

Manipulation and marketing strategies used by tobacco and nicotine industries to promote their products

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Key messages

Tobacco, nicotine and related products are often manipulated to attract and retain users, including through deception, for commercial gain, at the expense of public health.

- Misleading product descriptions are used by the tobacco and nicotine industries to glamourize their harmful products and conceal their dangers.
- Users of tobacco, nicotine and related products are often not fully aware of what they are consuming.
- Tobacco and nicotine industries use influencers to promote and make their products appealing to diverse groups, including young people, to increase their profits.
- Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control are obliged and non-Parties are encouraged to:
 - comprehensively ban the advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products, including on digital platforms; and
 - protect tobacco control policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry.
- Countries should consider taking the following actions:
 - implementing cost-effective counter-marketing strategies;
 - comprehensively banning the advertising, promotion and sponsorship of nicotine and related products, including on digital platforms;
 - relying on independent, credible sources for policy development and implementation; and
 - putting mechanisms in place to monitor the market, including use, and the strategies used by industries to promote their products, especially to children and young people.

What are tobacco, nicotine and related products?

Tobacco, nicotine and related products include commercially available products and devices, many of which deliver pharmacologically active doses of nicotine to the user. Even when they claim not to contain nicotine, such products often mimic the use, appearance or function of tobacco or nicotine products. Tobacco, nicotine and related products

include smoked tobacco products (e.g. cigarettes, waterpipe tobacco, cigars, cigarillos, roll-your-own tobacco, pipe tobacco, bidis, kreteks and heated tobacco products) and smokeless tobacco products, as well as electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) and nicotine pouches. Some products are used in conjunction with devices and/or smoking or flavour accessories.

Who are the key market players?

Tobacco and nicotine industries comprise a wide array of players, including multinational corporations and regional producers. The industries remain, however, heavily dominated by a handful of large transnational corporations, often referred to as “Big Tobacco”. These transnational companies have led the global cigarette market and are now diversifying to increase their profits by investing heavily in new and emerging tobacco, nicotine and related products (1).

How do tobacco and nicotine industries manipulate product design and use marketing strategies and public relations to mislead the public?

Deliberate strategies used by the tobacco and nicotine industries include manipulating the content and design of their products to enhance their attractiveness and nicotine addictiveness (2,3), promoting misleading marketing narratives that understate the health risks of these harmful products, manipulating science to downplay risk and political lobbying. Other strategies include deceptive corporate branding, with industries presenting themselves as moving away from cigarettes and using greenwashing to appear environmentally responsible (1,4,5). The wide range of deceptive tactics used by the tobacco and nicotine industries is designed to obscure the harms of their products, create confusion, foster addiction, give the impression of corporate responsibility and erode informed regulatory decision-making.

Why is it important to understand product manipulation and marketing strategies?

Understanding how tobacco and nicotine industries manipulate their products and market them is essential for protecting public health, especially that of vulnerable populations such as children and young people (6). The industries’ strategies are designed to reduce barriers to experimentation with their harmful products, often by giving people a false

sense of security, attracting new users and facilitating initiation. Their tactics maintain and even, at times, heighten addiction and promote long-term use. Youth e-cigarette users, for example, show signs of addiction, such as use within 30 min of waking and feeling unable to stop (7). Sustained use of tobacco, nicotine and related products prolongs exposure to toxic substances in emissions. Marketing tactics and manipulation also often hinder quit attempts and promote use of multiple products, which is at least as dangerous and probably more dangerous than single product use (8,9). By recognizing the risks of these products, which are usually hidden behind deceptive messaging, both the public and policymakers can make informed, evidence-based decisions that prioritize health over the industries’ interests.

How are product descriptions crafted as a marketing strategy to manipulate consumer perception?

Terms such as “mild”, “light” and “low tar” have long been used to create the illusion of a less harmful product, encouraging continued use. Even though many countries have banned use of these terms, as recommended in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the tobacco and nicotine industries use alternative descriptors, colours and branding strategies (10). Consequently, misleading descriptors such as “organic”, “clean” or “low-risk” are deliberately used to deceive the public and to circumvent regulations (11,12). Further, descriptors on packaging of cigarettes labelled as menthol-free often resemble those commonly used to market flavoured tobacco, including menthol (e.g. “flavourful”, “crisp” and “smooth”) (13).

What are some examples of manipulation of the content of tobacco, nicotine and related products?

- **Nicotine level.** Nicotine is a highly addictive substance, and the tobacco and nicotine industries modify its level and chemical form to increase product addictiveness and, in some cases, to circumvent regulations. Cigarette manufacturers have long

adjusted nicotine concentrations, pH and additives and engineered tobacco blends to optimize nicotine delivery and absorption (14). Some products, despite the manufacturers' claims (15), also deliver very high nicotine concentrations (16), similar to or even exceeding those in conventional cigarettes (8,17). Recently, nicotine analogues and synthetic compounds that mimic the structure and effects of nicotine have been used to circumvent tobacco and nicotine product regulation (18).

