes (often referred to as “vape tricks”) are also posted by electronic cigarette brands. Electronic cigarette brand sponsorship of “vape trick” videos is a common tactic on social media (44). These tricks make electronic cigarette use appear to be fun and appealing, and have been identified as a reason why young people start to use electronic cigarettes (Image 1) (44).

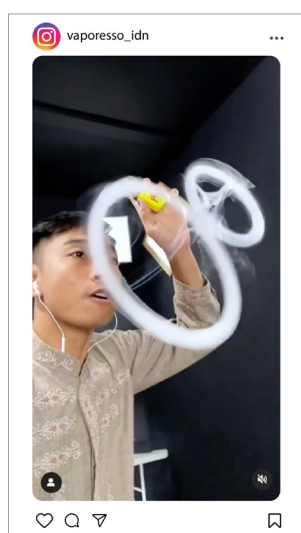
Several electronic cigarette brands also run programs to recruit users to promote their products in exchange for money or other benefits (Image 2).



This post features an Indonesian influencer, who has 42,000 followers, promoting Vaporesso electronic cigarette products.

Source: vaporesso\_idn Instagram

Image 1



This video was reposted from an account with 236,000 followers that consists almost entirely of videos of electronic cigarette tricks.

Source: vaporesso\_idn Instagram

Image 2



The global electronic cigarette brand GeekVape has a TikTok program that seeks to recruit people to post content about their products on TikTok in exchange for “paid collaboration opportunities, VIP perks and product giveaways.”

Source: GeekVape Linktree (as of August 2023; this has since been removed)

### Surrogate Marketing

Surrogate marketing (a form of “brand stretching”) is a promotional strategy to advertise products that government regulations otherwise ban or restrict from being widely advertised, such as tobacco and alcohol. To get around this, companies advertise another permissible product they make, in order to increase brand awareness.

Using this tactic, companies market nontobacco products using a visual brand identity similar to that of the company’s tobacco products, so the two may be conflated (45). This tactic has been frequently observed in India, where companies started to manufacture products like pan masala and mouth fresheners after direct and indirect advertising of tobacco products was banned (46). These nontobacco products are often marketed with the same or a similar brand name and packaging as those of known tobacco brands (46). Tobacco companies have large advertising budgets to promote surrogate products in place of their tobacco products, and they do so on television, billboards and other traditional channels (47). And advertising on social media enables these products to be marketed even farther and wider to increase familiarity with the brand.

For example, the pan masala brand Pan Parag (from Kothari Products Limited), which carries the same brand name and a similar visual identity as the company’s gutkha tobacco product (Image 1), is actively promoted across Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube—accounts that TERM monitors (46). The accounts often use cartoons likely to appeal to youth (Image 2), as well as well-wishes for secular and religious holidays. Products are promoted as refreshing, often via the use of memes.

Image 1



Image 2



Colorful imagery and catchy slogans, including a nod to India’s lunar space mission, are used to market this pan masala surrogate product to a young audience.

Source: panparagindia Instagram

DS Group’s BABA Elaichi (cardamom seeds) and BABA Supari (areca nut) are promoted with packaging similar to its BABA line of tobacco products (46). While TERM has not observed social media accounts for this brand, it has seen DS Group’s Rajnigandha pan masala line marketed on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. DS Group’s mouth freshener, Rajnigandha silver pearls, which has the same brand name and a very similar look to the pan masala line, is also heavily promoted on television and social media including Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook (48) (Image 1). The famous Indian movie stars Priyanka Chopra and Anushka Sharma have both served as ambassadors for the silver pearl brand (49). The brand’s marketing uses the concept of “achchai,” meaning goodness or virtue (Image 2), and recently celebrated “pearls” of India in honor of the 75th year of independence, featuring people who have made a positive contribution to India (such as educators, environmental stewards, doctors who have contributed to improving health, etc.) (Image 3).

Image 1



Image 2



To observe World Health Day, this post presents advice for self-care that, ironically, is from a company that sells tobacco.

