

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 or restricting 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.

Key Highlights

- Images of famous actors who are shown with cigarette products are being used to promote tobacco indirectly. These social media posts glamorize the act of smoking and associate it with “tough” and “manly” behavior. See spotlight issue on page 2.
- The main digital marketing challenge in India is the promotion of tobacco companies and product brands via indirect methods, like surrogate marketing of non-tobacco brands such as mouth fresheners which share similar packaging designs with smoking tobacco brands. See pages 4 and 9 for examples.
- The enforcement of the ban on electronic cigarettes is of utmost importance. Third-party retailers continue to market these products on social media, using creative tactics such as “unboxing” and “vape tricks” videos, accompanied by popular songs. These third-party retailers provide their WhatsApp number and detailed instructions on how to order and pay for the electronic cigarettes. See pages 6 and 8 for more details.

Spotlight issue: Smokeless tobacco company uses tobacco imagery to promote movies

TERM observed social media accounts for Miraj Cinemas showing images of famous actors using cigarettes. Miraj Cinemas is a chain of cinemas throughout India owned by Miraj Group, a smokeless tobacco company. These static images with embedded text may pose a challenge to monitoring that relies on keyword searches alone.

Under India's "Film Rules" policy, tobacco imagery is restricted in films, broadcast television and streaming platforms and is subject to clearance by designated authorities. The rules prohibit display of tobacco products or their use in promotional materials such as posters, teasers, trailers, etc.*

It is a major challenge to enforce compliance from producers and content creators of films, television, and streaming platforms. It is also more difficult to monitor and stop the use of tobacco imagery in online promotions – such as the ones used for the film "Animal." This post shows the popular actor Ranbir Kapoor with a cigarette in his mouth and a lighter in his hand.



Promotions of the movie "Animal" shows the actor Ranbir Kapoor smoking a cigarette. This post uses the narrative of the "tough" and "manly" image of the character to entice the public to watch the movie.

Source: Miraj Cinemas Instagram

*Note: See Rule 9(2) of the film rules 2011[GSR-786(E)] and Rule 11.5b of OTT Rules of 2023[GSR 400(E)]

Detailed Insights

How much marketing was observed? Most observed marketing was indirect marketing for non-tobacco products (n=2,183, Figure 1), primarily for brand-extended products and services (92%) and surrogate products (8%). There were 79 instances of direct tobacco marketing (Figure 1a). The majority of these were for electronic cigarettes (80%), followed by bidi cigarettes (19%) and cigarettes (1%). Cigarette marketing was observed in news media.

