



Online Marketing of Tobacco Products in India

Situation Report (April - May 2024 Edition)



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.

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: 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.

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

- Beedi smoking by famous actors in iconic roles is depicted in movie promotions online. This type of indirect marketing glamorizes and associates tobacco use with manliness and heroism, which may change youth attitudes toward smoking. See spotlight issue on page 2.
- A post from the Association of Vapers India used a peer-reviewed article to position electronic cigarettes as causing less harm than smoking tobacco, while downplaying the risks of nicotine addiction. The tobacco industry funds research studies to cast doubt on the scientific evidence of the health harms of tobacco. See page 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 brands 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 films “Pushpa,” “Maidaan,” and “Bhaiyya Ji.” The male protagonists in these films demonstrate a strong will in the face of adversity and a sense of justice, even when they resort to violence against their enemies. These movies create associations between beedi smoking and masculinity in young viewers, making this behavior more appealing.



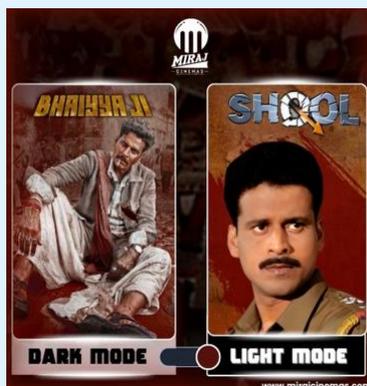
This is a post from Miraj Cinemas, promoting the 2024 sequel of the blockbuster movie “Pushpa.” The actor Allu Arjun, who plays the iconic character, is shown smoking a beedi cigarette. This character is portrayed as a tough and deadly man who prevails over his enemies.

Source: @MirajCinemas Twitter



This is a promotional post from Miraj Cinemas for the 2024 sports biography “Maidaan.” It shows the lead actor, Ajay Devgn, holding a cigarette. He portrays the life of the chain-smoking coach of the Indian National Football Team during the 1950s. The text is a line in the movie about team unity. Ajay Devgn is the brand ambassador of a pan masala brand, which is a surrogate product for smokeless tobacco.

Source: @MirajCinemas Facebook



This is a post from Miraj Cinemas, showing two characters played by the famous actor Manoj Bajpayee.

The left image shows the actor smoking a beedi cigarette, for the promotion of the 2024 movie “Bhaiyya Ji,” where he plays an ex-crime lord seeking vengeance. This character is tagged as “dark mode” which may reflect the violent aspect of the character. The right image of Bajpayee in the 1999 movie Shool,” tagged as “light mode,” is about the triumph of an honest cop over corruption.

Source: @MirajCinemas Facebook

Detailed Insights

How much marketing was observed? The total volume observed in April and May 2024 was N=1,644 from 59 social media accounts and a news platform. Most observed marketing was indirect marketing for nontobacco products (N=1,606, Figure 1), primarily for brand-extended products and services (93%) and surrogate products (7%). There were 38 instances of marketing of tobacco products. (Figure 1a). The majority of these were for electronic cigarettes (74%), followed by beedi cigarettes (23%) and smokeless tobacco (3%). A news article highlighted the sponsorship of cricket games by pan masala brands such as Kamla Pasand.

