

Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM)

Online Marketing of Tobacco Products

Background

Article 13 of the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) recommends banning all forms of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS) across all channels. Online platforms, which are more difficult to oversee than traditional media channels, pose a significant challenge to controlling and curbing tobacco marketing. Vital Strategies' [Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement](#) (TERM) is a digital media monitoring system that tracks tobacco marketing on social media platforms and news sites. This situation report is part of a series that summarizes observed examples of online tobacco marketing in India. TERM does not allege or attempt to identify whether these tobacco marketing instances are in violation of local or international laws. Visit the [TERM website](#) to learn more and to view all reports.

Definitions used in this report

Surrogate products: Non-tobacco products with a similar visual brand identity as the company's tobacco products. "Surrogate marketing" is the marketing of surrogate products, which in India are most often pan masala or mouth fresheners.

Brand-extended products and services: Nontobacco products and services that use the established brand name or trademark of a tobacco company, but do not have the same visual identity as the company's tobacco products. "Brand extension" is the marketing of brand-extended products, which may include confectionaries, processed food products, household items, incense, etc.

Non-tobacco products: Surrogate products and brand-extended products and services.

Direct marketing: Marketing of tobacco products with clear visuals of the product and/or its use, or the product brand name.

Indirect marketing: Promotion of the tobacco company and/or product and its use through brand extension, surrogate marketing, price discounts and giveaways, and sponsorship of events or activities.

Key Highlights

- Engaging short-form video content tools like Instagram reels are being used to promote tobacco scenes from movies featuring famous actors. See spotlight issue on page 2.
- The main digital marketing challenge in India is the promotion of tobacco companies and product brands via insidious methods, like surrogate marketing of nontobacco brands and brand-extensions. See pages 6-8.

Spotlight issue: Tobacco imagery in digital entertainment media

Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts are short-form video content tools that are used to engage social media users. Specifically, Instagram Reels enable brands to tell more engaging stories and are also searchable on Instagram’s “explore” tab, which allows them to reach wider audiences.¹ TERM observed social media accounts for Miraj Cinemas using reels to portray popular movie scenes of famous actors using cigarettes and cigars. Miraj Cinemas is a chain of cinemas throughout India that are owned by Miraj Group, a smokeless tobacco company.. The use of short-form video with embedded text may pose a challenge to monitoring that relies on keyword searches alone. Short-form videos may also hide smoking imagery since it is not as easily detectable as in static images.

Under India’s “Film Rules” policy, tobacco imagery is restricted in films, broadcast television and streaming platforms; this includes promotional content such as posters.² However, this content is still reaching consumers through social media and through engaging content like Instagram Reels.



Miraj Cinemas celebrated the actor Ajay Devgn through an Instagram Reel of his movie scenes. In one clip, the actor is shown smoking a cigarette. Ajay Devgn is a brand ambassador for Vimal Pan Masala.

Source: mirajcinemas Instagram



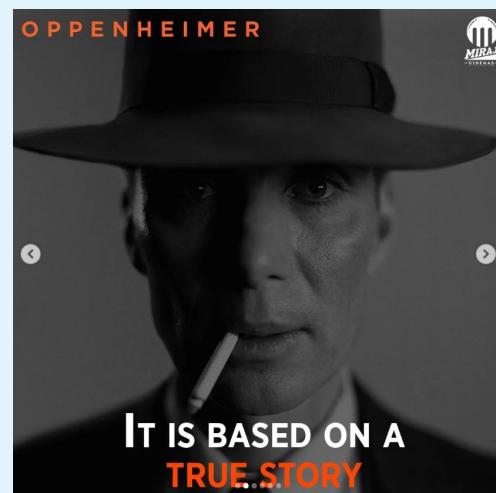
This Instagram Reel is a birthday video compilation of movie scenes by the actor Sanjay Dutt, which was featured by Miraj Cinemas. One scene shows the actor smoking a cigar.

Source: mirajcinemas Instagram



This post compares two movie characters played by the actor Kartik Aaryan. One of his movie characters is shown smoking a cigarette.