Source: *rajnigandhasilverpearls* Instagram

Image 3



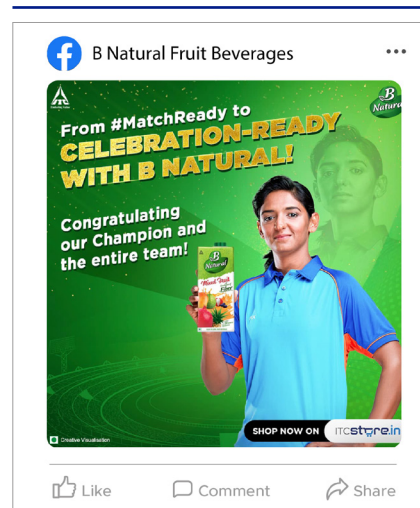
Rajnigandha silver pearls—a surrogate brand—saluted “pearls of India” including women who made a difference through their work on social and development initiatives.

Source: *rajnigandhasilverpearls* Instagram

### Brand Extension

Brand extension (also known as “brand sharing”) is when nontobacco products feature the same established brand name, logo or trademark that is used for a company’s tobacco products (45). These products do not have the same visual identity as the company’s tobacco products, but seeing them may foster associations with the company’s tobacco products. For example, the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company extended its Camel cigarette brand to other products after European countries restricted tobacco advertising. The company introduced new Camel-branded products including clothing, travel companies, matches, scooters and more (50).

This tactic is also evident in India, where tobacco giants like ITC Limited and DS Group have expanded into manufacturing nontobacco products including food and drinks—many of which are unhealthy ultra-processed foods—and into nontobacco services like hospitality and agriculture (51, 52). This can make the companies appear to be responsible corporate entities, despite cigarettes accounting for a large part of their revenues (53). These nontobacco brands are promoted on social media with content that includes the tobacco companies’ logos, prompting associations with their tobacco brands and products.

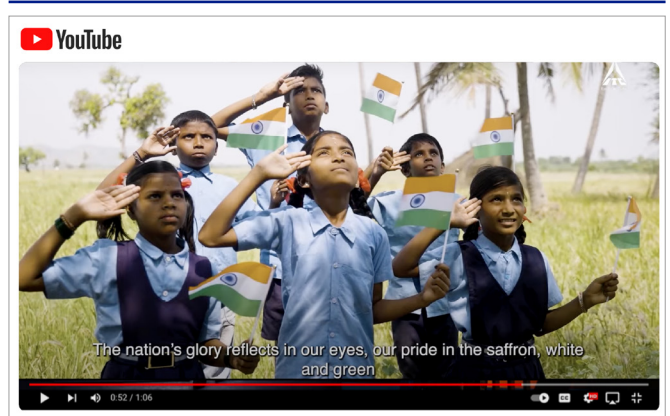


Harmanpreet Kaur, captain of the India Women’s National Cricket Team, is the brand ambassador for ITC’s B Natural juice line. Note the ITC logo in the upper left-hand corner and the link to the company’s online grocery store.

Source: *B Natural Fruit Beverages* Facebook

### Corporate Social Responsibility

Social media is further used to develop and amplify corporate social responsibility initiatives that seek to portray tobacco companies as responsible corporate citizens. For example, TERM saw a short film produced by ITC for India's 75th Independence Day, which was promoted using the hashtag #NationFirst to highlight the company's "nation first" social initiatives in primary education, sustainable agriculture and women's empowerment. This is despite the company's production of a product that undermines all these areas, claiming more than 1 million deaths in India each year.



To celebrate India's 75th Independence Day, the tobacco giant ITC created a nationalistic video highlighting its "nation first" social initiatives in primary education, sustainable agriculture and women's empowerment, despite producing a product that undermines all these areas.