Figure 1
Volume of Marketing for Non-Tobacco Products

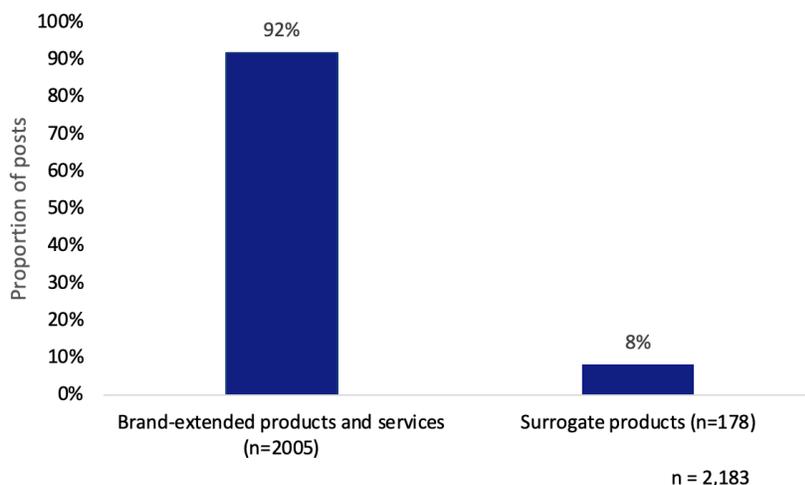
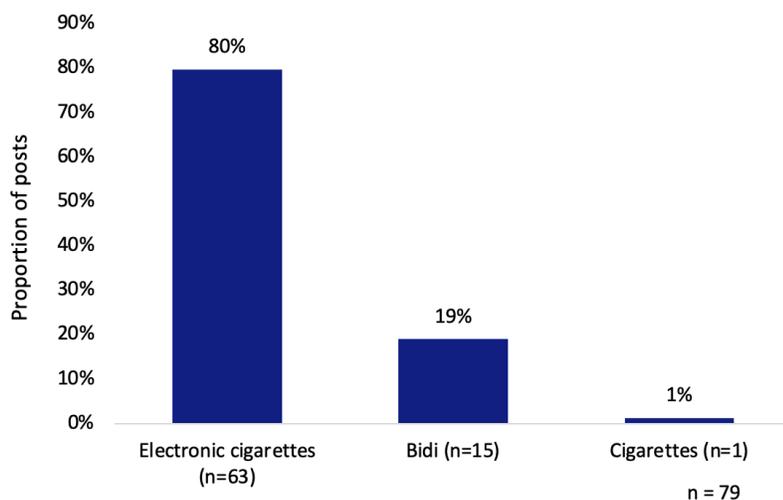
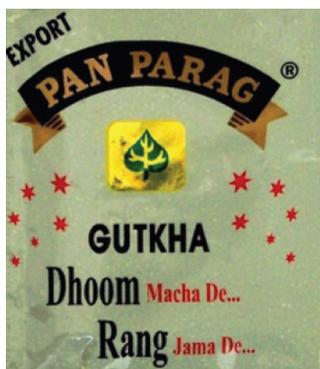


Figure 1a
Volume of Marketing for Tobacco Products



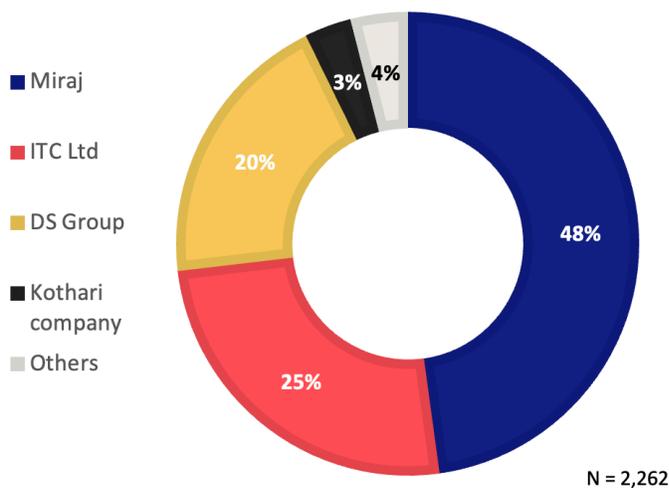
Who were the key players? The majority of observed marketing instances were for Miraj Group’s brand-extended products and services (48%, Figure 2), which was largely for Miraj Cinemas during this period. This was followed by marketing for ITC Ltd.’s brand-extended products and services (25%, Figure 2), which were largely ITC Master Chef, B Natural fruit beverages and Sunfeast Yippee noodles processed products. TERM observed marketing by DS Group’s brand-extended and surrogate products (20%, Figure 2) largely for Pass Pass mouth fresheners and Rajnigandha Silver Pearls. Kothari Products Pvt. Ltd. (3%, Figure 2) marketed its Pan Parag pan masala brand, which is surrogate marketing (Image 1) for its gutkha tobacco product. Marketing of other electronic cigarettes and bidi products was also observed (4%).

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 on these two products.

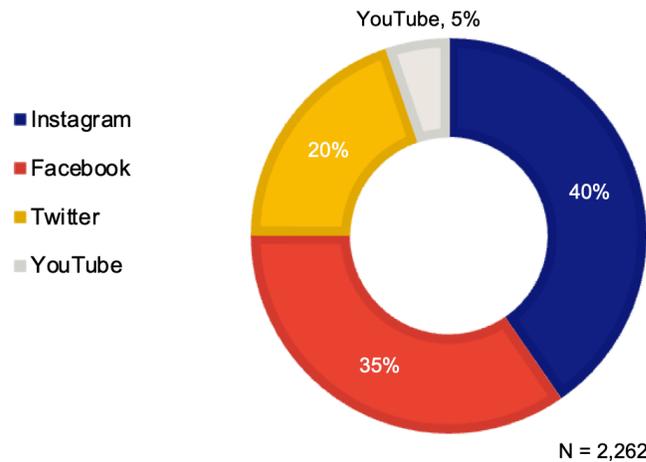
Figure 2
Companies Associated with Marketing



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 (40%, Figure 3), followed by Facebook (35%), Twitter (20%) and YouTube (5%).