Figure 1
Volume of Marketing for Non-Tobacco Products

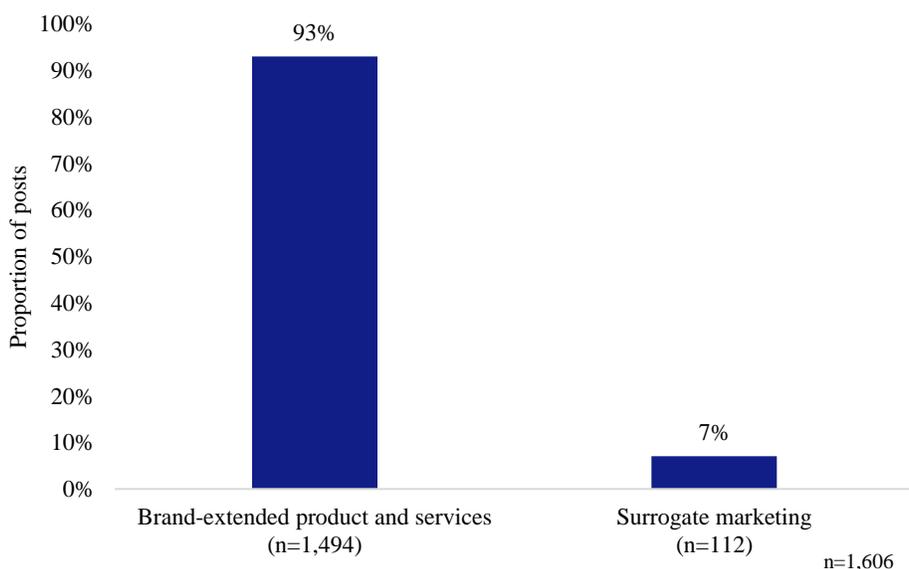
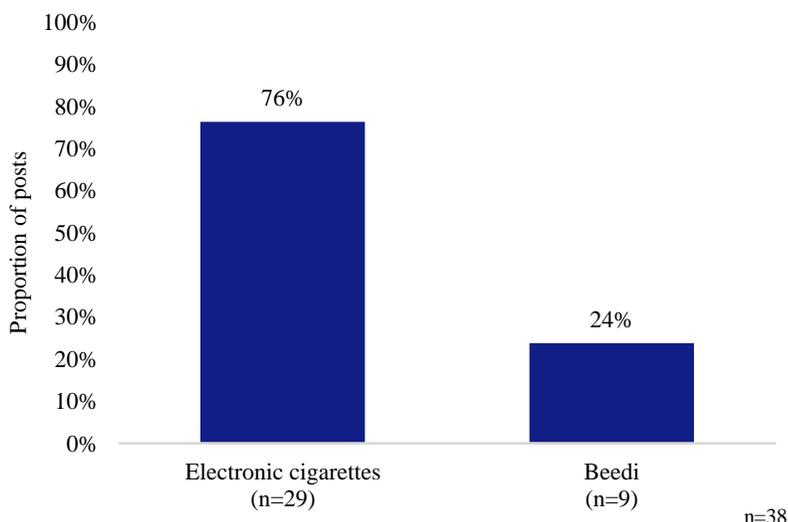
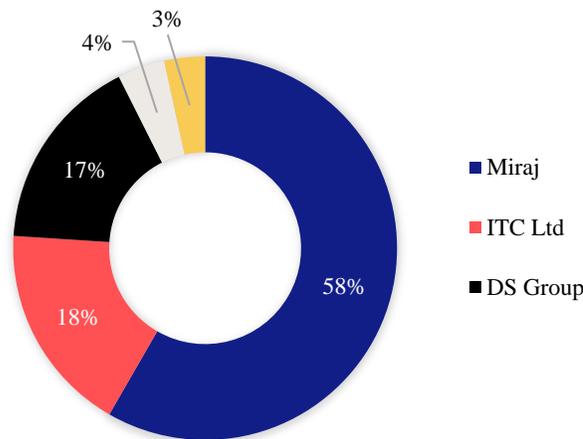


Figure 1a
Volume of Marketing for Tobacco Products



Who were the key players? The majority of observed marketing instances were for Miraj Group’s brand-extended products and services (58%, 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 (18%, 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 (17%, Figure 2) largely for Pass Pass Mouth Fresheners and Rajnigandha Silver Pearls. Kothari Products Pvt. Ltd. (4%, Figure 2) marketed its Pan Parag pan masala brand, which is surrogate marketing for its gutkha tobacco product. Marketing of other electronic cigarettes and beedi products was also observed (3%).

Figure 2
Companies Associated with Marketing

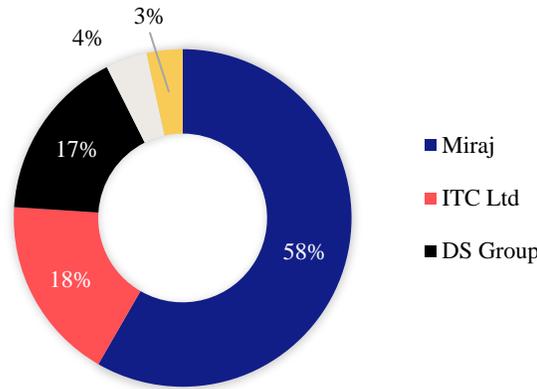


N=1,644

Note: To view some of the companies included in the “Others” category, see appendix table 2.

