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Vaping and anime: a growing area of concern

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Anime, or Japanese animation which combines graphic art, characterisation and cinematography, is experiencing a global boom after having doubled its market size over the past decade.¹ The industry was valued at \$23.5 billion in 2020 and is continuing to grow rapidly. Anime is popular among adolescents and young adults, who are targeted with content related to romantic attraction, teen relationships, depression and despair.^{2,3} A 2020 survey in the USA found twice as many 18-year-olds to 29-year-olds (27%) had a very favourable impression of anime as compared with 30-year-olds to 44-year-olds.⁴ Notably, smoking by anime characters is not uncommon. Popular examples of anime smokers include Asuma Sarutobi from *Naruto*, Spike Spiegel from *Cowboy Bebop* and Sanjo from *One Piece*.⁵ Vaping by anime characters has yet to be systematically analysed, although a scene from Netflix's original anime, *Neo Yokio*, produced in 2017 with talent that included Jaden Smith, Jude Law and Susan Sarandon, included a viral scene in which a character asks to, and then proceeds to use a vaping device (figure 1).

Given anime's growing popularity among teens worldwide, we investigated if and how tobacco companies, including those that exclusively sell e-cigarettes and other vape devices, are using anime to market vaping products, through an exploratory online search of 'anime', 'e-cigarettes' and 'vape' conducted in September 2021. We conducted the search on Duckduckgo.com, an independent search engine that does not store personal data and search history, to minimise bias from authors' personal search history. We found numerous examples of strategies previously found to be effective in promoting tobacco use among adolescents and young adults, including linking products and behaviour to popular movies and



Figure 1 Viral meme image from Netflix original *Neo Yokio*. The image is widely available in meme form on multiple internet sites. An example site where you can embed it into your own social media post (<https://awwwmemes.com/i/good-thing-ibrought-my-vape-anime-boston---make-a-52d887ec8099434eb98fb88aaf1238b7>).



Figure 2 Product of Yami Vapor (<https://vapedrive.com/brand/yami-vapor/>) featuring anime artwork and flavor (Taruto) named after an anime show *Magical Meow Meow Taruto* (accessed October 11, 2021).

video games;^{6,7} using cartoon-based marketing;⁸ and leveraging social media to market to youth.⁹ We identified manufacturers branding their products after anime shows and characters; for example Yami Vapour is named after the character Yami in the show *To Love-Ru*, now steaming on Hulu.¹⁰ We also found nicotine liquid named and marketed after popular anime shows and characters, including



Figure 3 Vape devices covered in (A) *Naruto*, one of the most well-known anime shows worldwide, and (B) stereotypical anime blond girl in sailor uniform; both marketed by StayLit Designs, October 11. (<https://www.staylitdesign.com/products/510-threaded-battery-naruto-starter-kit>).

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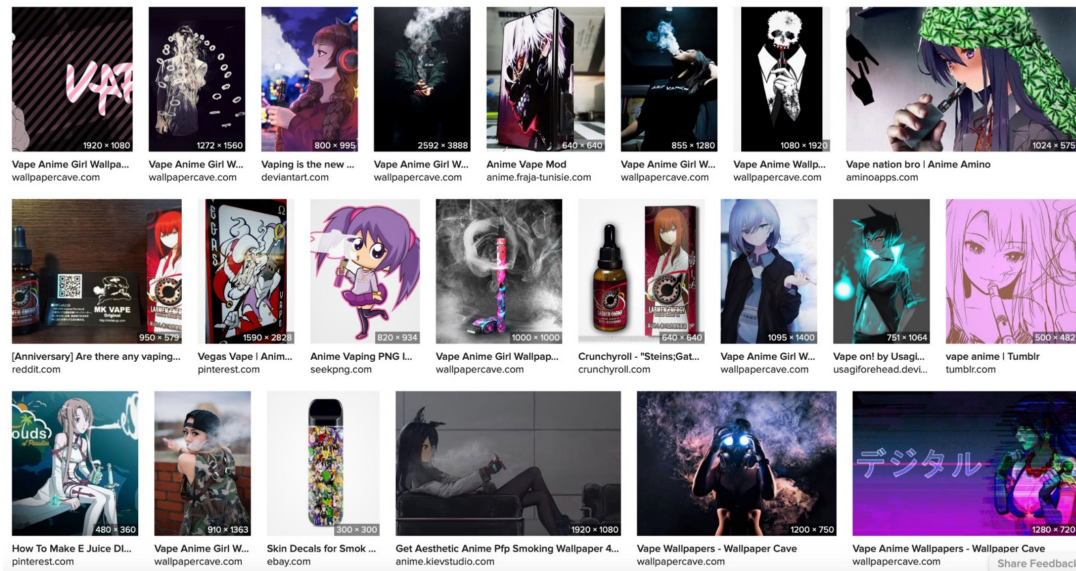


Figure 4 Screen capture of a group of publicly available images resulting from a search of DuckDuckGo.

Taruto from *Magical Meow Meow Taruto* (figure 2), Yamato from *Space Battleship Yamato*¹¹ and Onoki from *Naruto*.¹² Anime-inspired artwork was also observed on product packaging from vendors or on separately purchased accessories such as skins/wallpapers for e-cigarette devices (figure 3). There are also examples of anime art depicting young girls and boys vaping that are shared over multiple websites and social media platforms including Instagram, Reddit and Twitter and linked through hashtags (eg, #animevape; #japanesevapor) (figure 4). It is unclear if these images are within the animator's artistic license or if they represent paid promotion.

The US Food and Drug Administration's Centre for Tobacco Products can take steps to prevent tobacco companies, including those that exclusively sell e-cigarettes, from leveraging the growing popularity of anime to market their products using the strategies identified. For example, the use of anime-inspired imagery (cartoons) on e-cigarette product packaging and accessories can be banned, as can the use of labelling that reflects youth and young adult-associated entertainment. Regulators can also support continued surveillance of anime-associated combustible tobacco and e-cigarette marketing strategies and assessment of the impact this cartoon-based imagery may have on youth attitudes, norms and health perceptions.

The increasing popularity of anime shows featuring e-cigarette use may encourage uptake among adolescents and young adults, as has been the case with exposure to combustible tobacco use imagery in other entertainment media.¹³ While the transnational nature of the anime industry could make regulatory efforts to limit content difficult, the frequency, content, and source of tobacco content including e-cigarette in anime shows with majority teen and young adult viewership should be further studied and potentially addressed by the global tobacco control community. If, for example, e-cigarette companies are paying for their products to be prominently featured, then tobacco control advocates could challenge such paid placements as they did with paid placement of combustible products in traditional television shows and movies. The opening credits of Netflix's recent live action rendition of the award-winning anime show, *Cowboy Bebop*, begin with an animated smoking character evolving into a real man smoking on screen.^{14 15} It is exactly this transformation from cartoon to real life that we need to prevent among

youth anime viewers for both combustible tobacco and e-cigarette products.

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