Source: mirajcinemas Instagram



The movie “Oppenheimer” was promoted using an image of the lead character smoking a cigarette.

Source: mirajcinemas Instagram

¹ Napilay, J. The Power of Instagram Reels for Brand Promotion: How to Drive Engagement and Reach Your Target Audience. LinkedIn. Available from: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/power-instagram-reels-brand-promotion-how-drive-reach-joshua-napilay>

² Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM). India Situation Report: December 2022-March 2023 (English). Available from: <https://termcommunity.com/report/84/india-situation-report-december-2022-march-2023-english>

Detailed Insights

How much marketing was observed? Most observed marketing was indirect marketing for nontobacco products (n=3,913, Figure 1), primarily for brand-extended products and services (94%) and surrogate products (6%). There were 131 instances of direct tobacco marketing (Figure 1a). The majority of these were for electronic cigarettes (67%), followed by bidi cigarettes (29%) and cigarettes (4%). Cigarette marketing was observed in news media.

Figure 1
Volume of Marketing for Nontobacco Products

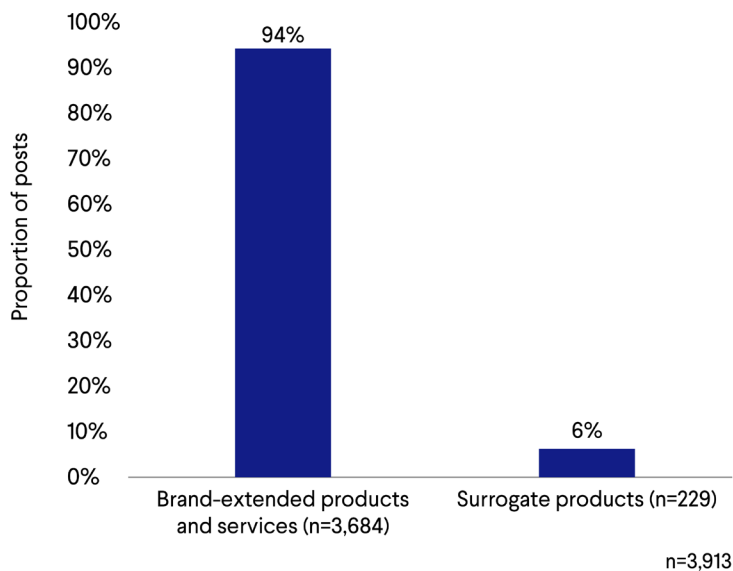
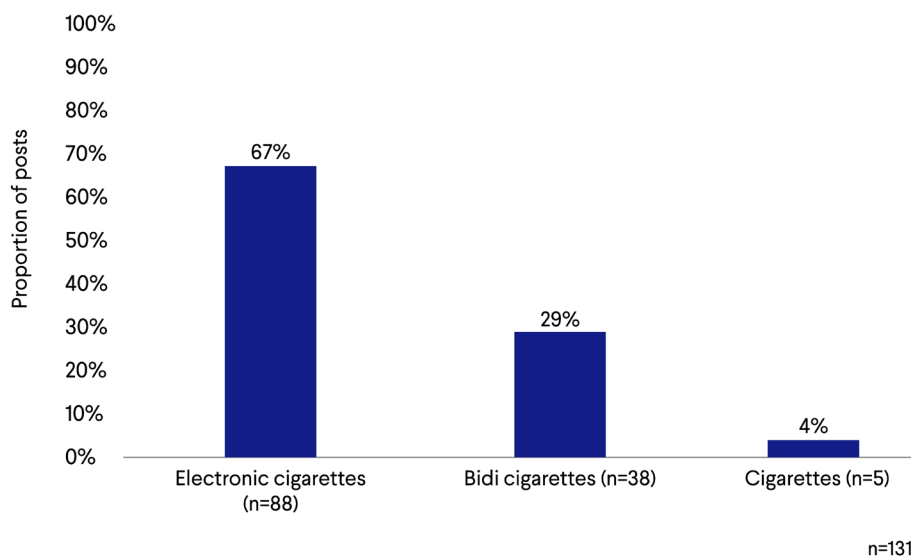