- **Additives.** Additives are intentionally added to tobacco, nicotine and related products to enhance their appeal, palatability and addictiveness. They include substances such as sugars, cooling agents, nicotine salts and flavouring agents, some of which reduce the harshness of nicotine and facilitate inhalation (19). Some additives also affect the way in which nicotine is absorbed into the body, amplifying its impact. While these additives are often presented as harmless, they can alter a product's toxicity (20,21). Furthermore, it has been established that the increased appeal and addictiveness of such products due to additives cause public health harm.

How do the tobacco and nicotine industries manipulate the general public's perception of the risk of harmful products?

Mislabelling is a common, devious marketing strategy, which often leaves many users of tobacco, nicotine and related products unaware of what they are consuming (8,15). A recent study of nicotine levels in 15 flavoured waterpipe tobacco products from five manufacturers showed wide discrepancies between the labelled and the measured levels of nicotine (15). Of the 15 flavours tested, 12 (80%) had much higher levels of nicotine than the 0.05% indicated on the product packaging. In the 12 flavours, the actual nicotine content was 20–160% higher than the advertised levels (15). Further, while electronic non-nicotine delivery systems, by definition, should not contain nicotine, in practice, many e-liquids marked as containing “zero nicotine” were found to contain nicotine when tested (22).

What narrative do industries push as a marketing strategy to mislead the public?

All major transnational tobacco companies have introduced new and emerging products, such as e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products and nicotine pouches, in their expanded portfolios. They aggressively position these products as “next-generation” and “reduced-risk” alternatives, while continuing to profit substantially from smoked tobacco products (1).

How do industries manipulate tobacco users with unsubstantiated narratives and unproven claims, and what is important for everyone to know?

One strategy used by industries is promotion of new and emerging products, portraying these products as “cessation tools”, “clean products”, “alternative products” or “less harmful” and encouraging tobacco users to switch to them. Many users, however, do not quit but instead become dual or poly-users, using more than one tobacco, nicotine and/or related product concurrently (23). To support their narratives, the tobacco and nicotine industries are known to exploit the scientific field; their strategies include funding research, influencing researchers, supporting scientific events and selectively promoting results that align with their commercial interests (24,25). They often use third-party organizations to support and echo their narratives (26). Additionally, more and more frequently, research funded by the tobacco industry is published without disclosure of conflicts of interest, notably, in many publications on tobacco harm reduction.

Important facts for everyone to know include the following.

- All tobacco and nicotine products contain toxic substances and pose significant health risks.
- Toxicant levels lower than those in conventional cigarettes do not necessarily reduce the health risk; furthermore, the levels of some toxicants are higher in some new and emerging products than in conventional cigarettes.

- Use of new and emerging products can stall quit attempts due to concurrent use of several products, potentially causing former conventional cigarette smokers to relapse.
- People who stop smoking conventional cigarettes often report high, continuing use of new and emerging products.
- New and emerging products, as used in the real world as consumer products, have not been proven to be effective for tobacco use cessation at the population level.

What are other examples of marketing strategies that undermine governments' attempts to protect the public?

More and more governments are banning additives, including flavourings and coolants, in tobacco, nicotine and related products to help reduce their appeal, experimentation and initiation, especially among young people. Many studies, however, have documented misleading labelling of the presence of flavours, diluting the impact of the policy measure and compromising public protection. For example, a study of 282 waterpipe tobacco products notified to the European Common Entry Gate found that only 39% had a declared menthol or mint flavour, but 83% contained one or more menthol-like ingredients (27). The packaging of non-menthol "cooling" cigarettes often has colours that are typically associated with the marketing of various types of mentholated products (e.g. bright green and blue) (13). New marketing of non-menthol products includes slogans such as "the non-menthol for menthol smokers" and "fresh intensity made just for you" (13).

Despite the ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, which is implemented in many countries, industries continue to find covert, creative ways to circumvent regulations and maintain their presence, often by indirect marketing, "brand stretching" and digital platforms. For example, a series in an online streaming platform featured a tobacco company branding. The series was aired in many countries, including some in which tobacco advertising and sponsorship are expressly prohibited (28,29).

What are some examples of tobacco and nicotine industries' manipulative marketing tricks that specifically target children and young people?

The tobacco and nicotine industries use influencers and social media personalities to market their products. Such deliberate use of digital platforms, often without proper warnings, age restrictions or transparency, amplifies the reach and impact of product manipulation and marketing, especially among those who are most at risk. Many studies have shown that the social media content of products such as e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches heavily features young people (30,31). A scoping review of relevant e-cigarette-related content on two social media platforms popular with young people showed that most of the posts analysed portrayed e-cigarette use positively, without health warnings and did not include age warnings (32). This is a concern, because most e-cigarette users under the age of 20 years are non-tobacco users and, before initiating e-cigarettes, were nicotine-naïve (28). Nicotine has detrimental effects in this age group, as the brain continues to develop into the early- to mid-20s (28). This age group is also more susceptible to nicotine dependence. Furthermore, these products are addictive and expose young people to other risks (9,28).