Source: ITC Corp Com YouTube

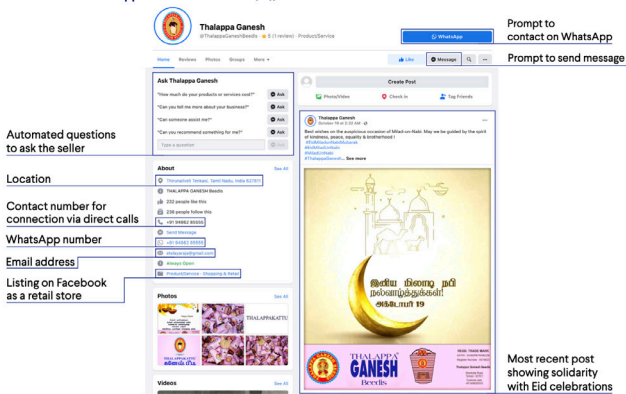
### Online Retail

Online retail is a form of e-commerce that allows consumers to buy goods online using tools that facilitate purchases. TERM observed the use of several digital platforms to sell tobacco products—including websites, e-commerce apps and delivery apps—even when such sales are banned. Social media has made it easier than ever before to directly link customers with these sales channels (41, 54). While a website link or store locations may be provided in traditional advertising, such as a television or print ad, on social media a potential customer can directly click the link that appears in the marketing content or account itself.

Social media accounts enable tobacco promoters to list their complete contact information (phone number, email address, locations of brick-and-mortar stores) and encourage potential customers to reach out via direct messages in the app itself (Facebook Messenger, Instagram Direct Message) or via a private messaging app (WhatsApp) (Images 1 and 2). These messaging tools have been called "dark social" and present additional monitoring challenges (55). TERM has observed this form of marketing for electronic cigarettes in India (56), and it has also occurred in Mexico—despite product bans in both countries.

#### Image 1

A screenshot of Thalappa Ganesh's Facebook page.

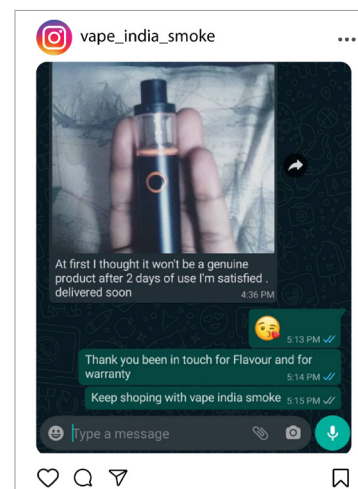


Source: <https://www.facebook.com/ThalappaGaneshBeedis/>

This bidi company's Facebook account in India has automated questions that potential customers can ask the seller via Facebook Messenger, and a prompt to contact the company on WhatsApp.

Source: Thalappa Ganesh Facebook

#### Image 2



In India, customers can purchase tobacco products via private messaging apps like WhatsApp. This screenshot of a conversation in WhatsApp between a customer and a seller was shared on the seller's Instagram account.

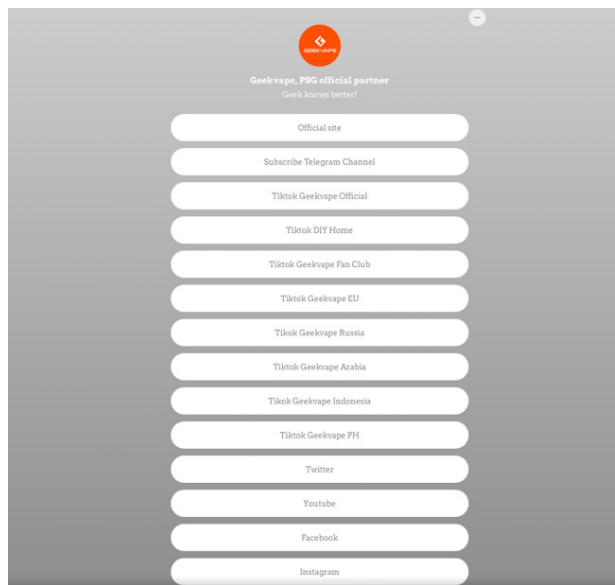
Source: vape\_india\_smoke Instagram



Some accounts link to third-party landing pages like Linktree, which list other digital accounts and initiatives. They may include, for example, e-commerce sites where products are sold (56). TERM has observed this primarily in Indonesia for electronic cigarettes (56) (Image 3).