Figure 1a
Volume of Marketing for Tobacco Products



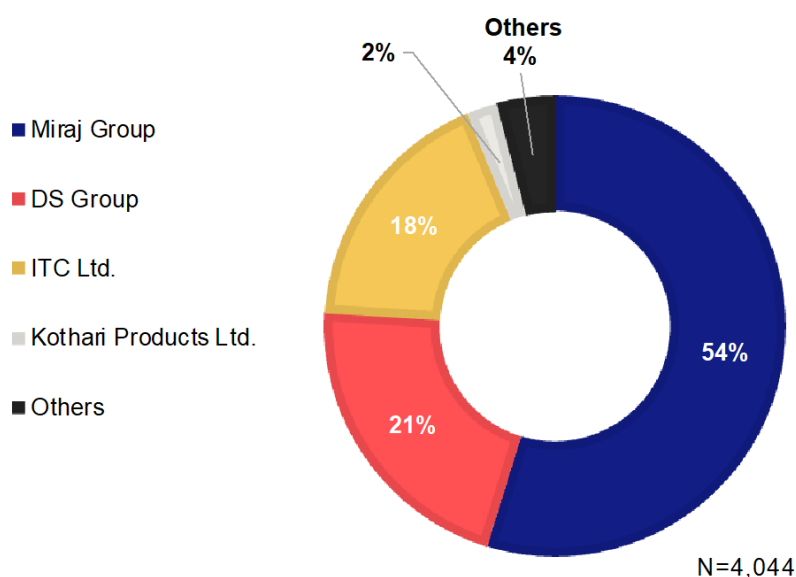
Who were the key players? The majority of observed marketing instances were for Miraj Group's brand-extended products and services (54%, Figure 2), which was largely for the cinema chain Miraj Cinemas during this period. This was followed by marketing for DS Group's brand-extended and surrogate products (21%, Figure 2) largely for Pass Pass mouth fresheners and Rajnigandha Silver Pearls, and ITC Ltd.'s brand-extended products and services (18%, Figure 2), which were largely ITC Master Chef, Sunfeast Dark Fantasy cookies, B Natural fruit beverages, Sunbean coffee and Sunfeast Yippee noodles processed products. Kothari Products Pvt Ltd. marketed its Pan Parag pan masala brand, which is surrogate marketing (Image 1) for its gutkha tobacco product (2%, Figure 2).

Image 1
Example of a Surrogate Marketing



Pan Parag pan masala is a surrogate product for Pan Parag Gutkha. Note the shared use of the brand logo, brand name, and banner design of these two products.

Figure 2
Companies Associated with Marketing



Note: For details on the companies included in the "Others" category, contact the TERM research team.

Where were products marketed?¹ Most marketing was observed on Instagram (39%, Figure 3), followed by Facebook (33%). Electronic cigarettes were exclusively observed being promoted on Instagram (100%, Figure 3a), while bidi cigarettes were exclusively observed being promoted on Facebook (100%). Marketing for cigarettes (news stories) was mostly observed on Facebook (60%, Figure 3a), followed by Twitter (40%). Marketing for nontobacco products was observed across the widest variety of platforms, with the majority on Instagram (38%) and some on YouTube (2%).