Where were products marketed?¹ Most marketing was observed on Instagram (36%), followed by Facebook (34%), Twitter (28%), YouTube (2%) and news (less than 1%).

Figure 3
Digital Platforms Used for Marketing

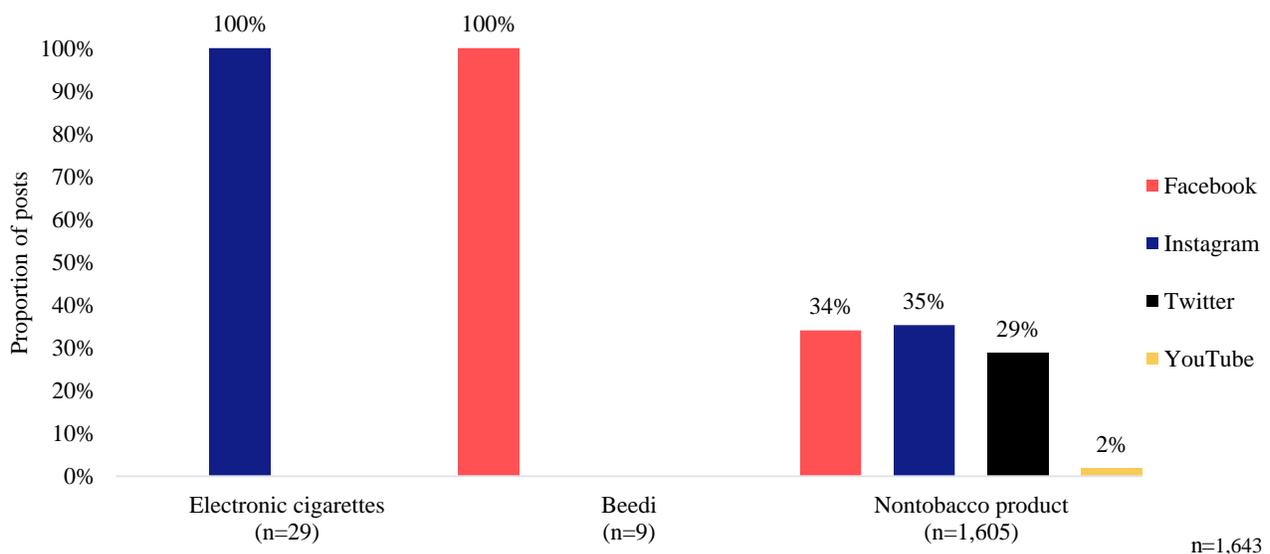


N=1,644

Beedi product marketing accounts were found on Facebook (100%), while electronic cigarettes were marketed by third-party retailers on Instagram (100%) (Figure 3a). Third-party retailers regularly share short-form videos and images which work very well on Instagram.

Nontobacco products such as brand-extended food and beverages and pan masala surrogate products were marketed through Instagram (35%), Facebook (34%), and Twitter (29%) accounts, with a small proportion on YouTube (2%) channels (Figure 3a).

