

## NOTHING NEW IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF E-CIGARETTES – THE NEW WAVE OF FAKE NEWS

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**Abstract:** *The tobacco industry is using the same methods of persuasion as they were doing since the start of advertising cigarettes and other tobacco products in 1914. Producers of tobacco products have been accused of spreading misinformation and fake news since the 1980. Main objective of our paper is to describe the evolution of “fake” marketing communication, especially of e-cigarettes - lately the deceptive strategies of e-tobacco companies in their advertising campaigns, where they minimize the dangers of smoking and portray it as a beneficial or attractive practice are coming under the control of the relevant institutions. Since the e-tobacco companies are using all the modern means and platforms of communication, especially young generations are quite successfully targeted. Results of desk research will be presented as well as some of the activities performed by state owned, and private institutions aimed to prevent harmful and shameless spreading of this conflicting information.*

**Keywords:** *fake news, e-cigarettes, desk research.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is partly based on a previous piece from 2018 where effect of fake news in marketing (communication) was illustrated using two examples: content of iron in spinach and danger of smoking (Sila, 2018). Since e-cigarettes of different styles and shapes evolved in these years, we decided to broaden our research into this area.

The goal of this paper is to describe the marketing (communication) tools, approaches, and perfidious ways of persuasion that made people believe smoking (e-cigarettes) is a good and even healthy decision. Or, since e-cigarettes tend to be more advanced, they “allow individuals to enjoy nicotine or flavored vapes at their own discretion.

While there is still some stigma attached to vaping, it is becoming more widely accepted, and the devices are certainly safer than when they first appeared on the market decades ago« (IndeJuice, 2024).

It is estimated that 1.1 billion people on the planet are smoking (Healthdata, 2021). 90% of new smokers start smoking in the age between 15 and 24.

*The ten countries with the largest number of tobacco smokers in 2019, together comprising nearly two-thirds of the global tobacco smoking population, are China, India, Indonesia, the USA, Russia, Bangladesh, Japan, Turkey, Vietnam, and the Philippines – one in three current tobacco smokers (341 million) live in China. (Healthdata, 2021).*

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Additionally, Tobacco kills more than 50% of regular smokers, 6 million a year (plus more than 884.000 secondhand smokers) and has a two trillion-dollar economic cost to society each year (Martin, 2018; Smith, 2018; Tobacco 2018). E-cigarettes are electronic devices which belong to an enlarging number of electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) that mimic tobacco smoking without combustion of tobacco (Bhatt, Ramphul and Bush, 2020).

The first patent introducing electronic cigarette was granted as early as in 1930 to Joseph Robinson. Nevertheless, »It was never commercialized, and it is not entirely clear that even a prototype of this primitive device was manufactured« (History of Vaping 2022). There were a lot of unsuccessful attempts of developing and producing e-cigarettes until 2003 when a Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik produces »the first modern e-cigarette«. His father died from lung cancer and he »sought to create a device that would more deliver nicotine in a less harmful manner than cigarettes« (IndeJuice, 2024). In April 2006 electronic cigarettes were first introduced in Europe and in August 2006 to the United States. (History of Vaping, 2022)

»In March 2009, the e-cigarette business hit a roadblock with the FDA. The government agency released Import Alert 66-41, effectively banning all imports of E-cigarettes, citing they were not FDA-approved drug delivery devices«. Soon, Canada and Hong Kong banned e-cigarettes. The FDA continued to claim all kinds of e-cigarettes were drug delivery systems and required advanced approval from the FDA (IndeJuice, 2024). The share of e-cigarettes in February 2024 in a selection of countries was (Bashir, 2024):

- Indonesia: 32%
- India: 28%
- Brazil: Approximately 25%
- Russia: Around 23%
- United States: Approximately 20%

### **Fake news**

Fake news is “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (Collins, 2017). Fake news was selected the word of the year by Collins Dictionary.