Figure 3
Digital Platforms Used for Marketing

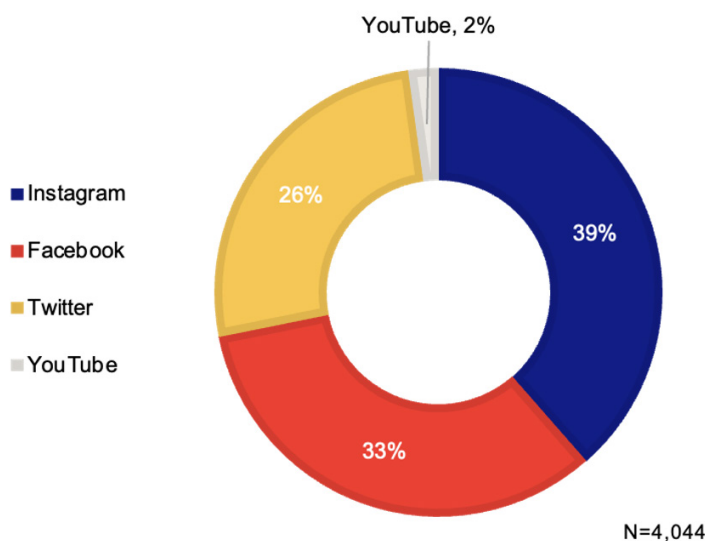
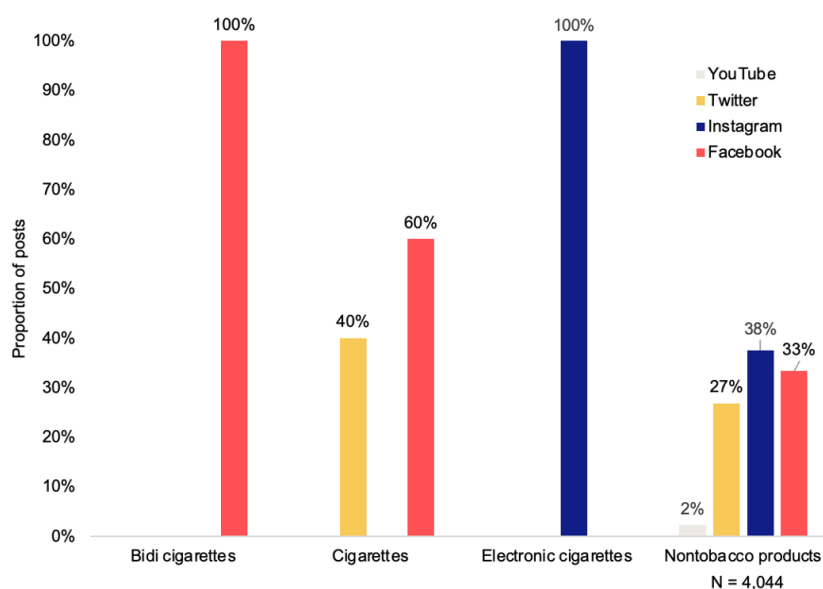



Figure 3a
Digital Platforms Used for Marketing by Product Type



¹ TERM relies heavily on text-based searches and is not able to capture any content that solely contains images. This may lead to an undercounting of marketing content on heavily visual media such as YouTube or TikTok.