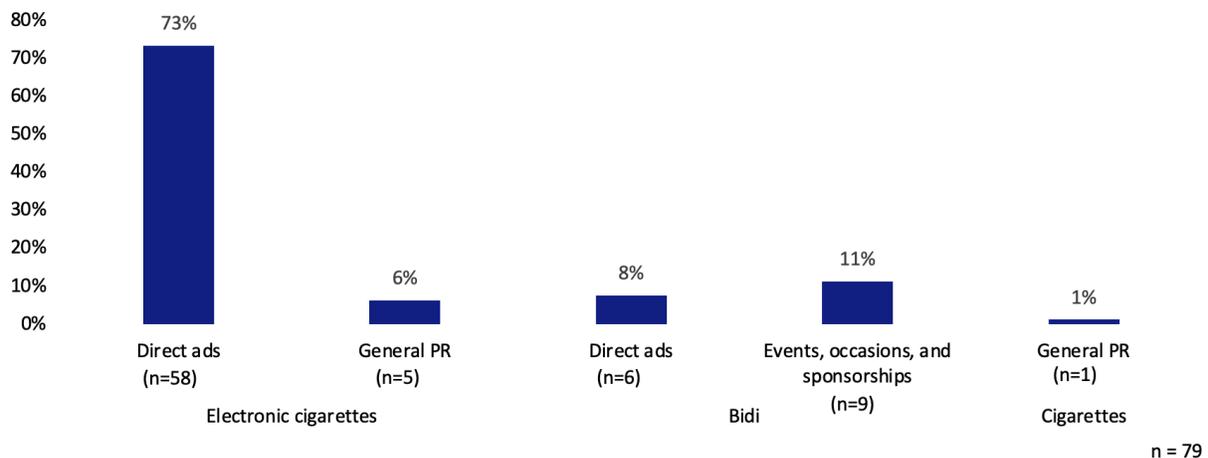
Figure 3
Digital Platforms Used for Marketing



What marketing tactics were used?² Indirect marketing tactics were the most prominent form observed online. Brand-extension tactics (92%) were mostly used to promote non-tobacco products such as Miraj Cinemas, ITC Ltd.'s ready-to-eat meals, and processed products such as cookies, instant noodles, and sugar-sweetened beverages. Surrogate marketing was used for pan masala and mouth fresheners products (8%).

Direct ads were used by third-party retailers to promote electronic cigarettes (73%) and by bidi cigarette product accounts (8%). The images and logos of these products were shown on social media posts. Current events and religious festivals (11%) were used by bidi cigarette product accounts. This included greetings for religious holidays such as Makar Sankranti and Holi, as well as secular events such as Republic Day and International Women's Day. One news article about ITC, Ltd. highlighted its stock performance (1%)(Figure 4).

Figure 4
Marketing Tactics Used by Type of Product



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.

² See Appendix Table 1 for definitions of message tactics.