Usually, fake news relates to media, public relations, or similar activities. In our article we want to explain how fake news is diligently and quite successfully used by manufacturers of e-tobacco products (hereafter e-cigarettes). Big and important advertisers have been communicating several facts that later proved to be false – they were often excused as *alternative facts*. Tobacco industry used all of tools you can imagine avoiding telling the truth (Sila, 2018) – this contains all of characteristics that can be attributed to fake news - their successors are no less ingenious in this respect.

The Internet as a platform and ubiquitous, especially mobile broadband with smartphones as equipment have opened a new dimension in the topic of fake news. Due to the number of messages, the superficiality, and the speed of the user (and the slightly smaller screen on the mobile device), if you are not careful enough - who is the source of your information -, you can be easily misled. Even the largest and most respected media were once owned, controlled or economically dependent on the tobacco industry (Sila, 2018) which is still happening in one way or another today.

### Research objectives

In our paper, three objectives were meant to be achieved: firstly, whether the communication practices employed by e-tobacco companies exhibit attributes akin to those of fake news; then, whether these strategies bear semblance to historically recognized modes of deceptive communication; and finally, do modern institutions that are supposed to take care of the protection (health) of consumers take appropriate actions and regulate this domain?

### METHOD

The present research continues our work from 2018, but since it is a subject that is of particular interest to us due to its controversy, it is constantly monitored. The desk research was carried out from January, especially in March and April 2024.

A huge number of different online and offline sources were reviewed, both those favoring the production and consumption of e-cigarettes and those against - especially the websites of public and private "concerned" initiatives and scientific institutions (such as Stanford University). The practice of some European self-regulatory advertising institutions, the European Commission and the Slovenian Advertising Chamber was also reviewed.

### RESULTS

As Stevens et.al. (2020) found out in their research, e-cigarette advertising was minimally regulated and therefore meant an important factor for increasing e-cigarette use among younger customers. Smoking conventional cigarettes is still declining among youth and young adults, in contrast to e-cigarette smoking, which is increasing.

#### Advertising Themes

There are a lot of different ways how to advertise e-smoking. Researchers at Stanford University - SRITA (Stanford Research Into the Impact of Tobacco Advertising) organized e-cigarette advertising themes into 28 collections, of which we will focus on some, in our opinion, the most interesting in our paper:

**Table 1**

*Examples of selected adverting themes*

Theme	Brand	Main Message
Freedom	Blu Victory	Take back your freedom No Limitations No Tar No Odor
Healthier, Health giving	Blu Shenzhen Tobeco Technology	More Doctors Vape than use traditional cigarettes! NO second-hand smoke, NO unpleasant smell, NO fire, NO ash
Helps You Quit	Quitters LMAE	Let Smokeless Delite be Your Last Cigarette (Lifetime Warranty, 30-day Money-Back Guarantee) Why Quit? Just Switch! Try Now!
Smart, Pure & Fresh	Veppo Novus	Weak People Smoke, Strong People Smoke Less, Intelligent People Vape Inspired By Science. The harmonic balance of science and nature provides inspiration for the

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		development of an Integrative solution such as Novus
(Sweet) Flavors	Vapor Wise  Vest Shore Vapes	Milk Chocolate: Inhale Flavor, Curb Cravings, Lose Weight Try Our New Red White&Blue e-juice. It's The Bomb!
Woman Targeting	Wink Vape Goddess Eversmoke	Let'em, know you 're Single? 0 mg Guilty Pleasure (Cookies & Milk) Save a Life. Save a Lung. Save a Boob
Sex Sells	Weston  Blu	I've got some bad habits but smoking isn't one of them. Slim. Charged. Ready to Go
Eco-Friendly	Logic Smoke  Green Smoke	It's Simple. (Send us 10 disposable LOGIC e-cigs, and we'll send you 1 new disposable e-cig for free) Tastes Real... Feels Real... It's NOT a Cigarette. It's electric
e-cig Designs	NJOY  Antonio Villard	The most amazing thing about this cigarette? It isn't one. All of the good, none of the bad
Tobacco Owned Brands	E-Lites  Vuse	The Satisfying smoking alternative (UK's best electronic cigarette) Welcome to tomorrow. A perfect puff. First time, every time

Source: SRITA (n.d.)

