

Findings from a TERM content analysis of e-cigarette marketing on social media:

India



January 2023

Country Overview

Summary:

India has the second largest population in the world, which is increasingly connected to the internet and using social media. Despite a total ban on e-cigarettes, young Indians are still reporting having seen e-cigarette promotions on social media, and especially on Instagram. While e-cigarette use rates are relatively low, most current e-cigarette users first heard about e-cigarettes online.

Total population: 1.4 billion

Internet and social media use rates:

- 692 million people actively use the internet.
- Approximately one-third (467 million) of the total population uses social media.
- Indians spend an average of 2 hours and 36 minutes using social media each day.
- The top three most-used platforms are WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook.
- 77.8% of Meta's ad audience is between the ages of 13 and 34.

Exposure to e-cigarette marketing on social media:

26% of Indians ages 18-35 report having seen e-cigarette promotions on social media, 60% of which were on Instagram.

E-cigarette use rate:

0.02% of the population were current e-cigarette users in 2015. Most e-cigarette users in India's eight largest cities first heard about e-cigarettes online, which is also where most of them make their purchases.

E-cigarette regulations:

A 2019 bill banned the production, manufacture, import, export, transport, sale, distribution and advertisement of e-cigarettes.

Sources

United Nations Population Division: *World Population Prospects*. Internet and Mobile Association of India's 2021 report "internet in India." We Are Social, Kepios, Hootsuite: *Digital 2022 India*. Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, National Law School India University: *Results from 2022 national survey*. Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. *Global Adult Tobacco Survey GATS 2 India 2016*. Rajeshwar Nath Sharan et al.'s "Patterns of tobacco and e-cigarette use status in India: a cross-sectional survey of 3000 vapers in eight Indian cities" in *Harm Reduction Journal*. Government of India. *The Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act (No. 42 of 2019)*.

Vital Strategies' systematic digital media monitoring system, the Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM), collected and analyzed three months of data on online e-cigarette marketing from Dec. 15, 2021 to March 16, 2022 in three countries: India, Indonesia and Mexico.¹ This fact sheet summarizes data from India based on TERM's three-country study published in the journal Frontiers in Public Health. It can be used by tobacco control stakeholders to inform policy and advocacy efforts. Please refer to the full article for additional detail, including data visuals.

¹Please note that this study uses purposive sampling, which means our observations are based on a proportion of the marketing that is actually out there. Specifically, our study relied on text-based searches and was not able to capture any content that solely contains images. This may have led to an undercounting of marketing content on heavily visual media such as YouTube or TikTok.

Summary of key findings:

While there is far less marketing for e-cigarettes than there is for conventional tobacco products, third-party retailers were still observed marketing e-cigarettes on Instagram despite the ban.

Total volume of tobacco/nicotine product marketing observed:²

- Smoking tobacco products: 64% (1,418 posts)
- Smokeless tobacco products: 32% (723 posts)
- **E-cigarettes: 4% (90 posts)**

Number and type of e-cigarette-related accounts identified:

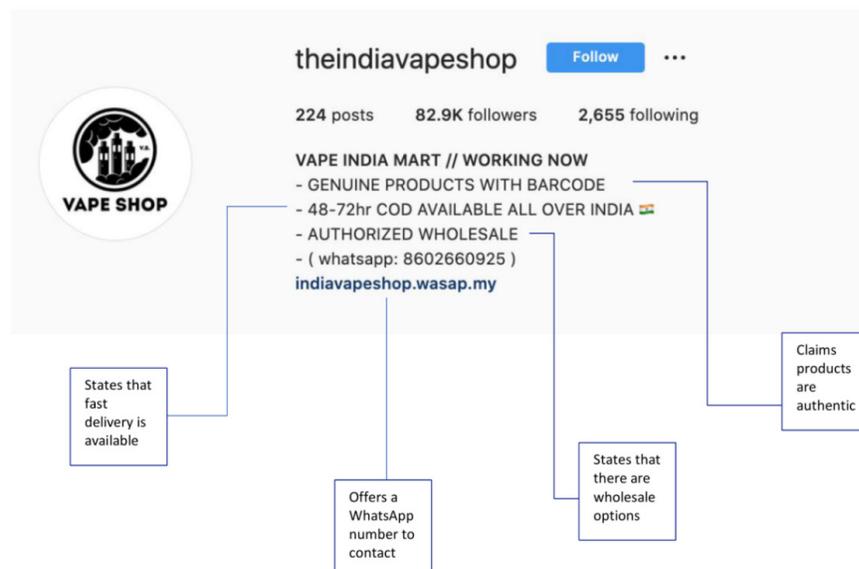
7 accounts, 100% of which were third-party retailers (Table 1).

How social media accounts promoted sales:

The observed accounts offered covert ways of making purchases by providing phone numbers, often via WhatsApp (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Sample Instagram account in India



²The tobacco/nicotine product marketing instances that TERM collected are those posted to the public commercial social media accounts of tobacco and e-cigarette companies that TERM tracks. For tobacco products, this may include indirect marketing including surrogate marketing, which is the promotion of unregulated products with the same or similar brand identity as a company's tobacco products so that consumers connect them, and company brand extension marketing, which is the marketing of non-tobacco products and services using the logo and trademark of a tobacco company.

Recommendations

- 1. Counter industry messaging:** Disseminate accurate, youth-focused health information on digital platforms where young people gather to counter e-cigarette and conventional tobacco marketing claims.
- 2. Strengthen monitoring and enforcement:** Develop or strengthen rapid and continuous digital media monitoring surveillance systems to track players, marketing trends and policy interference efforts, with mechanisms for enforcement. Citizen-led reporting may be used to complement these efforts.
- 3. Reject voluntary commitments:** Voluntary commitments, such as those by social media platforms, do not work alone; government action is necessary.

Table 1. Observed social media accounts marketing e-cigarettes and e-liquids

Country	Platform	Account name	Account description (self-identification)	Total Followers / Subscribers (n) *	Posts during study period (n)
India (N=7)		Retailers			
	Instagram	vape_wholesaler_india	No classification	1,110	15
	Instagram	tugboat.india	No classification	4,724	30
	Instagram	Tugboatvapeindia	No classification	27	25
	Instagram	vape_bar_india	No classification	730	1
	Instagram	vapers_stop_india	Product/service	1,120	
	Instagram	indian_vape_shop	Brand	3,870	3
	Instagram	theindiavapeshop	No classification	82,900	

*As of June 2022

About the Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement

Vital Strategies' [Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement \(TERM\)](#) is a real-time 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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