Examples of Events, Occasions and Sponsorships

Examples of Direct Ad Tactics



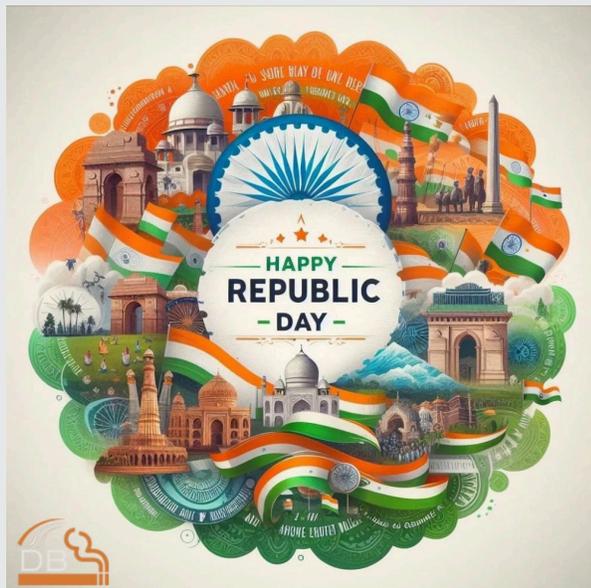
This post by the A.B. Bidi company is celebrating Makar Sankranti, a Hindu festival associated with the Sun deity. The image associates kite flying with bidi use. The translation of the text is: “Fly kites of happiness, while celebrating sankranti (festival) with your family and friends.” Note the health warnings at the bottom left of the image.

Source: A.B. Bidi Company Facebook



This is a post by the third-party retailer called the Vapestore Delhi. Older posts included a mobile number and store location in New Delhi. This post is accompanied by a popular Bollywood song.

Source: thevapestorelhi Instagram account



This is an example of secular community post by Dinesh bidi account, wishing everyone a Happy Republic Day. Images of the Indian flag and iconic and historical sites are shown in this post, which tries to associate the brand with nationalistic fervor. Note the product logo at the bottom left of the image.

Source: Dinesh Bidi Facebook



This is post from the third-party retailer vape_wholesaler_india, promoting an IGET Star electronic cigarette. This person is demonstrating “vape tricks” while showing other products in the store. The WhatsApp number and instructions for purchases are provided in the caption, including payment and delivery systems.

Note the types of hashtags that are used in the post. These are mostly about hookahs and other brands of electronic cigarettes.

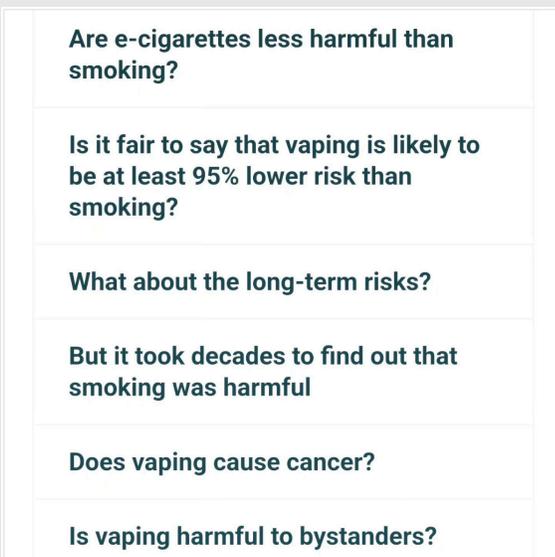
Source: vape_wholesaler_india Instagram

Examples of “Corporate Social Responsibility” and General Public Relations



This is a post by Sunfeast Yippee noodles, a brand extension product of the smoking tobacco company, ITC, Ltd. It is promoting the company’s green initiative: YiPee! Better World: Create Magic”, where post-consumption plastic waste is recycled into playground equipment in four metropolitan parks. Note the use of the ITC, Ltd. logo in the images.

Source: Sunfeast Yippee Instagram



The Association of Vapers India posts information about the uses of electronic cigarettes and its potential as a tool for smoking cessation. This post includes a link to a blog of an electronic cigarettes advocate. These groups are using the concept of “harm reduction” even though electronic cigarettes also pose health risks from nicotine use.