Who are the key players that tobacco and nicotine industries recruit to push their narrative?

While the tobacco and nicotine industries are the primary drivers of these tactics, they operate through a broad, complex network of people to advance their interests and influence. Industries reinforce their deceptive narratives by using front groups and funding research designed to support their commercial interests, at the expense of public health. The industries capitalize on scientific events as a crucial platform for building connections in the scientific sphere and disseminating industry messages (33). These industries also recruit celebrities, digital marketers and influencers, health professionals, private foundations,

think tanks, activists, trade associations and lobbyists to promote their agendas, creating doubt about the harms of their products while amplifying narratives that support their business interests.

How do industries manipulate public policy to resist strict regulation?

The industries' lobbying strategies are well established (34). New research by the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom has shown that major tobacco firms have ramped up their opposition to the United Kingdom's Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which would ban cigarette sales to anyone born after 2009, gradually phasing out tobacco products nationwide (35). The research demonstrates that, during the Government's public consultation, 42% of the responses were linked to the tobacco industry (35). In some countries (e.g. Kenya and Pakistan), the industry has threatened to pull out investment in the country to intimidate the governments into submission (36,37).

What can be done to protect the public from manipulation and marketing by the tobacco and nicotine industries?

It is important to remain informed and vigilant about how these industries operate and evolve, as they continuously adapt their strategies in response to regulatory measures. It is of paramount importance to rely on credible, unbiased sources of information, independent of industry, and to support the funding of independent research. Trusted sources can include credible public health organizations, independent academic research institutions and official government sources. International bodies such as WHO regularly review and update evidence-based information and knowledge. The manipulative strategies and marketing tricks of the tobacco and nicotine industries should be monitored and exposed so that the industries are prevented from influencing science and policy and are held accountable. All segments of the population have an important role in countering misinformation from the industries and calling for strong regulations that

protect public health from the industries' commercial interests. Regulatory frameworks must abide by strict rules whereby engagement with the industries is transparent and only when strictly necessary. Policies must be resistant to commercial interference from the industries and be aligned with public health goals to protect populations from the harms of these industries and their products.

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Methods

The information sheet, Manipulation and marketing strategies used by tobacco and nicotine industries to promote their products, was conceptualized by the World Health Organization (WHO) in response to requests from WHO Member States after a WHO Global Consultation held in June 2023. The evidence underpinning the normative content on marketing strategies is well documented in the WHO Technical Report Series of the WHO Study Group on Tobacco Product Regulation (Study Group), which represents each WHO region, and in other WHO reports; however, WHO Member States requested that the report also address regulations that would protect young people, and that the scientific basis be simplified to make the information accessible to a broader audience, allowing for wider dissemination and visibility.

WHO, in consultation with the Study Group, invited experts to conduct a thorough desk review of the most recent literature and of regulations for a background paper, Regulation of tobacco and related products – priorities for the protection of young people, prepared for the twelfth meeting of the Study Group, held on 10–13 December 2024. The evidence was evaluated, and the recommendations were extensively reviewed and discussed by members of the Study Group and by subject matter experts before, during and after the meeting. In addition, an extensive search was conducted of the recommendations in reports of the Study Group, of WHO and of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and its Implementing Guidelines, including the Partial Guidelines on Articles 9 and 10. The extensive evidence available in the literature was reviewed by the Study Group and is well documented in the WHO Technical Report Series. This served as the basis of the Study Group's recommendations, which were finalized after further deliberation among members, in consultation with the WHO secretariat. Subsequently, WHO, in collaboration with research agencies, universities, regulators and members of the Study Group, developed the information sheet. The recommendations in the information sheet are aligned with the main recommendations of the Study Group in its report to the 157th session of the WHO Executive Board, which can be found at https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB157/B157_14-en.pdf.

Summary of evidence

Evidence shows that comprehensive bans on advertising, promotion and sponsorship, including on digital platforms, effectively reduce the appeal and uptake of tobacco

and nicotine products, especially among youth. Cost-effective counter-marketing campaigns based on credible, independent sources further help to counter industry messages and misinformation.

Studies have also demonstrated the persistent efforts of the tobacco and nicotine industries to interfere with policymaking and to target young people with evolving marketing strategies. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which is an evidence-based treaty established to combat the tobacco epidemic, provides that Parties, in setting and implementing their public health policies with respect to tobacco control, shall act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry. There is strong evidence that monitoring systems and safeguards against industry influence are essential to protect public health and ensure effective tobacco control.

Contributors

The Information Sheet was conceptualized by WHO, in consultation with subject matter experts on tobacco industry interference and marketing strategies for tobacco, nicotine and related products. All contributors, including the WHO FCTC Convention Secretariat, provided critical comments and approved the final version of the Information Sheet.

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