Social media is also used to promote product availability and locations of physical brick-and-mortar shops, sometimes with pictures that show point-of-sale displays, and to advertise sales promotions.

**Image 3**



A link to this Linktree landing page is provided in the account description on [geekvape.indonesia](#)'s Instagram page. It links to the brand's other social media platforms, including its TikTok accounts in different regions.

**Source:** *geekvape.indonesia Instagram (as of August 2023; the Linktree content has since changed)*

# The Next Frontier in Digital Tobacco Marketing

## The Metaverse

The metaverse, which is an immersive virtual world facilitated by virtual and augmented reality, can host and enhance the tactics currently used by marketers of harmful products, including tobacco (8). For instance, at a branded event in the metaverse, influencers could interact with their followers in 3D. Tobacco marketers will use social media and other digital platforms to promote these initiatives in the metaverse to followers.

Evidence from TERM suggests these efforts are already underway. Djarum, which is one of Indonesia’s largest cigarette companies, runs a campaign focusing on electronic music called Iceperience (<https://iceperience.id>) to indirectly promote its L.A. Ice cigarettes. TERM observed the Iceperience Instagram account using metaverse art to encourage introverts to party and smoke in the metaverse.



The caption of this post invites followers, especially introverts who love electronic music, to party in the metaverse. The avatars are smoking, with Djarum L.A. Ice menthol kretek cigarette packages on the table.

Source: [iceperience.id](https://iceperience.id) Instagram

Translation of the caption and post:

A new opportunity for partygoers who are too lazy to go out and introverted people who don't want to meet with many people. Party in the metaverse! Which circle do you want to invite to join the party in the metaverse? Tag them below! INTROVERTS CAN GO ALL OUT—PARTY BUT NOT FEEL OVERCROWDED.



The caption of this post suggests spending time with friends in the metaverse. The avatars are pictured smoking, with Djarum L.A. Ice menthol kretek cigarette packages on the table.

Source: [iceperience.id](https://iceperience.id) Instagram

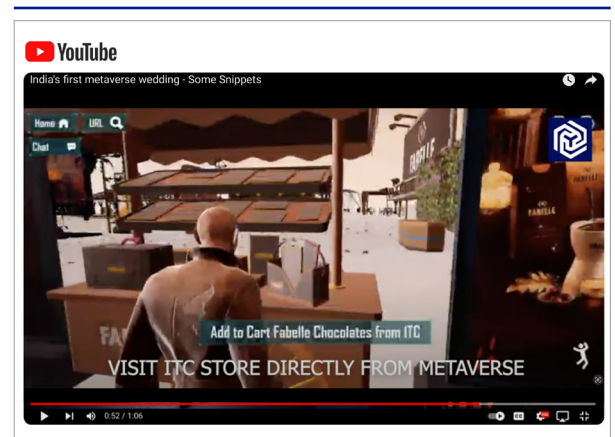
Translation of the caption and post:

Loss of lighters when gathering is common and could lead to arguments. What's the topic you want to talk with your best friends about during a gathering in the metaverse? HAVING COFFEE IN THE METAVERSE. HAS ANYONE STOLEN THE LIGHTERS?

TERM also observed digital news mentions of the Indian tobacco giant ITC, in which the global cigarette corporation British American Tobacco has a large stake, using the metaverse to promote several ultra-processed food products in its portfolio (57, 58).

This included advertising Fabelle chocolates during what was promoted as India’s first metaverse wedding (59), and a metaverse gift-giving event for Diwali, a popular festival celebrated across India, during which ITC’s B Natural juices were promoted. Since the ITC branding was ubiquitous throughout the event, tobacco was being indirectly promoted even when the product advertised was a food or beverage.

Attendees could create avatars and win “fiber coins” that they could use to virtually send a B Natural gift pack to loved ones and could also purchase gift packs directly from a connected Amazon website page (60). This is an example of how e-commerce may transform into immersive commerce (i-commerce), where users can enter a virtual shop, make a purchase and have products sent to an actual location (23).