Figure 3a
Marketing Over Social Platforms by Type of Tobacco Product

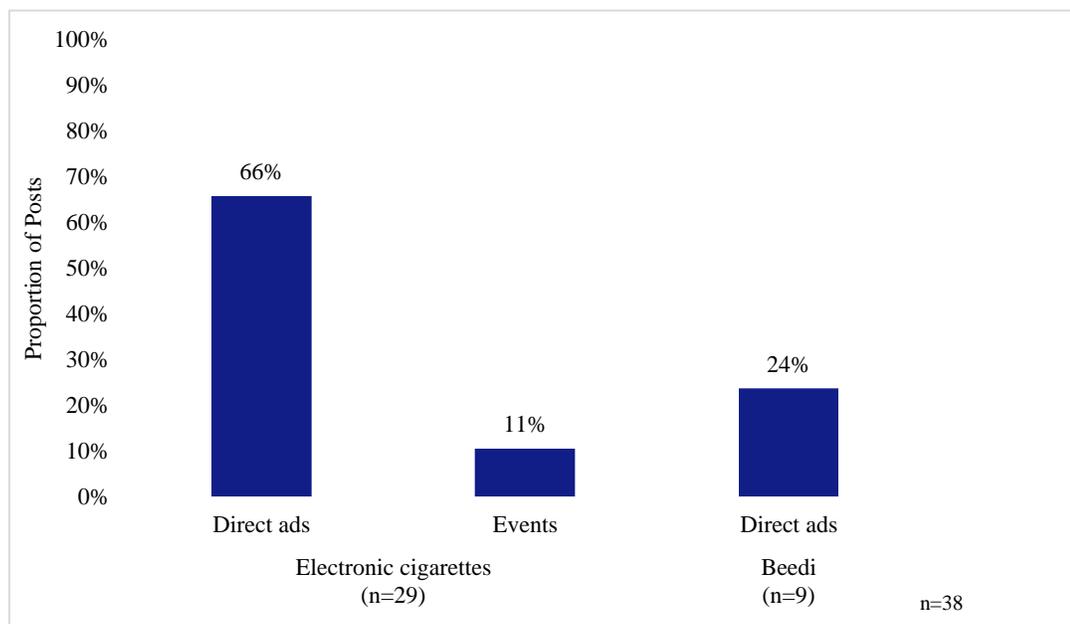


n=1,643

What marketing tactics were used?² Indirect marketing tactics were the most prominent form observed online. Brand-extension tactics (93%) 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 (7%).

Direct ads were used by third-party retailers to promote electronic cigarettes (64%) and by beedi cigarette product accounts (23%). The images and logos of these products were shown on social media posts. Current events and religious festivals (11%) were used by beedi cigarette product accounts. These included greetings for Eid ul-Fitr and Akshaya Tritiya, as well as secular events such as World Art Day and Mother’s Day. One news article about Kamla Pasand highlighted its sponsorship of cricket games (3%) (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 Direct Ad Tactics



This is a post from a third-party retailer account, “vape_ wholesaler_india,” promoting various flavors of an electronic cigarette brand. The instructions on how to order products and various payment modes are provided in the caption, along with the WhatsApp number.

Source: @vape_wholesaler_india Instagram



A post from the third-party retailer account “vape_ wholesaler_india” features a person doing “vape tricks,” to promote an electronic cigarette product. This short video is accompanied by a trending song, which makes it more entertaining. The WhatsApp number of the store and ordering instructions are provided in the caption.

Source: @vape_wholesaler_india Instagram

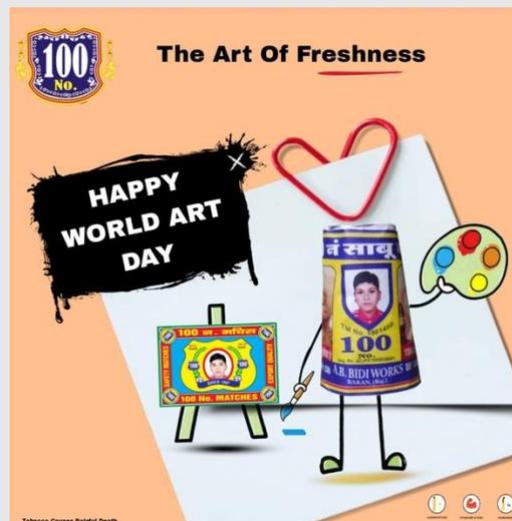
Examples of Events, Occasions and Sponsorships



This is a post from the beedi account “Dinesh Beedi,” celebrating Eid ul-Fitr. Note the company logo on the bottom right side of the image.