Example of YouTube video

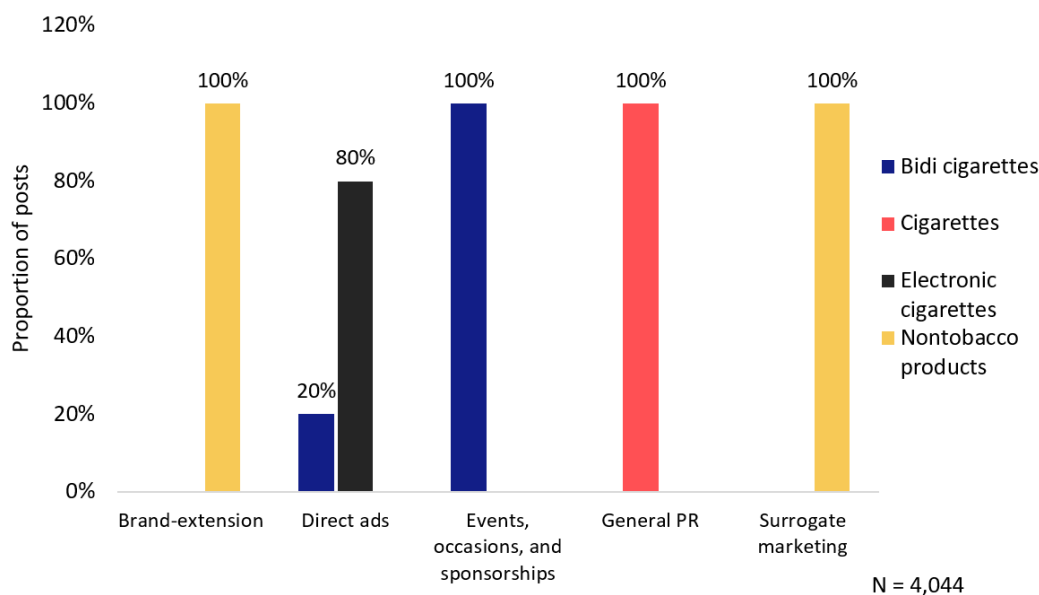


ITC Ltd.'s Sunfeast Marie Light biscuit is marketed as perfect for families who care for each other's health and wellbeing. This YouTube video highlights that it's enriched with iron and six B vitamins. Note the use of the ITC logo.

Source: Sunfeast YouTube

What marketing tactics were used?² The use of indirect marketing tactics was the most prominent form observed online. Brand-extension tactics (100%) were mostly used to promote nontobacco products such as Miraj cinemas, ITC Ltd.'s ready-to-eat meals, processed products such as cookies, instant noodles, and sugar-sweetened beverages. Surrogate marketing was used for pan masala and mouth fresheners products (100%). Direct ads were used by third-party retailers to promote electronic cigarette (80%) and by bidi cigarette product accounts (20%). The images and product logos of these products were shown on social media posts. Marketing using current events, and religious festivals (100%) were used by bidi cigarette product accounts. This included greetings for religious holidays including Eid al-Fitr, Mahavir Jayanti and Hanuman Jayanti, as well as secular events such as the launch of the Chandrayaan-3 lunar mission, Mother's Day, World Health Day, World Environment Day and International Yoga Day. Cigarette companies mainly used general PR (100%) which during this period largely focused on company earnings (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Marketing Tactics Used by Type of Product



² See Appendix Table 1 for definitions of message tactics.

Examples of direct ads for bidis



This post celebrates the opening game of the Indian Premier League cricket league.

Source: A.B. Bidi Company Facebook



Significant events such as the success of the Chandrayaan-3 lunar mission was used by this bidi company to remain top-of-mind for users.

Source: A.B. Bidi Company Facebook



This third-party retailer directly promoted electronic cigarettes by sharing a video of “vape tricks.” In the caption, viewers are instructed to send the screenshot of a product they wish to order to the retailer’s WhatsApp number. They can pay in full in advance when booking or pay a down payment and then complete the payment after the products are delivered to their home in 2-5 days.

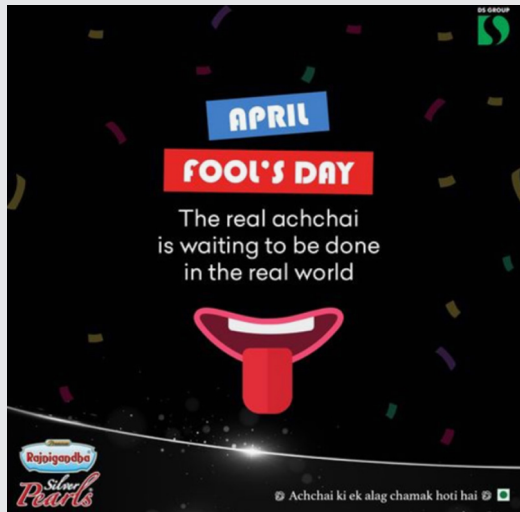
Source: vape_wholesaler_india Instagram



This bidi account celebrates National Doctor's Day, sharing the message that doctors are like “gods” because they help people.

Source: A.B. Bidi Company Facebook

Examples of surrogate marketing tactic



Rajnigandha Silver Pearls mouth freshener is produced by DS Group, a smokeless tobacco company. This post encourages readers to do good deeds during April Fool's day, thereby associating kindness and positivity with the brand.