Fabelle chocolates, a brand extension of ITC, was featured prominently in the first Indian metaverse wedding in 2022. Note the text identifying the brand as an ITC product and promoting the online ITC grocery store ([itcstore.in](https://itcstore.in)).

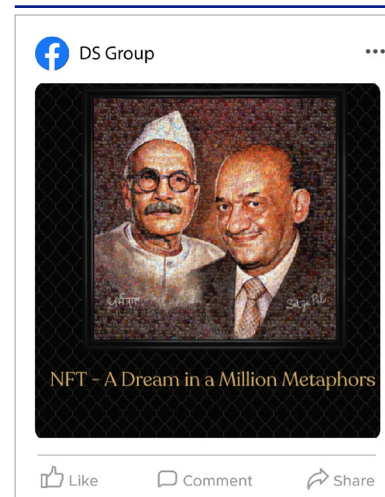
Source: [Yug Metaverse YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

## Nonfungible Tokens (NFTs)

In addition, tobacco industry actors may increasingly develop nonfungible tokens, or NFTs, to promote a company or brand and its products. NFTs represent ownership over unique digital assets, such as artwork or videos, that exist on a blockchain and cannot be duplicated (10). These digital assets can also correspond to tangible products.

For example, the McLaren Formula 1 team, which is sponsored by British American Tobacco, has launched NFTs—offering fans the chance to collect 22 NFT parts to assemble a complete 3D race car (61). To follow up, the virtual racing program McLaren Shadow released an NFT with incentives for purchasers including a coaching session with Shadow esports drivers and the chance to race against them (62).

TERM observed marketing for the Indian smokeless tobacco company DS Group's NFT mosaic that was developed to honor the company's 93rd Founders' Day (63). The mosaic uses 93 images to pay homage to the company's founders, projecting a vision of the company as an important and responsible corporate citizen in India.



DS Group celebrated its 93rd anniversary by creating an NFT featuring the company founders' portraits.

Source: DS Group Facebook

## Conclusion

Digital media has made it easier for tobacco companies to reach, engage with and sell its addictive, harmful products to potential customers, including youth. The next generation of the internet is offering virtual spaces and tools, such as the metaverse and NFTs, that are even more decentralized and user-controlled, posing new challenges to tobacco regulators.

Tobacco control stakeholders must respond to this evolving media landscape with smart policy and enforcement mechanisms. This includes policies that comprehensively prohibit all forms of tobacco promotions through all forms of media, including that based on new and emerging technology, such as the metaverse. It is imperative to understand these new technologies and tools so we can act early and efficiently to prevent tobacco marketing from growing unchecked. We must be innovative and coordinate across jurisdictions to regulate these new frontiers of marketing and to develop systems for continuously monitoring them.

## Methodology

The Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM) is an AI-powered, human-expertise-driven digital media monitoring system. 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 that TERM gathered between 2021 and 2023 from publicly available social media accounts, as well as other digital platforms and digital news sites. The analysis was restricted to content in English, Hindi, Indonesian and Spanish. For more information and details on how TERM operates, please refer to our [website](#).

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## **About the Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement**

Vital Strategies' Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM) is an AI-powered, human-expertise-driven digital media monitoring system built in response to the tobacco industry's exploitation of the power of digital platforms. TERM tracks and analyzes tobacco marketing online using news and social media listening. It packages findings into actionable, easy-to-read reports for governments, media, tobacco control advocates and others. TERM is currently operating in India, Indonesia and Mexico.

## **About Vital Strategies**

Vital Strategies believes every person should be protected by an equitable and effective public health system. We partner with governments, communities and organizations around the world to reimagine public health so that health is supported in all the places we live, work and play. The result is millions of people living longer, healthier lives. To find out more, please visit [www.vitalstrategies.org](http://www.vitalstrategies.org) or Twitter [@VitalStrat](https://twitter.com/VitalStrat).

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