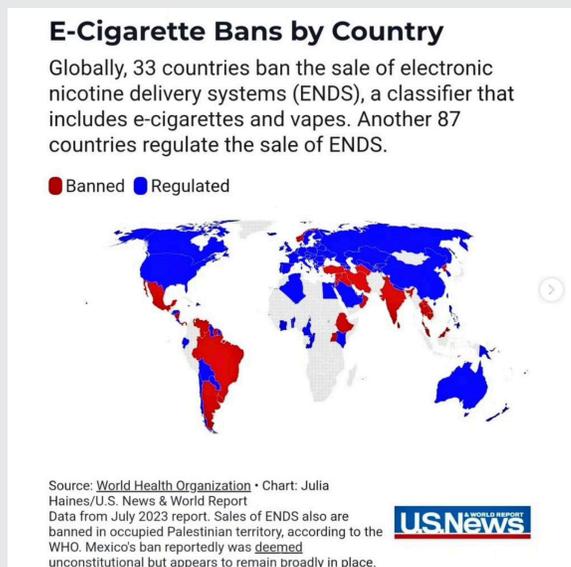
Source: avi_vapeindia Instagram



Miraj Group Corporate Film-2023
MIRAJ GROUP 7.02K subscribers

The smokeless tobacco company Miraj Group created a corporate film promoting its various brand extension food and industrial products and its various “corporate social responsibility” initiatives in the state of Rajasthan. The caption means: Your faith is our identity.

Source: Miraj Group YouTube



In this post, the Association of Vapers India tries to influence public opinion about India’s ban on electronic cigarettes by highlighting different bans globally. This is in response to the COP10 WHO FCTC meetings that were held in Panama from Feb. 5-10, 2024.

Note the hashtags such as #COP10, #endvapeban, #vapingsaveslives, #regulatedontban.

Source: avi_vapeindia Instagram

What messaging was used?³ Overall, most marketing messages were informational (64%, Figure 5), offering information on non-tobacco products and services, for example, the schedule of movies shown in Miraj Group’s Miraj Cinemas.** Consumers were encouraged to eat ITC Ltd.’s ultra-processed foods, ready-to-eat-meals, chocolates, and sugar-sweetened beverage products to welcome the New Year. Surrogate product accounts highlighted the refreshing flavor and freshness of pan masala products and encouraged consumers to share pan masala or mouth fresheners with loved ones.

Message framing for the direct marketing of tobacco products was predominantly through entertaining videos (54%, Figure 5a). Third-party retailers created short videos of people unboxing and assembling the components of electronic cigarettes, or videos and images of people performing vape tricks.** These videos are about 30 seconds long and accompanied by popular songs. The same vendors also posted products with information in their captions (13%) on how to send inquiries or how to order products. There are instructions to send a product screenshot to a WhatsApp number to enable home deliveries and payment by cash on delivery. The second-most common message framing used product features. Bidi cigarette accounts (20%, Figure 5a) emphasized flavor and freshness, or only showed product images and logos. Religious events such as Makar Sankranti and Holi were also used to promote tobacco products (8%, Figure 5a). Greetings for secular community celebrations (5%), such as Republic Day, were also frequently observed in the marketing of bidi products.

Figure 5
Message Framing Used for All Products

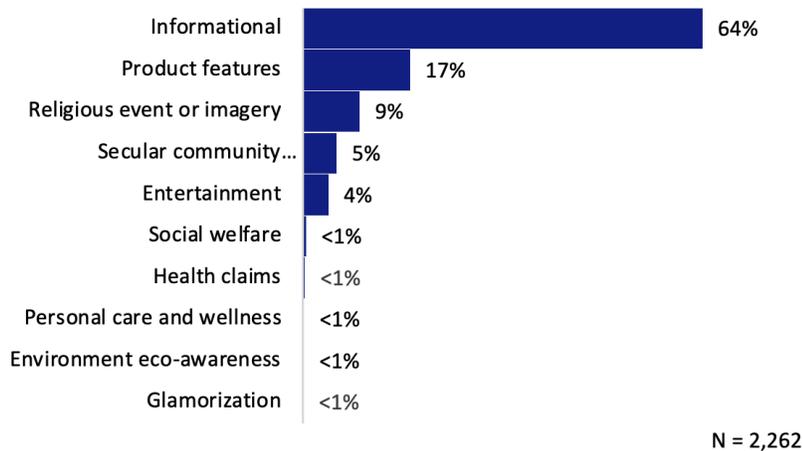
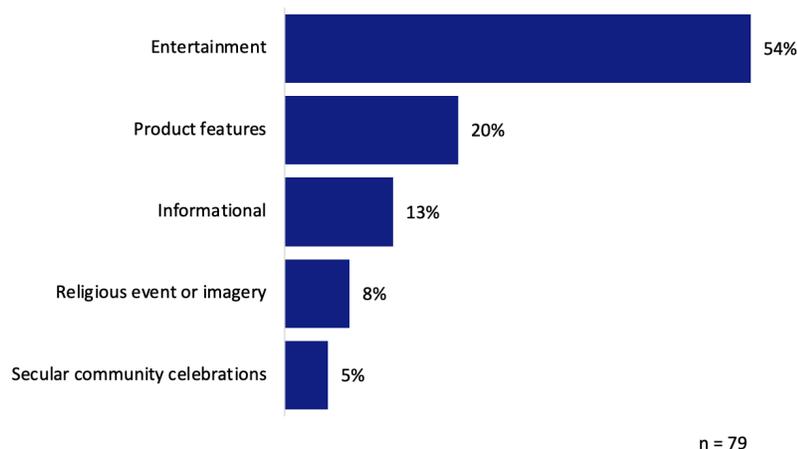