### **Regulation of (e-)cigarette marketing**

#### *Slovenia*

In Slovenia, the legal regulation of e-cigarettes is governed by the Act on Restrictions on the Use of Tobacco and Related Products (ZOUTPI), which entered into force in 2017. This act sets the following restrictions on e-cigarettes (NIJZ, n.d.-a; Uradni list, 2017):

- Prohibition on the sale of e-cigarettes to minors (under 18).
- Prohibition of remote sales of e-cigarettes (via the Internet or telephone).
- Prohibition of advertising, promotion, and sponsorship of e-cigarettes.
- Ban on the use of e-cigarettes in closed public places and workplaces, except in specially designated smoking areas.
- Mandatory warnings about health risks on the packaging of e-cigarettes and liquids with nicotine.
- Limiting the maximum nicotine content in e-cigarette liquids to 20 mg/ml.
- Limiting the maximum volume of containers for e-cigarette liquids to 10 ml.
- Limiting the maximum volume of containers for filling e-cigarettes to 2 ml.

#### *Europe*

The marketing communication of e-cigarettes in EU countries is regulated by Article 20 of the Tobacco Products Directive (2014/40/EU), which lays down rules for electronic cigarettes sold

as consumer products in the EU. According to this article, e-cigarettes must comply with safety and quality requirements (i. e. a maximum nicotine concentration and volume, child-resistant and tamper-evident packaging, and a mechanism for refilling without spillage). You can't enter the new market with e-cigarettes without notification of regulatory institution in the country. You must provide information on the ingredients, nicotine content, and harmful effects of the products. Moreover, e-cigarettes must carry health warnings advising consumers that they contain nicotine and should not be used by non-smokers, and a leaflet with instructions for use and additional information. Any promotional elements on e-cigarette packaging are prohibited, and any cross-border advertising and promotion of e-cigarettes in the EU as well. The article also requires manufacturers, importers, EU countries, and the Commission to monitor and report on the developments related to e-cigarettes, such as market trends, preferences of various consumer groups, and health effects. The Commission has adopted implementing acts and reports to facilitate the implementation of Article 20 of the Directive. (Public Health, n.d.-a)

### **Questionable communication practices**

Manufacturers and sellers of e-cigarettes use many tricks in their marketing and sales activities, below we will list only some of them (K., 2023; R., 2020; Bandur, Pust, Jaklič, 2019; tobaccofreekids, n.d.)

#### ***Misleading consumers about the safety and health effects of e-cigarettes***

E-cigarettes are said to be safer and less harmful than regular cigarettes, although there is insufficient evidence to support this. In addition, some ignore warnings about potential risks such as nicotine addiction, lung and heart damage, and exposure to aerosols and toxic chemicals.

While the American media is still following young people who have recently been affected by an unknown lung disease, which, according to doctors, is most likely related to smoking electronic cigarettes or vaping, it is also noted in Slovenia that the use of such cigarettes is quite widespread in primary and secondary schools. In a survey conducted by NIJZ (Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje - Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje (National institute of public health) in 2018, school workers reported its use in 43 percent of participating schools from Slovenia.

The mysterious lung disease, as it was called in the American media, including the Washington Post and the New York Times, reportedly affected about a hundred people. Although it is not yet known what caused it, it can be linked to electronic cigarettes or to the ingredients that people inhale while vaping. Nor is there sufficient evidence that an infectious disease is to blame for their condition. Since patients do not respond to antibiotics, doctors suspect that the cause of their discomfort is a toxic ingredient.

#### ***Targeting young and vulnerable groups using attractive and trendy elements.***

Nicotine is a highly addictive substance and can greatly affect the development of the adolescent brain. In particular, it can damage the parts of the brain responsible for attention, memory and learning. If someone consumes nicotine at a young age, the likelihood of future addiction to other drugs increases. Thus, some advertisers use colorful and tasty aromas, fashion designs, celebrities, music, and humor in their messages to attract young people (and other vulnerable groups). They are less critical, less experienced, and more susceptible to the influence of advertising.

