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Big Tobacco is Exploiting COVID-19 to Market its Harmful Products

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Tobacco and e-cigarette companies are exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to market their harmful and addictive products around the world, especially on social media, according to a Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids analysis of marketing tactics by big tobacco companies, e-cigarette makers and vape shops in 28 countries. Examples of industry activities include:

- In Guatemala, Romania, Spain, Italy and other countries, Philip Morris International (PMI) and British American Tobacco (BAT) – the world's two largest tobacco companies – are appropriating "Stay at Home" social media hashtags promoted by governments and health authorities to instead market heated cigarette products IQOS and Glo, e-cigarette Vype.
- [In the United States](#), e-cigarette makers and vape shops have engaged in pandemic-themed promotions such as free giveaways of protective masks with purchases and offering COVID-19 themed discounts (get 19% off nicotine e-liquids by entering the code COVID-19).
- British American Tobacco is promoting its heated cigarette Glo in several countries with special discounts, contest prizes, and even offering branded face masks and hand sanitizer with purchase. In Kazakhstan, BAT provided Glo-branded masks to more than a dozen Instagram influencers who posted photos wearing the masks, with captions advertising free Glo masks with the purchase of a Glo device.
- PMI has waived ID validation on delivery of IQOS in at least one country and references the COVID-19 crisis in at least 18 countries (Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Canada, Greece, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, UK, and Ukraine) to promote special offers, "contactless delivery," and home delivery of the product. These activities could undermine minimum age purchase restrictions intended to prevent sales to youth. The company has also promoted at-home music series and launched exclusive music videos to promote tobacco products online.
- E-cigarette makers have also used the pandemic to make unproven and illegal health claims. In the U.S., Bidi Vapor claimed on Instagram that "A bidi stick a day keeps the pulmonologist away."

Tobacco and e-cigarette companies are engaging in pandemic-themed marketing even as [health experts warn](#) that smoking and vaping can increase risk of serious complications from COVID-19.

Tobacco product marketing campaigns using COVID-19 references have been observed online, on social media, and through mobile text messages. A fuller list of examples follows.

Examples of tobacco and e-cigarette COVID-19 promotional campaigns include:

Exploiting COVID-19 for brand promotion of tobacco products and e-cigarettes on social media

- Using social media influencers – and on official, branded Instagram pages – British American Tobacco is using references to COVID-19 to promote the use of its e-cigarette Vype and heated cigarette Glo. Several promotions include models wearing face masks with branding for heated cigarette Glo.
- On official, branded Instagram pages, Philip Morris International is using references to COVID-19 to promote its heated cigarette IQOS. The company has also promoted at-home music series and launched exclusive music videos to promote tobacco products online















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- In the U.S., e-cigarette makers and vape shops have engaged in pandemic-themed promotions such as free giveaways of protective masks with purchases and offering COVID-19 themed discounts (get 19% off nicotine e-liquids by entering the code COVID-19). E-cigarette makers have also used the pandemic to make unproven and illegal health claims. Bidi Vapor claimed on Instagram that “A bidi stick a day keeps the pulmonologist away.”

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Offering special COVID-19 sales promotions for tobacco products and e-cigarettes.












- Using references to “stay at home” orders, British American Tobacco is pushing online sales of its e-cigarette Vype with special discounts in several countries. See these examples of promotions for e-cigarette Vype in Germany, Guatemala (where British American Tobacco is promoting 50% off Vype “starter kits”), and Italy.
- British American Tobacco is aggressively promoting its heated cigarette Glo in several countries with special discounts, contest prizes, and even offering branded face masks and hand sanitizer with purchase.
- On official sales sites, Philip Morris International is referencing the COVID-19 crisis and promoting special offers for home delivery of its heated cigarette IQOS in several countries including Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Canada, Greece, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland,

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Undermining minimum age purchase regulations for tobacco products and e-cigarettes

- On official Philip Morris International sales sites, the company is referencing the crisis and offering options to “waive ID validation” or for “contactless delivery” that in some cases note identification will be checked by couriers from a “safety distance of 1-2 meters”

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Tobacco companies will stop at nothing to sell more products, even if it means capitalizing on a pandemic. Never has it been more important for the public and policymakers to see the tobacco industry for what it is: an industry of death and disease.

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As a non-profit organization, we accept no government or tobacco industry funding. We rely on contributions from individuals, philanthropic foundations, corporations and other non-profit organizations to continue working toward a tobacco-free future.

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