Source: Rajnigandha Silver Pearls Facebook



Tobacco companies are targeting impressionable youth by associating with their important milestones such as passing the Central Board of Secondary Education exams.

Source: rajnighandhasilverpearls Instagram

Examples of brand-extension tactics



ITC Ltd. is a smoking tobacco company that sells the processed product ITS Master Chef frozen snacks. This post encourages cricket viewers to eat snacks while enjoying the games. These products can be ordered from the delivery apps that are included in the image. Sports events are regularly used by tobacco companies to market their products. Note the use of the ITC Ltd. logo.

Source: itcmasterchef Instagram



ITC Ltd. produces the sugar-sweetened beverage B Natural. It is the official beverage partner of Punjab Kings, a popular cricket team in India. Processed food products use athletes and sports teams as brand ambassadors to associate their brand with healthy living and vitality. Note the use of the ITC Ltd. logo.

Source: B Natural Fruit Beverages Facebook

What messaging was used?³ Overall, most marketing messages were informational (65%, Figure 5), offering information on nontobacco products and services. Message framing for the direct marketing of tobacco products was predominantly informational (67%, Figure 5a); for example, third-party retailers of electronic cigarettes provides instructions on how to send inquiries or how to order products. There are instructions to send a product screenshot to a WhatsApp number. The retailers also share delivery information. Product features was the second-most common message framing for bidi cigarettes (16%, Figure 5a), emphasizing their flavor and freshness. Religious events like Eid and Hanuman Jayanti, were also used often to promote tobacco products (6%, Figure 5a). Greetings for secular community celebrations, such as World Environment Day and World Health Day, were also frequently observed in the marketing of bidi products. Third-party retailers used videos to describe product features, and to provide entertainment by “unboxing” (5%, Figure 5a) new electronic cigarettes.

For nontobacco products (brand-extended products and services), most marketing instances offered information about movies from Miraj Group’s Miraj Cinemas** (65%, Figure 5b). Brand-extended products and services, which largely included ultra-processed foods and drinks, were also often promoted as being key for personal wellness and relaxation and togetherness while watching cricket games (10%, Figure 5b).

