

Briefing-paper

Social networks: a whole new world for the tobacco industry to conquer

Dossier #3 Marketing | March 2024

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Introduction

Young people are the prime target audience of the tobacco industry. Turning them into consumers is, quite simply, essential to the business's survival. The barely disguised objective of every tobacco company is to lure young non-smokers (which they refer to as 'pre-smokers') onto one of their brands as early as possible, before their competitors do so. It is then a matter of turning these 'apprentice smokers' into regular consumers, addicted to a product and loyal to a brand.

The tobacco industry makes use of all the marketing channels available to it to achieve these aims. In addition to the classic advertising media, social networks have now also emerged as new land to conquer. This virtual space, open, borderless and intrusive, is not subject to the usual regulations concerning targeted marketing. So as long as this regulatory vagueness remains, and the virtual communities continue to attract new and ever younger members, all the industry needs to do is fire off a few arrows to hit its target audience.

01. A few facts

In order to guarantee their sales figures, the tobacco industry must **continually renew its customer base**, which is constantly being eroded through the deaths of existing smokers or smokers succeeding in kicking the habit. Young persons under 21 are a key focus for the tobacco industry, as 85 per cent of smokers begin to smoke before this age. So social media, which are highly popular with the young, are a natural focus of any industries' attention, whatever their market may be. Through social media, the tobacco industry tends to particularly pitch smoking to young people as **'an initiation rite on the journey to adulthood'**¹

A monitoring of the social networks has confirmed that the promotion of nicotine products (e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, snus) is widespread in Switzerland.



85%
of smokers
begin to smoke
before the age of 21.

¹ Béguinot E. and Martinet Y., Rev Prat, 2021.

The tobacco industry primarily uses two forms of communications in its online activities:

- direct marketing of its products and
- the publications through intermediaries, that is **'influencers'**, who provide a range of content which is not easily recognisable as advertising.

The marketing strategies used to reach the youngest members correspond to those described in International scientific literature on the subject:

- positive product presentation
- lifestyle references appealing to the young
- sleek and colourful content
- etc.

Various publications – from both the tobacco product manufacturers and the influencer segment – pay little or no heed to the regulations applicable to the social networks, which include in particular a requirement to **mention, where applicable, when a publication is sponsored or of promotional nature.**

In addition, no effort at all is made to prevent underage online users accessing the content concerned.

The publications concerned do not even observe **the agreements between Swiss Cigarette and the Swiss Commission for Fairness**, which stipulate that 'all advertising must include, clearly and visibly, extending over at least 10 per cent of the space available and in three languages, the official text of one of the general warnings specified in Article 12 of the Ordinance on Tobacco and Tobacco Products'², while it is also widely known that the agreements concerned are almost designed to be ineffective.

At the same time, content aimed at discouraging tobacco consumption has little more than an anecdotal presence on the social networks, and is effectively absent.

² <https://www.faire-werbung.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Accord-industrie-cigarette-1.2.2018.pdf> (article 1.3).

02. Well-established phishing strategies

In its endeavours to achieve its objectives, the tobacco industry has identified the key factors which are likely to **encourage young people to start consuming tobacco products and continue doing so.**

Physical factors

- Aromas (in the 20th Century, tobacco and menthol were the only aromas available; today, with the arrival of new products such as disposable e-cigarettes, a vast range of aromas is available)
- The packaging's visual appeal (to increase the product's attractiveness)
- Nicotine addiction

Psychological factors

- The desire for independence, a sense of adulthood and rebellion (against parents, society etc.)
- Association with positively-perceived life experiences (parties, friends, risk-taking etc.)
- Wanting to belong
- Greater self-esteem (identifying with leaders, freedom of choice etc.)
- Trying out new products (curiosity and the desire to have new experiences)
- Coping with stress, problems or boredom

➔ Advertising on social networks is encouraging young people to start smoking

A study³ of some **140 000 individuals** (three quarters of them adolescents) has shown that non-smokers who are exposed to content promoting tobacco use on their social networks run twice the risk of starting to consume tobacco products some time in their life compared to those not so exposed. The risk of doing so was even higher among persons using more than two social networks.

2x Persons exposed to content promoting tobacco use

on their social networks run twice the risk of starting to consume tobacco products.



³Donaldson S., and al., JAMA pediatr., 2022.

➤ Marketing specifically tailored to social networks

Parties seeking to discourage the consumption of tobacco products have established a **monitoring of marketing strategies used to promote tobacco use in various social networks in Western Switzerland.**⁴

The monitoring has shown that:

- such products are presented **in a positive light**;
- the protagonists are young and physically attractive and are presented as **cool**;
- the language used is young and casual;
- the colours are lively, the design is sleek and the content is interactive;
- the lifestyle references used (glamour, risk-taking) are designed to appeal to the young;
- opportunities are presented of **winning prizes or life experiences** that are sought after by the persons in the target age group;
- an **appeal to rebellion** is strongly conveyed by emphasising that the products presented are unavailable to underage persons.