Source: @DineshBidi Facebook

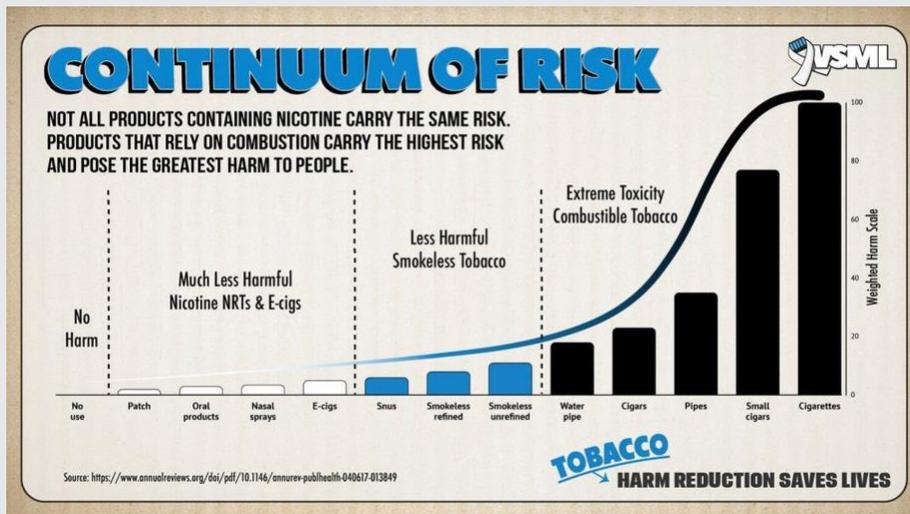
Examples of Entertainment



This is a post from A.B. Bidi company, celebrating “World Arts Day.” The image of a packet of bidi is shown painting the image of the “100 matchstick” box. This product uses a child’s face as its company logo.

Source: @A.B.BidiCompany Facebook

Examples of “Corporate Social Responsibility” and General Public Relations



This is a post from the account “Association of Vapers India (AVI),” which promotes the benefits of electronic cigarettes use compared to tobacco products. The post shared a continuum of risk chart, comparing lower toxicity levels from use of nicotine replacement therapy products and electronic cigarettes to more harmful, smoking tobacco products. The intent is to position electronic cigarettes as harm reduction tools, instead of addictive nicotine products. Citing data from peer-reviewed articles are meant to add legitimacy to the information. However, the journal has noted that the authors of this article failed to disclose their advisory relationship with the JUUL company. Their conflict of interest may potentially have led to [bias* toward the electronic cigarette industry](#) and affect the interpretation of the results. Providing funds for research studies on the health harms of tobacco products is a common tactic practiced by the tobacco industry.

Source: @Association of Vapers India (AVI) Facebook

This is another post from the AVI account, which requests its followers to support and make their voices heard on “World Vape Day.” It is a call for action, and an invitation for followers to share their personal testimonies and to send a message to the government.

Source: @Association of Vapers India (AVI) Facebook

*Influencing Science, Tobacco Tactics, updated 07 October 2024, accessed 05

What messaging was used?³ Overall, most marketing messages were informational (72%, 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 beverages. 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 marketing of tobacco products was predominantly through entertaining videos (66%, 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 tricks⁴ These videos were about 30 seconds long and accompanied by popular songs. The same vendors also posted products with information in their captions (16%) 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. Another common message framing used is to send greetings during secular events such as Mother’s Day and World Art Day (11%, Figure 5a). Religious events such as Akshaya Tritiya and Eid ul-Fitr were also used to promote tobacco products (5%, Figure 5a).

Figure 5
Message Framing Used for All Product

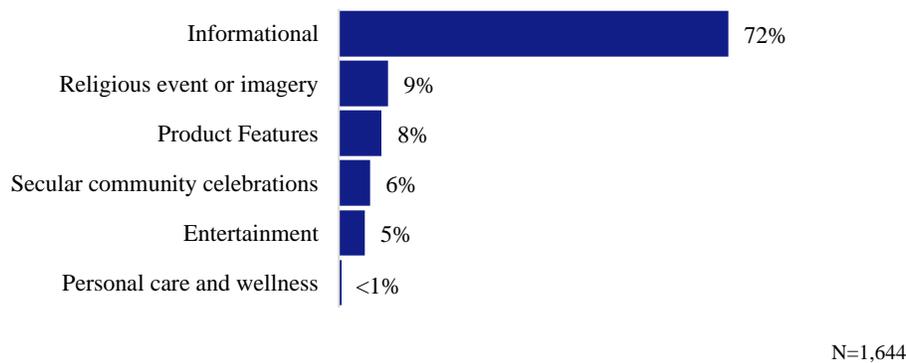
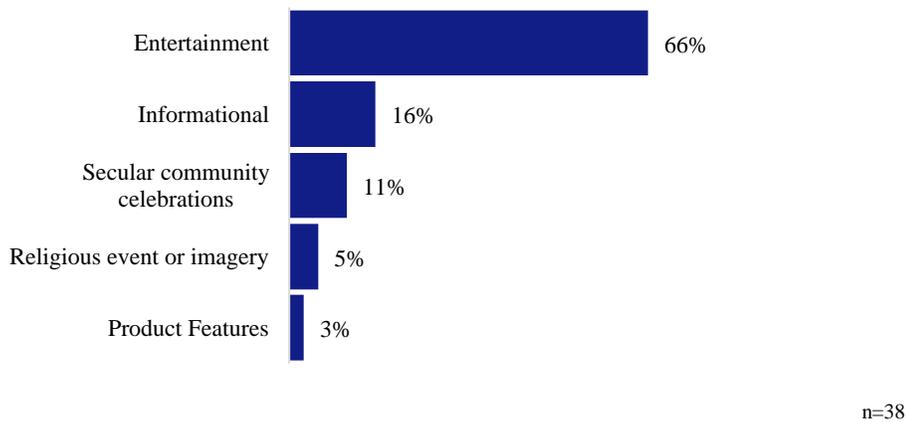