Figure 5a
Message Framing Used for Tobacco Products



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, vape trick videos).

Message framing examples

Secular Community Celebrations



This is a short video post celebrating International Women's Day from the mouth freshener Rajnigandha Silver Pearls, a surrogate product of the smokeless tobacco company DS Group. The images honor Indian women who were trailblazers in sport and education despite facing challenges in life. The image shows: Mary Kom, India's first female boxer to win gold in the Asian and Commonwealth games; Savitribai Phule, a social reformer who opened the first school for girls in Pune; and Anandi Gopal Joshi, the first Indian woman to study and practice western medicine.

Source: Rajnigandha Silver Pearls Facebook

Religious Events or Imagery



This post from DB Signature Silver Elaichi celebrates Lohri, an important social and cultural festival celebrated by Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab and northern India. Lohri celebrates the start of the new year. Note the image of its brand ambassador—the Bollywood actor, Hrithik Roshan—at the bottom right corner of the image.

Source: DB Signature Silver Elaichi Facebook

Product Features



This post promotes the consumption of the mouth freshener throughout the whole day. This post has garnered 19,925 engagements. DS Group is a smokeless tobacco company.

Source: Rajnigandha Silver Pearls Facebook

Entertainment



This is a post from Pan Parag pan masala, manufactured by the smokeless tobacco company Kothari Group. It garnered 1,002 total engagements.

Source: Pan Parag Facebook

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.](#)

Disclaimer

All trademarks, product names, and company names or logos used in this publication are for identification purpose only, and are the property of their respective owners. The use of any trademarks, product names, and company names or logos in the publication is for information and research purposes only and is not intended to infringe any patent, trademark, copyright, license or any other proprietary right of any third party. Vital Strategies does not claim any proprietorship over the logos/trademarks of third parties used in this publication.

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

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	Non-tobacco 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.
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, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and sponsorship of events or activities.

Marketing tactic	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
Message framing	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.

Other TERM reports: India

Recent situation reports:

- April-July 2023 – [English](#)
- December 2022-March 2023 – [English](#)
- August-September 2022 – [English](#)

Issue briefs:

- The Next Frontier in Tobacco Marketing: The Metaverse, NFTs, Advergaming and More
[English full report](#) | [English explainer](#)
- Tobacco Marketing and Football: A Losing Game—The 2022 FIFA World Cup and Tobacco Marketing on Social Media in Indonesia, India, and Mexico
[English](#) | [Hindi](#)
- Protecting Youth From Online E-Cigarette Marketing: Findings From a New Study in India, Indonesia and Mexico
[English](#)
- Findings from a TERM Content Analysis of E-Cigarette Marketing on Social Media: India
[English](#)
- Hidden in Plain Sight: Surrogate Marketing of Tobacco Products on Social Media in India
[English](#)
- Selling Death on Social Media: How bidis are reaching consumers online
[English](#)

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.

Join the movement



To learn more visit termcommunity.com
or follow us [X @termcommunity](#) and
[@termcommunity](#)