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***Exploiting legal loopholes and lack of regulation***

Entrepreneurs are always looking for opportunities to avoid excessive restrictions. Manufacturers of (e)cigarettes are real masters at this, they cleverly take advantage of the fact that in most countries e-cigarettes are not subject to the same legal restrictions as regular cigarettes. For example, some advertise e-cigarettes on television, radio, the Internet, and other media where advertising of regular cigarettes is prohibited. Social networks and certain events are also an excellent opportunity to spread recognition and your own truth. Also, some do not respect age restrictions or the ban on smoking in public places.

***Advertising of e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation aid***

It is often easy to understand from advertisements that e-cigarettes are an effective way to quit smoking regular cigarettes, although there is no scientific evidence for this. But we do know that e-cigarettes can increase nicotine addiction and make the process of quitting smoking more difficult. In addition, e-cigarettes may encourage substantial use—along with regular cigarettes—increasing the effects of exposure to tobacco smoke and other harmful substances.

***Corruption of academic research***

JUUL bought an entire May/June 2021 edition of the American Journal of Health Behavior (for 51,000 USD). That means they can control the proof that JUUL's products are safe. 11 studies were written by 26 co-authors, of which 18 were employed by or had strong connections with JUUL.

Most of the articles were influenced by JUUL, which claims that e-cigarettes help dissuade smokers from combustible tobacco products and thus help public health. Virtually nowhere in these articles can we find information that Juul and similar vaping companies make money by getting new smokers addicted to nicotine. But what can the quality of research even be if all the results come from the same corporate source (Juul e-cigarettes, n.d.)

## **DISCUSSIONS**

In the continuation, we describe selected examples of advertising topics, examples of limitations and restrictions of marketing communication and other examples of marketing activities in more detail.

In the previous chapter, the reader could already find many characteristics that can be attributed to fake news, and below, these descriptions additionally confirm our claims.

### **Comment on advertising topics**

***Freedom***

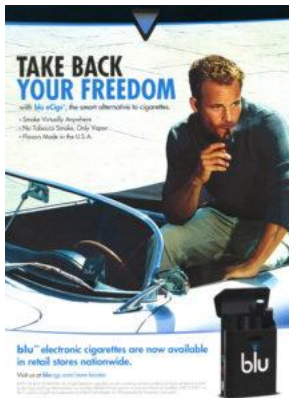
Freedom marketing is very powerful, since free style can also mean freedom to smoke anywhere – without worrying too much about smoking restrictions.

*E-cig brands market freedom-based messages both through traditional advertising in magazines and billboards and through direct consumer interactions through social media channels. Blu Cigs frequently posts on its Facebook page with images associated with a free lifestyle and with posts asking followers to comment on their own “freedom stories.” (Daddis, 2011, in SRITA, n.d.).*

Freedom and rebellion-based communication messages are aimed primarily at a younger population that is less critical of advertising messages (SRITA, n.d.).

**Picture 1**

***Blu: Take back your freedom***



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

***Health***

In the 1950s, tobacco company advertisements often featured doctors selling cigarettes or cigars. Doctors have always been idealized. Consumers who saw these ads felt that they had to follow the doctor's instructions - after all, doctors represent the authority in the field of health.

It is unlikely that such an advertising strategy would be tried in the 21st century. This is exactly what is happening in the electronic cigarette industry - not only is it newer, it is also less understood and the consequences of e-smoking are less studied. E-cigarette brands such as Vapestick, Vape Doctor and Love are resorting to the old and familiar tactic of using the image of a "trustworthy" doctor to sell their products. In a more obvious push for the product by the online retailer, we see two surgeons in an operating theater laughing (!) at a patient who we understand is being treated for a tobacco-related illness. The headline of the ad reads: "Still smoking tobacco cigarettes?" The rest of the text reads: "Haven't you heard of e-cigarettes?"

