

Future of tobacco marketing: the metaverse, NFTs and the next generation of the internet

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We were behind the curve to address tobacco and electronic cigarette marketing on social media, but should have the foresight to get ahead of new technologies like the metaverse.¹ The Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM) monitors and documents tobacco marketing on social media platforms in India, Indonesia and Mexico.² The project analyses publicly available social media posts from tobacco company and brand accounts, including those for nontobacco products that tobacco companies have extended to and community marketing that indirectly promotes tobacco products. These posts often offer insight into tobacco company/brands' marketing strategies.^{2,3} TERM found early evidence of tobacco companies using their social media accounts to tell followers and readers of their marketing activities through adver-gaming, on metaverse platforms and via non-fungible tokens (NFTs). This included using metaverse digital avatars to promote positive messages about smoking behaviours and tobacco company sponsorship of metaverse events.⁴

We are entering a new digital era that may be dominated by the metaverse, a more three-dimensional, game-like version of the internet built on augmented and virtual reality, and NFTs, which are unique digital assets that exist on a blockchain and can be bought, sold and traded, including in the metaverse.^{5,6} These new tools pose challenges to regulators because they are designed to be decentralised, with only partial control by media platforms.⁷ However, there is an urgency in regulating them because the majority of metaverse monthly active users (454million as of early 2023)

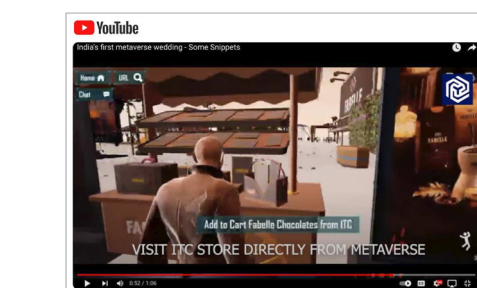


Figure 2 Screenshot of a YouTube video about the first metaverse wedding in India, sponsored by tobacco company ITC. Source: Yug Metaverse YouTube.

are 18 years old and below, especially in game-based metaverses such as Roblox, Fortnite and Minecraft.⁸

There is already growing evidence of alcohol promotion using these tools, and this should sound an alarm for those concerned with marketing of tobacco and other unhealthy products since they often use the same playbook. For instance, alcohol brands are using NFTs of their 'heritage' or rare products, which often correspond to real-world products. They are also using the metaverse to hold branded immersive events and



Figure 3 Metaverse art posted by Iceperience.id, an Indonesia-based Instagram account associated with the LA Ice kretek cigarette. Translation of the caption and post: A new opportunity for partygoers who are too lazy to go out and introverted people who do not 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. Source: @iceperience.id Instagram.

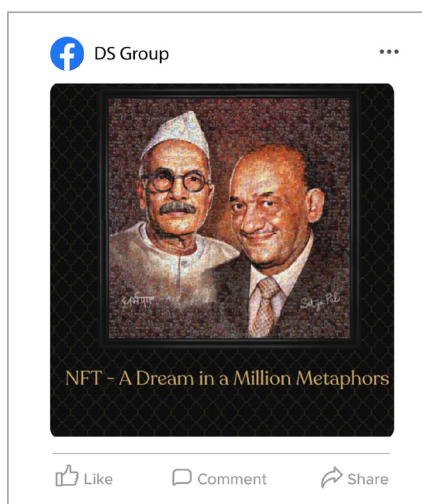


Figure 1 A non-fungible token (NFT) created by DS Group, a smokeless tobacco company in India. Source: DS Group Facebook.



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Figure 4 Metaverse art posted by Iceperience.id, an Indonesia-based Instagram account associated with the LA Ice kretek cigarette. 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? HAS ANYONE STOLEN MY LIGHTER? Source: @iceperience.id Instagram

sell products directly via virtual stores or bars where consumers can enter as avatars and purchase products to be sent to their location.^{9 10}

TERM observed some initial evidence of metaverse and NFT tobacco marketing through social media posts. In India, an NFT mosaic was developed by DS Group, a smokeless tobacco company, to celebrate its 93rd anniversary. The NFT paid homage to the company's founders, painting a picture of the company as a responsible and respected corporate citizen while signalling its ability to leverage innovative technology (see figure 1). The NFT received wide press coverage.

Also in India, tobacco giant ITC, which is partly owned by British American Tobacco, sponsored the first Indian metaverse wedding (see figure 2) and a metaverse gift-giving event for the Diwali festival via its extended chocolate and juice brands.¹¹ The ITC logo was featured, which may prompt associations with its well-known tobacco brands.¹²

In Indonesia, TERM has found that tobacco companies use campaigns and events to link their brands with activities that are popular among young people, such as sports or music.¹³ The intention is to build brand awareness and a following. One such campaign focuses on electronic music (Iceperience), to promote the LA Ice cigarette brand. TERM observed the Iceperience Instagram account using metaverse art (see figures 3 and 4) to encourage introverts to party and smoke in the metaverse, using images of avatars smoking and packages of LA Ice cigarettes.⁴

These examples of early tobacco marketing activity in the metaverse and via NFTs, along with what we know about alcohol promotions using these tools, highlight that tobacco control stakeholders need to⁴:

- Understand features of digital technologies to identify policy gaps and inform future regulatory frameworks including the development of tech-neutral policies.¹⁴
- Set up monitoring systems in collaboration with various stakeholders including media companies to track direct and indirect tobacco marketing and protect the safety of young users.

- Consider which government agencies have jurisdiction to enact policies that restrict tobacco marketing across all media and create legal frameworks that ban tobacco companies and brands from directly or indirectly marketing to young people, including via game-based metaverse platforms.

Tobacco control stakeholders, civil society and technology companies need to work together to stay ahead of the rapidly evolving digital landscape. This is a must to protect young people from the health harms of tobacco marketing as it continues to reach them using the newest digital tools.

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