75%

of influencer followers have bought a product promoted by the same after viewing the corresponding publication.

⁴ https://www.unisante.ch/sites/default/files/inline-files/UPT_Observatoire%20des%20stat%C3%A9gie%20marketing_2013-14_Web%20.pdf

03. An insufficient youth protection policy

The tobacco and nicotine industry has developed creative methods to consistently reach its target audience. Material promoting tobacco use has been found on all social networks, and the industry has a direct presence on the majority of them.

The in-house rules and regulations of the various web giants **vary from platform to platform**. In 2022, of the seven networks most used by young people in Switzerland (Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest and X (Twitter)), it was noted⁵ that:

- Snapchat, YouTube and Pinterest still had no restrictions on influencers' promotions of sponsored content;
- Snapchat, TikTok and Pinterest still had no restrictions preventing underage users from accessing (physical or online) sites selling tobacco and/or nicotine products.



⁵ Kong G. and al., *Tob. Control*, 2022.

➤ Policies in effect in May 2021 regarding the advertising, promotion and sale of tobacco products on social networks⁶

Restriction type	Tobacco restriction policies	Social networks
Paid advertisement	Prohibits paid ads for tobacco products	
	Prohibits paid ads for tobacco use venues (eg, hookah lounges)	
	Prohibits paid ads for tobacco events	
Promotion	Restricts platform from recommending user generated tobacco content	
	Prohibits sponsored content (ie, influencer)	
Sale	Prohibits tobacco sales	
Underage access	Age-gating that restricts youth access to tobacco sales and promotions	

* Authorisation to publish content proposing the purchase, sale, exchange or offer of tobacco products if this is via a physical shop, a website or a brand, provided it includes a minimum age limit of 18 or over

** Sales of tobacco products are restricted to user-to-user

*** Broader definition: content serving to promote a product containing nicotine may be prohibited or made subject to age restrictions



⁶ Kong G. and al., Tob. Control, 2022.

➤ A law a long time coming

The Swiss Federal Tobacco Product Act, **which should enter into effect in 2024**, regulates new products such as for example e-cigarettes. However, although it specifically prohibits, inter alia, the tobacco advertising 'on websites aimed at underage users'⁷, **it still permits tobacco advertising on social networks**, where these new products incontestably abound. The Tobacco Product Act thus shows characteristics of 'loophole legislation', featuring only fragmentary and incoherent provisions **which may render it totally ineffective**⁸.

The 'Tobacco-Free Children' initiative⁹, which has been approved by the Swiss electorate and which calls for a ban on "all forms of advertising of tobacco products to which children and adolescents may be exposed", should enable the Tobacco Product Act to be further refined by 2025, provided the Swiss Parliament respects the wishes of the Swiss population.



⁷ Art.18, Paragraph 1, d.

⁸ See the 'Preventing tobacco and tobacco advertising' factsheet by the Federal Commission for Tobacco Prevention.

⁹ www.enfantssanstabac.ch

04. Potential solutions?

Actions which could help effectively protect young people include:

- Acting without delay on the Swiss electorate's decision to **protect young people from all forms of advertising for tobacco and nicotine products** (by accepting the 'Tobacco-Free Children' initiative of 12 February 2022).
- **Ratifying the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC)** and applying Article 13 thereof, which calls for a worldwide ban on all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.
- Ensuring due monitoring of the application of the rules and regulations already in effect, and particularly of the legal framework for social media, by the corresponding authorities and **punishing any violations thereof** (such as by influencers who fail to observe the transparency principle).
- **Monitoring social networks** to identify any violations of the law and also identify any new marketing tactics intended to circumvent legislation. The CLICK monitoring framework proposed by the WHO could serve as a valuable worktool for monitoring the digital marketing of tobacco and nicotine products aimed at children or adolescents.
- **Promoting regular updates of rules and regulations** in the light of technological developments and new products. Actions which could be taken immediately with regard to publications include:
 - **Adding warnings on the effects of nicotine** or information that certain products are intended to help smokers quit. These elements should help reduce the appeal of the products promoted to young non-users of tobacco and nicotine.

- Favouring the use of the #ad hashtag to **indicate sponsored content**. This is recognised twice as much as the #sponsored hashtag by young users.
- Improving young people's critical abilities to recognise the tobacco industry's sophisticated marketing strategies in which they are the prime target (e.g. via the Tabagram tablet game).
- Informing and **sensitising the public**, decision-makers and authorities on the marketing strategies which are used by the tobacco industry to target young people and circumvent the law.
- Utilising the social networks to **conduct prevention campaigns** (cf. the communication recommendations and examples of campaigns led by Santé publique France).



Publishing details

This Briefing-paper is based on the report «New forms of marketing: promoting new tobacco and nicotine products on social networks» written by Cathy Berthouzoz (Promotion santé Valais) and Jérémy Cros (Unisanté).

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Photo credits: GettyImages, AdobeStock

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Transparency and Truth

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