Electronic cigarette companies distance themselves from the risk of lung cancer in their advertisements by stating that their product does not contain carcinogenic substances (Green Smoke, Cleurette, Headlines, e-cigLife) or "No cancer substances" (eHealth-Cigarette). The Steamz brand even states that their cartomizers are "non-cancer" and "90% safer than traditional cigarettes" (SRITA n.d.).

To date, not enough research has been done on the health effects of e-cigarettes, so this is a very immoral advertising tactic designed to emphasize people's fear of this, often fatal, disease. (U.S. National Library of Medicine, n.d.)

**Picture 2**

***Blu: Doctors&Nurses***



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

***Helps You Quit***

In advertisements for e-cigarettes, their manufacturers convince consumers that e-cigarettes are a "safer" alternative to traditional cigarettes.

Manufacturers thus market e-cigarettes as a "healthier" and more "environmentally friendly" recreational product to which consumers would be "wise" to switch. The advertisement for Blu states that the e-cigarette is "a smart choice for smokers who want a change." The ad headline reads: "Why stop, switch to Blu." Another ad for an e-cigarette vendor shows an image of a well-built woman who kicks a man smoking a regular cigarette (SRITA n.d.).

**Picture 3**

***LMAE: Why Quit? Just Switch! Try Now!***



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

***Smart, Pure & Fresh***

Many e-cigarette company brands use numerous forms of the word "smart" in their ads (eg, intelligig, smart e-cigarette, Kanger e-smart). One of the reasons for choosing such names is the effort of tobacco companies to alleviate the concerns of worried smokers. The purpose of such brand names is to communicate to potential users that they are smarter about choosing a digital product over a regular cigarette and that they can trust such a brand.

Likewise, e-cigarette producers often use positive images and slogans that divert attention away from the negative effects of smoking – the implicit message being that you would be smarter to use an e-cigarette than conventional cigarettes. Visual images, which contain symbols of health, pleasure, and social desirability, similarly want to convince consumers that these are healthy products (SRITA, n.d.).

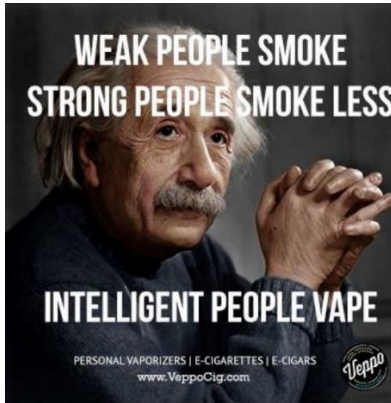
In 2010, the use of light, mild, or fresh descriptors to prevent smoking cessation became legally prohibited. Even though scientific studies have not shown any health benefits in switching to low-tar cigarettes (e.g., light, low-tar, mild cigarettes), many smokers still think that these products are better for their health. However, most smokers are not aware that they just found another way to achieve the same "target" level of nicotine. Other studies show that using low-tar cigarettes actually delays quitting efforts (Shopland et.al., 2001)!

Examples of companies using soothing descriptors and brand names include E-Lites, Go-Lites, Vapourlites, EZlite, and mild e-vaporizer. Even when designing the packaging, they use white, green, light blue or silver color shades that remind us of lighter and healthier products (Wakefield et.al., 2002).



**Picture 4**

*Veppo: Weak People Smoke, Strong People Smoke Less, Intelligent People Vape*



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

*(Sweet) Flavors*

The e-cigarette industry intensely claims that it only targets adults and established smokers. The abundance of vape juices with alcoholic or sweetened flavors and sweet names serve to make these products attractive to children and teenagers who like to experiment with tobacco products and are overwhelmed by misconceptions about the "safe nature" of e-cigarettes.

E-cigarettes and e-juices come in a variety of chocolate flavors, including milk chocolate, coffee chocolate, chocolate mint, chocolate caramel, chocolate peanut butter, chocolate banana, and chocolate strawberry. You can also find ice cream, candies, cookies, donuts, cakes and pies, mint, beverages and other flavors, colors, and shapes.