Figure 5
Message Framing Used for All Products

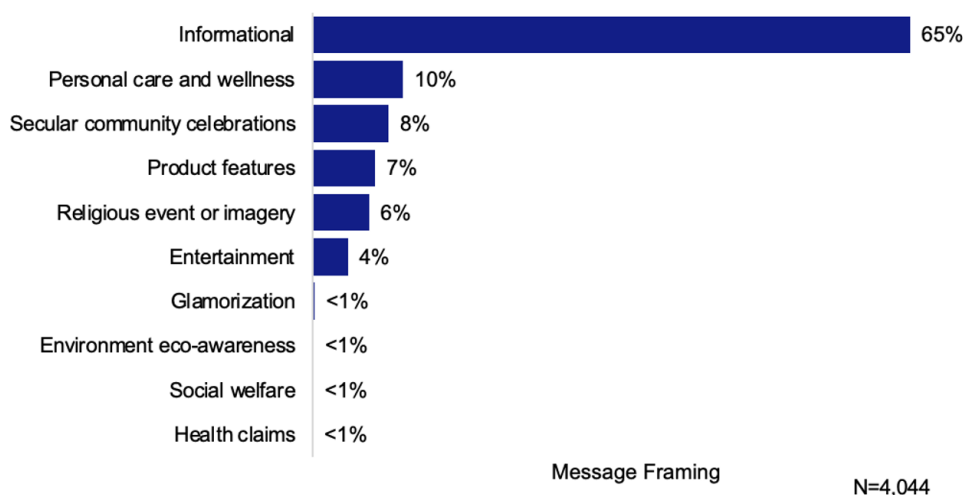


Figure 5a
Message Framing Used for Tobacco Products

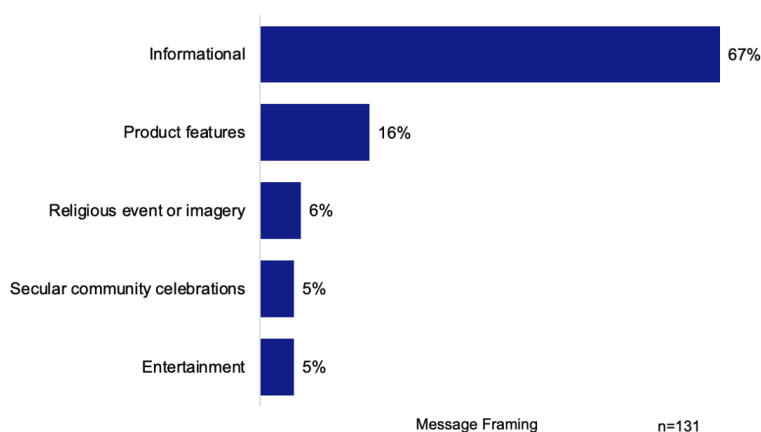
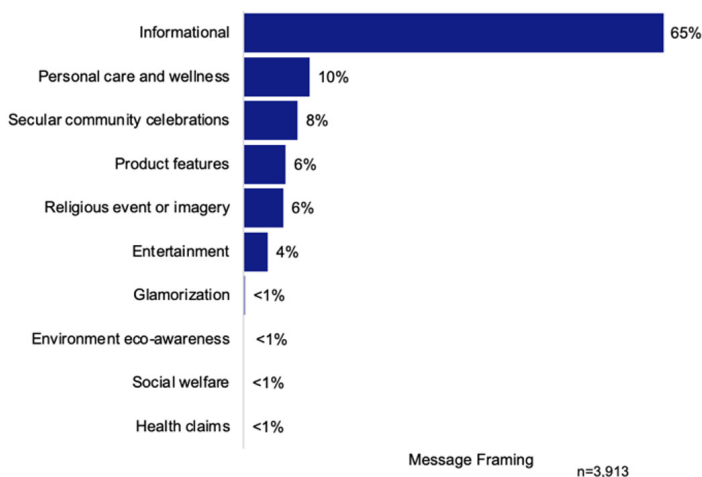


Figure 5b
Message Framing Used for Non-Tobacco Products



³ See Appendix Table 1 for definitions of message framing.

** This marketing was coded as informational and not entertainment because information is being offered about movies; entertaining posts are coded as those that promote the product as being entertaining and fun or present the content in an entertaining way (memes, cartoons).

Message framing examples

Informational



This post from Miraj Group's Miraj cinemas shares its achievement of being the third largest cinema chain in India. Miraj group produces smokeless tobacco products.

Source: @MirajCinemas Twitter

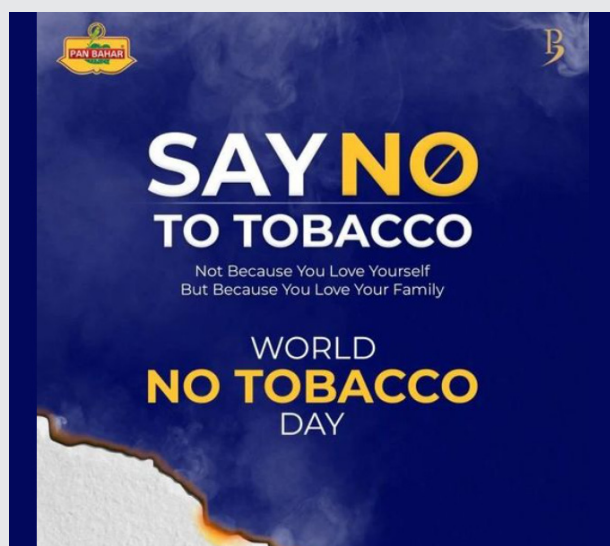
Glamorization



Smokeless tobacco company DS group uses the success of the winner of the beauty pageant Femina Miss India, Mizoram, C. Lalhngaihual, to promote its surrogate product – Rajnigandha silver pearls.

