Tobacco content and marketing online and beyond – new and ongoing challenges for tobacco control research and policy

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Five papers in this month’s issue of Nicotine and Tobacco Research report findings from studies on nicotine and tobacco content and marketing, including online and in films.

Three studies from researchers at the University of Southern California focus on tobacco-related social media research. Firstly, a scoping review of the literature that has analysed tobacco-related social media content by Donaldson et al. demonstrates the sheer volume of this type of content; the review found that researchers have analysed over 10 billion tobacco-related social media posts. The review highlights the diversity of information which tobacco-related social media research can provide, including timely insights into tobacco industry marketing strategies, user experiences of tobacco products – especially new products - and perceptions of health effects.¹

This is exemplified in a study by Galimov et al., who undertook a content analysis of Twitter (now rebranded as X) discussions about oral nicotine gum in the US.² The study is timely given the emergence of new nicotine gum products on the US market. Unlike nicotine gums which have been approved for smoking cessation by the Food and Drug Administration, these new products lack an evidence base for smoking cessation and are marketed as a long-term substitute for combustible cigarettes.² Smoking cessation-related tweets were prominent in the identified tweets, suggesting that Twitter/X can provide a platform for conversation between people looking for cessation advice and those who have successful used nicotine gum to quit. The authors highlight the need to monitor promotional content from nicotine gum companies to ensure that these products are not appealing to non-tobacco users, particularly youth.

Given the quantity of tobacco content that is present in social media and evidence that exposure to tobacco content on social media is associated with tobacco use,³ it is important that tobacco-related social media research is used to inform policy. The third study from this group of researchers is a systematic review of the use of tobacco-related social media research in government policy documents by Beard et al. The authors identified 38 government policy documents at state, national and international level which have used social media studies to describe and bring attention to tobacco industry marketing and youth exposure to tobacco content online.⁴

Together these three papers demonstrate the important role that research into social media content can play in providing timely evidence on tobacco and nicotine products, marketing strategies and their use to policy stakeholders. While exposure to tobacco content in social media is a relatively recent challenge for policymakers, other papers in this issue highlight ongoing challenges with tackling other sources of tobacco content and marketing, particularly in many low- and middle-income countries.

Exposure to smoking imagery in films has been found to increase the risk of smoking uptake.⁵ Malaysia is a signatory to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and has implemented tobacco advertising and sponsorship restrictions including television films and other media. However, a study by Billy et al., which analysed tobacco imagery in the 50 most popular Malaysian movies from 2015–2019,⁶ found that half of the movies contained tobacco imagery which does not comply with the guidelines for implementation of Article 13 of the FCTC, which requires comprehensive bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.⁷ The authors call for health warnings about the hazards of
tobacco use in films, and reclassification of films containing tobacco imagery as suitable only for adults, to prevent exposure of children and youth to tobacco imagery.

Barker et al. report the findings of a qualitative study which used focus groups with adolescents across 10 Chinese cities in 2021 and 2022 to explore exposure to and perceptions of cigarette and e-cigarette marketing. The findings suggest that young people in China are exposed to cigarette and e-cigarette marketing through multiple sources, such as malls, convenience stores, kiosks near school, and social media, despite laws prohibiting cigarette and e-cigarette advertising in public places and online.

These two studies highlight ongoing challenges in the implementation of FCTC measures related to advertising and promotion of tobacco. A further study in this issue focuses on a different FCTC measure – tax and price - but provides insights which could also be helpful in understanding obstacles to the implementation of the FCTC in general. Increasing tobacco taxes is a highly effective way of reducing tobacco use and uptake and is widely implemented in many high income countries; however, few low and middle-income countries have adopted this strategy. Théodore et al. undertook in-depth interviews with key fiscal policy stakeholders to investigate the barriers and facilitators to increasing tobacco taxes in Mexico. Facilitators included robust scientific evidence, intersectoral coordination and political champions. The main barriers were incomplete implementation of the FCTC, lack of political will, misinformation about the effects of tobacco taxes and strong tobacco industry interference. While this study focused on fiscal measures in Mexico, the findings seem likely to resonate with tobacco control researchers and advocates working on different aspects of tobacco control in many parts of the world.

**Conflict of interest**

None.
References