When advertising chocolate-flavored e-cigarettes, images of decadent pieces of chocolate are common. Some examples of packaging are designed to closely resemble popular chocolate brands (SRITA, n.d.).

**Picture 5**

*Vapor Wise: Inhale Flavor, Curb Cravings, Lose Weight*



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

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### ***Women Targeting***

E-cigarette manufacturers often target women through dedicated brands such as Vapor Couture and Luli. Some companies are using ads that feature highly successful and independent women in occupations that have long been considered exclusively male.

It is normal to see pink e-cigarettes next to a bouquet of red roses or lipstick. These images are intended to allow women to associate e-cigarettes with a harmless fashion accessory that is as crucial and fundamental as a make-up mirror or lipstick.

A common trick they use is to use social/health reasons for their own benefit. In 1992, the pink ribbon became the official symbol of breast cancer awareness. Since then, the color pink has often been linked with support for women who survived breast cancer, and women's solidarity. In this way, the manufacturers of e-cigarettes try to gain the willingness of the public and indicate to potential consumers that the product is not unsafe (SRITA, n.d.).

### **Picture 6**

#### ***Eversmoke: Save a Life. Save a Lung. Save a Boob***



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

### ***Sex Sells***

E-cigarette manufacturers know this well and don't hesitate to use phallic symbols or objectify women to sell their products.

For example, Blu also sponsored Playboy parties that allowed visitors to meet Playmates. Playboy itself tackled this when it created its own Playboy e-cigarettes. Certain ads for Playboy e-cigarettes with the registered bunny symbol advertised free condoms if you bought a vaporizer. Phantom Smoke shamelessly emphasized the objectification of women in its advertising. Many ads show scantily clad women in submissive positions to men. Ad for Krave e-cigarettes shows a woman wearing a bodysuit sitting on the side of a sofa with her legs slightly apart, looking towards the viewer.

In addition to online and print ads that abuse sexuality to sell a product, online videos are full of sexual innuendo. For instance, ad for the VIP e-cigarette featured a sultry-looking woman saying, "I want you to get it out. I want to see it. Feel it. Hold it. Put it in my mouth. I want to see how great it tastes." The online and TV ad, which aired in Britain, attracted 937 complaints about its "overtly sexual" tone (SRITA, n.d.).

### Picture 7

*Westons: I've got some bad habits but smoking isn't one of them.*



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

### *Eco Friendly*

"Going green" is a very popular behavior these days, so it is understandable that the marketing mechanism of the e-cigarette industry also loudly proclaims that its products are environmentally friendly and better for health and the environment than conventional cigarette products. A lot of e-cigarette companies mention that their products do not produce smoke, only vapor, and are therefore less littering than conventional tobacco products. Green Smoke says it "aspires to create a greener planet" by offering cigarettes that are free of second-hand smoke, ash and fire hazards. SouthBeach Smoke similarly equates the healthier aspect of e-cigarettes i.e. without carcinogenic substances and without smoke, as a more environmentally friendly product.

Companies often use subliminal brand names such as Green Smoke, Eco-Cigs, Ever Smoke, EverGreen Vapor, Enviro and Green Nicotine. Many ads also use claims such as "additive-free," "organic," and "eco-friendly," meaning that the ingredients are "clean" and not harmful to humans or the environment. Manufacturers are also keen to point out that their products are mostly reusable. That's why we don't throw them away and don't accumulate in landfills and pollute the environment. Nonetheless, the eco-friendly nature of e-cigarettes should be closely inspected.

E-cigarettes contain numerous plastic and metal components that must be disposed of properly. Furthermore, nickel-cadmium or lithium batteries used in e-cigarettes should be properly disposed of in an e-waste recycling container. If e-cigarettes are not disposed of properly, they pose an even greater polluting burden than traditional cigarettes (SRITA, n.d.).

### Picture 8

*Logic Smoke: It's Simple*



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

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***eCig Designs***

There are two different styles of e-cigarettes. E-cigarettes that are shaped like technologically superior pens and smartphones, and e-cigarettes that seem and work like traditional cigarettes. For numerous heavy smokers, the whole smoking experience is important. For example, how they feel the cigarette in their hand, the taste and smell of the product, the way it burns their throat - all this contributes to their enjoyment of smoking. Some studies have shown that satisfaction with smoking decreases if smokers do not experience these feelings (SRITA, n.d.).

**Picture 9**

***V2Cigs: It's New. It's Cool. It's Blue!***



Source: SRITA (n.d.)

***Tobacco Owned Brands***

Tobacco producers entered the e-cigarette industry. Among them are Imperial Tobacco, British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco International and Philip Morris International.

**Table 2**

***Selection of producers and brands***

<b>Company</b>	<b>Brand - classic</b>	<b>Brand – e-cig</b>
CNTC – The China National Tobacco Corporation	Hongmei, Yunyan, Lesser Panda, Furong, Red Goldem Dragon, Chunghwa	Kuanzhai Kungfu, MC, MOK
BAT - British American Tobacco, incl. R. J. Reynolds and Lorillard	Dunhill, Kent, Lucky Strike, Pall Mall, Rothmans, Camel	Vuse, Glo, Velo
Imperial Tobacco	JPS (John Player Special), Davidoff, Gauloises, West, Winston, Kool	Blu, Pulze, Zone X
JTI – Japan Tobacco International	Winston, Camel, LD, Benson&Hedges	With, Logic, Ploom,
PMI – Philip Morris International	Marlboro, Parliament, L&M, Muratti, Chesterfield	Iqos, Bonds by Iqos, Lil Hybrid, Veev One, Zyn

Source: companies' web pages (for CNTC, Tobaccotactics, 2023)

Lorillard was the third largest cigarette producer in the US and a market leader in e-cigarettes (49% market share in 2011). They entered the British market for e-cigarettes in 2013 by acquiring Skycig, a British e-cigarette company. Skycig was rebranded to Blu (with a 20 million GBP marketing campaign). In 2014, Lorillard was acquired by RJ Reynolds – that had to sell Blu (to Imperial Tobacco). In 2017, the company was sold to British American Tobacco (Lorillard, n.d.)

### **Curbing the Cloud: Prohibited E-cigarette Marketing Campaigns in Europe**

In some countries they have already started strong activities to minimize the effect of e-cigarettes themselves and fake news about them. E-cigarettes have appeared as a controversial product in the European market. While supporters push them as a harm-reduction tool for smokers, public health concerns regarding their long-term effects and potential appeal to non-smokers, particularly youth, have fueled regulatory debates. We try to present some examples of specific e-cigarette marketing campaigns in Europe that were prohibited due to contravening regulations.

The European Union (EU) enacts a framework for tobacco advertising and promotion through Directive 2014/40/EU. This directive prohibits most forms of advertising for tobacco products, including e-cigarettes. The definition of advertising is broad, encompassing "any form of commercial communication, regardless of the medium used, that directly or indirectly promotes a tobacco product", and it also restricts product placement and free samples (European Commission, 2014). Additionally, member states have the authority to implement stricter regulations. However, the evolving digital landscape and the fact that e-cigarettes are still a relatively new phenomenon have presented challenges in implementation. Nevertheless, several e-cigarette marketing campaigns across Europe have been prohibited for disregarding these regulations. One prominent example of a prohibited campaign is *the use of social media influencers* by tobacco companies. They partnered with influencers to promote their products in a seemingly organic way, often without clear disclosure of sponsorship. In 2019, concerns arose around British American Tobacco's (BAT) marketing of their Vype e-cigarette brand in the UK. The campaign allegedly involved social media influencers posting photos showcasing themselves vaping Vype products, usually without evident disclaimers that this activity was sponsored (Furlong, 2019). This tactic exploits a potential loophole in regulations, as influencer marketing can be seen as a form of indirect promotion rather than explicit advertising.