Source: rajnigandhasilverpearls Instagram

Secular community celebrations



For World No Tobacco Day, this post promoting the pan masala product Pan Bahar, which is manufactured by Ashok & Co. Pan Bahar Ltd. and used as surrogate marketing for their Pan Bahar Dilruba tobacco brand, encourages people to "Say No to Tobacco."

Source: Pan Bahar Facebook

Religious event or imagery



This post from the official account of Miraj Group, which produces smokeless tobacco products, celebrates Hanuman Jayanti, which is an important religious festival in the Hindu religion.

Source: mirajgroupofficial Instagram

Methods

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 by an artificial intelligence-driven monitoring tool from publicly available posts on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, and from online media articles collected via LexisNexis. Instances of tobacco marketing are identified using keyword-based queries and through the regular monitoring of social media accounts that were identified purposively via input from tobacco control experts, market research data and keyword searches. Data coding is first conducted automatically and is then reviewed by Vital Strategies researchers using a theory-driven codebook.

The analysis is currently restricted to content in English and Hindi. Data restrictions and privacy laws followed by social media platforms may lead to undercounting of marketing activity. [Read our full methodology here.](#)

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Appendix Table 1. Definitions for marketing tactics and message framing identified

<i>Marketing tactic</i>	Type of marketing strategy used, which captures the intention of the marketing (to sell products, create brand endearment/loyalty, etc.)
Brand extension	A separate brand of non-tobacco items that are produced by tobacco companies/conglomerates. The products may use the trademark logo or the name of the parent tobacco company. These products do not show any features that indicate association with any tobacco products.
Direct marketing	Promotes the sale or use of tobacco products in a straightforward manner; shows images of the product.
Events, occasions and sponsorships	Pairs the company/brand or tobacco product with events, occasions, sponsorships and contests (e.g., product sponsorship of sports events, live concerts, holiday greetings).
General profile raising	Intended to raise the profile of the brand/company but does not fall into any of the other categories (e.g., brand/company wishing a happy new year).
Surrogate marketing	Non-tobacco products or services that have the same brand name, emblem, trademark, logo or trade insignia or any other distinctive feature (including distinctive color combinations) as a tobacco product or company so that they can be easily associated
<i>Message framing</i>	Underlying theme around which the whole message of the post is built.
Entertainment	Posts that promote the product as being entertaining and fun. This category also includes posts that use entertainment-related content including memes, funny videos or jokes.

Environment eco-awareness	Any post that addresses climate change, conservation, sustainable development goals, or encouraging people to support environmental causes.
Glamorization	Posts that associate use of products as aspirational, luxurious or part of an ideal, fashionable lifestyle.
Health claims	Posts that present the product as healthier than other products or as being less harmful than conventional tobacco products.
Informational	Posts that instruct viewers how to use a product. This category also includes posts that provide background information on the company.
Informational	Posts that present the product as healthier than other products or as being less harmful than conventional tobacco products.
Personal care and wellness	Posts that associate products with relaxation or stress management. This category also includes posts that frame products as being used for social bonding, including forming community around use of the product with like-minded peers.
Product features	Posts that primarily emphasize the available choices of product flavors and design including device colors, as well as technical specifications of the product. Posts without any text descriptions or keywords that only display the product are also included in this category.
Religious event or imagery	Posts that feature religious imagery, or celebrate religious festivals and events.
Secular community celebrations	Posts that offer celebrations or greetings for non-religious social and sporting events that are celebrated globally or nationally. This category also includes content celebrating achievements or honoring the memory contributions of those who passed away.
Social welfare	Posts that showcase activities sponsored or supported by company/brand that are meant to improve their public image. Any posts associating the company with social welfare schemes, livelihood initiatives, women's empowerment, entrepreneurship, educational scholarships, etc.

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About the Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement

Vital Strategies' Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM) is a 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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