

Tobacco products: Law applies also to social media

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Dear Editor,

Advertising for tobacco products is banned in many places in Germany, according to the Tobacco Products Act¹. The law applies to conventional tobacco products as well as to nicotine and non-nicotine e-cigarettes, and to heated tobacco products (HTPs). It also applies to social media. As globally acting networks, several social media platforms have a voluntary self-regulation for products that are harmful to health, such as tobacco. But those regulations do not work in reality². The Project ‘Media Monitoring: Advertising for Tobacco, Related Products and Alcohol on Social Media’, conducted by the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), shows that advertising for e-cigarettes and HTPs is still present on social media in Germany³. The tobacco industry is continuing its established advertising strategies for their new products in social media, creating an image of seemingly less harmful, trendy lifestyle products⁴. For example (Figure 1), British American Tobacco (BAT) advertises its Glo HTPs on Instagram with images of groups of young and fashion-conscious consumers enjoying a happy get-together, thus appealing to young people’s sense of togetherness and belonging. The tobacco sticks, which are covered by the Tobacco Products Act, are not visible in the BAT images. Instead, only the electronic devices used to heat the tobacco sticks are shown. BAT also involves Music Stars in its campaigns, using their popularity to reach a young target group. Philip Morris does things in a similar way. The tobacco company advertises the IQOS HTPs on Facebook and Instagram, sometimes even showing the tobacco sticks. In addition to the company, retailers are promoting IQOS on social media. In the media monitoring project, we collected 89 posts from retailers promoting IQOS between February and September 2023. Promotional items such as the packaging of the heating device (n=23; 26% of retailers posts for IQOS), the heating device (n=23; 26% of retailers posts for IQOS), display stands (n=6; 7% of retailers posts for IQOS) and other promotional items (n=25; 28% of retailers

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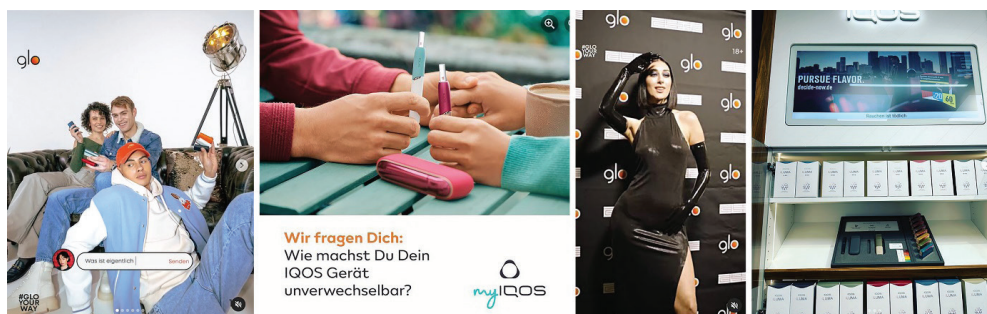
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Figure 1. Manufactures and retailers promote HTPs on Instagram and Facebook in Germany: (from left to right) young peer group with heating devices; the heating devices with tobacco sticks (post asks, ‘We ask you: How do you make your IQOS device unique?’); influencer on promotional event; point-of-sale display stand



posts for IQOS) can be seen in the images posted. Retailers also promote the tobacco sticks (n=12; 13% of retailers posts for IQOS).

Advertising on social media has a huge potential to reach many young people. A national survey in 2023 concludes that nearly 60% of the German-speaking population aged 14–19 years uses Instagram every day, and about 10% Facebook⁵. Tobacco advertising increases the likelihood of adolescents to start smoking⁶ and increases overall tobacco consumption⁷. The available studies suggest that e-cigarette advertising increases the desire to try the products^{8–10}. As neither HTPs nor e-cigarettes are harmless lifestyle products, young people have to be protected from advertising for these products^{11,12}. The German government is therefore urged to tighten the rules on the marketing and sponsorship of tobacco and nicotine, as recommended by the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)^{13,14}. Several health and civil society organizations started a campaign committed to ensure that children and adolescents grow up in an environment that enables them to develop their personality free from alcohol and nicotine, and to make decisions that are not influenced by commercial interests¹⁵. The results of the media monitoring project are valuable data for advocacy for improved advertising bans and enforcement of legislation.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest and none was reported.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

Ethical approval and informed consent were not required for this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data are available on request from the authors.

PROVENANCE AND PEER REVIEW

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DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors.