

## Big Tobacco is exploiting COVID-19 to market its harmful products

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### **Public health experts have warned that smokers and e-cigarette users face a greater risk for severe illness when confronted with COVID-19.**

There is conclusive evidence that smoking increases the risk for respiratory infections, weakens the immune system and is a major cause of chronic health conditions that increase risk for COVID-19, including lung disease, heart disease and diabetes. There is also growing evidence that e-cigarette use harms lung health. Unfortunately, in a dangerous irony, tobacco companies are taking advantage of COVID-19 public health campaigns to promote their products.

*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.*

On social media, Philip Morris International and British American Tobacco – the world’s two largest tobacco companies – are appropriating popular “Stay at Home” hashtags promoted by governments and health authorities to instead market heated cigarette products like Glo and IQOS and e-cigarettes like Vype.

In Spain, British American Tobacco has posted photos advertising Vype e-cigarettes accompanied by the hashtag #FrenaLaCurva (#FlattenTheCurve) and in Italy, Philip Morris has used #DistantiMaVicini (#DistantButClose) to advertise IQOS. The companies have also promoted at-home music series and launched exclusive music videos to promote tobacco products online.

In the United States, e-cigarette makers and vape shops have also turned to social media to promote their products and boost sales during the COVID-19 crisis. Pandemic-related promotions range from free masks with e-cigarette purchases to offering COVID-19 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 about e-cigarettes. Bidi Vapor claimed on Instagram that “A bidi stick a day keeps the pulmonologist away.”

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In Kazakhstan, British American Tobacco provided Glo-branded facemasks to more than a dozen Instagram influencers who posted photos wearing the masks – all with the same caption advertising free Glo masks (#glomask) with the purchase of a Glo device. These and other posts advertising tobacco products were documented in dozens of countries, despite a December 2019 announcement by Instagram and Facebook that the platforms would no longer allow influencers to promote tobacco products online.

*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.*

You can find more information on the examples gathered by the Global Health Advocacy Incubator [HERE](#) [1].

***The NCD Alliance thanks to the Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAi), a project of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, for providing this update and permitting us to publish it here.***

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[1] [https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/media/2020/2020\\_05\\_covid-marketing](https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/media/2020/2020_05_covid-marketing)

[2] <http://staging.ncdalliance.org/taxonomy/term/37>

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[4] <http://staging.ncdalliance.org/taxonomy/term/784>

[5] <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/assets/factsheets/0410.pdf>

[6] <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-big-tobacco-sees-an-opportunity-in-the-pandemic-138188>

[7] <http://staging.ncdalliance.org/taxonomy/term/985>