Another marketing strategy that has been restricted is *the use of flavors*. E-cigarette marketing often portrays vaping as a trendy, glamorous, or rebellious activity. Fruity, bubblegum and candy-like flavors are heavily promoted, especially in disposable vapes, which can be particularly attractive to young people (Stead et.al., 2021), who might be tempted by the taste rather than the presence of nicotine (European Commission, 2014). Finland, for instance, has stricter regulations than the EU as a whole. Their legislation bans not only the marketing of e-cigarettes but also flavored nicotine liquids (Ollila, 2020).

*Misrepresentation of Health Benefits* is also one of prohibited tactics, especially unsubstantiated claims about e-cigarettes being a safer alternative or even smoking cessation tool. Public health authorities argue such claims downplay the potential health risks associated with e-cigarette use (Furlong, 2019; IEVA 2023).

### **Measures authorities implement to improve the situation**

*Strengthening regulations:* The European Union is constantly evaluating and updating actions to address emerging market tactics. This also means the gradual banning of certain flavors of e-liquids and the tightening of controls on online advertising (Conway, 2024).

*Enforcement of existing regulations:* Authorities are intensifying prosecution efforts to detect and punish companies that violate the advertising ban. Social media platforms must cooperate in removing unauthorized or suspicious content (Conway, 2024).

*Public health campaigns:* Public health agencies are launching campaigns to combat messages that promote vaping. These campaigns usually highlight the (potential) health risks of vaping and highlight the lack of effectiveness of vaping as a smoking cessation tool (East et.al., 2024).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

We have only touched the tip of the iceberg of the issue of e-tobacco products and the false communication related to them. Several parts of the world, especially where the data is more difficult to access, were not taken into account.

In our research, we found many controversial practices similar to those used by tobacco companies in the past to promote cigarettes. E-cigarettes are also presented as safe, modern, fun, and attractive, especially for young people.

Tobacco companies still deny or try to relativize the harmful effects of e-cigarettes on health and the environment, despite the fact that so far, no serious research has been done. What's more, e-cigarettes are often mentioned as a (safer) alternative to smoking traditional cigarettes, or even as an aid for quitting smoking! In any case, in addition to nicotine, the aerosol contains humectants (propylene glycol and/or glycerol), various aromas, carcinogenic substances (formaldehyde, tobacco-specific nitrosamines, benzene), heavy metals (nickel, chromium, lead, aluminum, cadmium, manganese, tin, copper), other chemical substances (acrolein, glycosal...), small particles... (NIJZ, n.d.). There is still not enough research to prove how harmless smoking e-cigarettes might be (Sila, 2018).

In addition, tobacco companies exert strong pressure on politicians and public opinion to prevent or weaken the regulation of tobacco products.

The ban on e-cigarette advertising campaigns in Europe highlights the ongoing debate about the public health implications of these products. As the regulatory environment continues to evolve, the focus on protecting public health, particularly the health of young people, is likely to remain dominant.

The situation in some parts of the world, especially in Asia, is much less regulated, which the governments of these countries will have to deal with in particular.

It is difficult to assess the effects of bans and restrictions, as both manufacturers and retailers are constantly looking for shortcuts to consumers, who are often not even aware of the promotion of e-cigarettes. The use of modern advertising approaches, neuromarketing techniques and the insufficiently controlled use of social networks affect the success of e-tobacco companies.

Further research is needed to assess the long-term health effects of e-cigarette use in all forms and the effectiveness of current marketing restrictions.

Fake news, fake facts, myths – different words for the same phenomena have flourished uncontrollably with the development of the Internet and the tools of artificial intelligence and social media. The effect of fake news is as strong as it is widely distributed. In the shortest possible time, an interesting new piece of information, a fact, a piece of evidence, which we may forget the next moment, will land in the readers' minds. The problem and the beauty of the Internet is that even forgotten information can quickly appear again.

It is our responsibility as recipients of information to be careful when consuming media. If we want to avoid the effect of fake news (in marketing), we need to follow a few simple rules that apply even more today than in the past: follow quality and objective media, be a responsible and well-informed audience, and use common sense (Sila, 2017).

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