Figure 5a
Message Framing Used for Tobacco Products



³ See Appendix Table 1 for definitions of message framing.

⁴ This marketing was coded as informational and not entertainment because information is being offered about movies.

Message framing examples

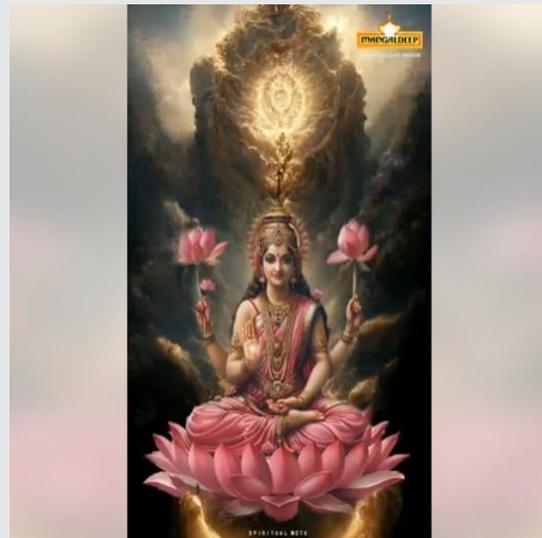
Secular Community Celebrations



This Mother’s Day post is from Catch foods, a brand extension product of DS Group, a smokeless tobacco company. The account urged followers to share their best moments with their mother for a chance to win a prize. This post had more than 10,000 engagements and used a very catchy hashtag “#MaaKaEhsaas,” or “moments with mom.”

Source: @Catch Foods Facebook

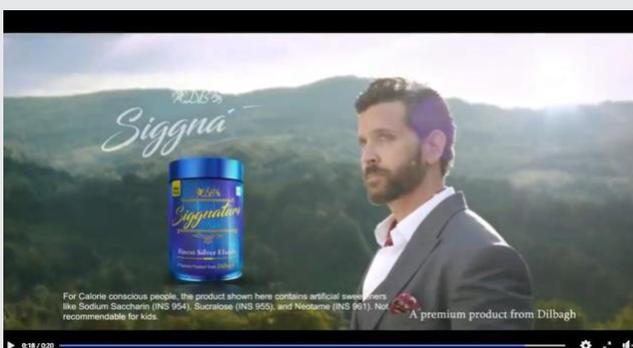
Religious Events or Imagery



This post is from the Mangaldeep account, a brand extension product from the smoking tobacco company ITC Ltd., sharing information about the Hindu and Jain festival “Akshaya Tritiya” with the image of goddess Laxmi. This short video has more than 1 million views.

Source: @Mangaldeep Facebook

Product Features



This video post from the surrogate product DB signature silver Elaichi was played 26 million times and had 88,127 engagements. In this video, the actor Hrithik Roshan, sets free prized stallions worth millions of dollars. This pan masala brand is framed as a “premium” product consumed by the elite class. The caption used the hashtag of the Cricket Indian Premier League “#IPL season” to boost its reach.

Source: @DB Signature Silver Elaichi Facebook

Entertainment



This is a post from Chingles gum, a brand extension of DS group that uses humor for marketing. Followers are urged to share jokes to win online vouchers. This post had more than 11,000 engagements. Note the use of the DS Group logo in this image.

Source: @Chingles 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.

TERM is purposive in its selection of accounts of market actors, via expert inputs and les or logos use systematic complementary any trademarks, searches, and may not be is not intended representative of the full extent and itegies does not breadth of tobacco digital marketing in India. The platform does not track targeted paid ads, peer-to-peer marketing, or marketing in private groups.

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 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.

<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	Nontobacco 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.
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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