Co-optation of harm reduction by Big Tobacco

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Harm reduction is a respected public health strategy for managing addictive behaviours that pose severe health risks. Such an approach recognises that for people unable to abstain from a certain risky behaviour, public health interventions can be used to mitigate the potential dangers and health risks. For drugs such as heroin, harm reduction applications include needle exchange and supervised injection sites where the provision of sterile injection equipment can minimise the risk of HIV and other infections, naloxone can be administered to manage overdoses and medical staff can arrange treatment referrals. In such instances, harm reduction applications can serve as a gateway to accessing vulnerable and marginalised groups. Harm reduction, which is typically overseen by clinicians, nurse practitioners and outreach workers, represents a movement that tends to be community-based, activism-driven and concerned with human rights. An important question pertains to the multitude of stakeholders involved and who is overseeing the harm reduction intervention. For tobacco harm reduction, the curious involvement and role of the industry prove to be contentious.2 3

Multinational tobacco companies, such as British American Tobacco (BAT) and Philip Morris International (PMI), have adopted harm reduction in their public relations initiatives and marketing communication, which provides them an opportunity to showcase their engagement in new product development of self-styled ‘next-generation products’.4 BAT, for example, publishes an annual report on sustainability that includes a section on harm reduction where their e-cigarette brand, Vype, is offered as a harm reduction product.5 During a 2017 annual shareholder meeting, Altria—the parent owner of Philip Morris USA—identified ‘tobacco harm reduction’ as a responsibility priority for the company with their branded ‘innovative products’ and heated tobacco products presented as examples.6 Also in 2017, PMI established a Foundation for a Smoke-Free World with committed funding of roughly US$1 billion and a stated mandate of ‘ending smoking in this generation’. Nevertheless, the independence of the foundation has been questioned.7 For PMI, a ‘smoke-free world’ is largely presented as getting existing users of cigarettes and combustible tobacco to switch to innovative non-combustible products that are positioned as harm reduced.

The underlying goal, however, for the tobacco industry is the maximisation of sales, profit and return to shareholders, which places them at odds with serving a mandate of harm reduction. When considering a marketing management perspective, it is apparent that tobacco companies pursue multiple sales growth strategies that have an underlying objective of profitable growth by expanding the size of the market. Market expansion strategies include market development, product development and diversification. Market development involves seeking new users and market segments to increase the consumption of the company’s existing products (eg, targeting ‘starters’, entering new geographic markets). Product development involves offering new products to current customers (eg, offering vaping products and encouraging dual use). Additionally, the acquisitions of vaping companies by major tobacco companies are a strategic demonstration of diversification, which involves the growth of sales by establishing both new markets and new products through acquisitions.8

Proponents of a tobacco harm reduction approach are likely to argue that vaping promotion, for example, should be allowable that normalises switching from conventional cigarettes and shifts nicotine consumption to lower risk alternatives. However, such a viewpoint overlooks that marketing communication for next-generation products is not limited to a target group specific to a harm reduction mandate (ie, existing adult cigarette smokers who fully convert to vaping, yet would not otherwise quit smoking). In the USA, where vaping by youth has been declared an ‘epidemic’,9 the promotion of sweet flavours makes the products more palatable and appealing to youth.10–13 Vaping products resembling USB flash drives are readily available with discreetness being another key product feature with youth appeal (figure 1).14 Youth have been a key target group for marketing purposes, and vaping brands are successfully marketed to youth.15–18 Put simply, the goals of harm reduction will not be realised if new users are brought into the market and introduced to nicotine addiction.

Promoting dual use also contradicts the goals of harm reduction. An important impact of implementing smoke-free policies that do not allow cigarette smoking indoors has been a reduction in consumption, including stimulating more quit attempts among smokers, enhancing the number of quit attempts that are successful, and diminishing the number of cigarettes that are smoked among continuing smokers.19–22 Nevertheless, marketing communication for next-generation products commonly encourages use in settings where cigarette smoking is not allowable (figure 2). Retail websites for e-cigarettes commonly include claims that their products can be used virtually anywhere and thereby used to circumvent smoke-free

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Figure 1 The ‘Vaporized’ marketing communication campaign for Juul from 2015, when the e-cigarette brand was launched, includes colourful creative and youthful-looking models. Juul, which is discreet and resembles a USB flash drive, was offered in flavours such as cool cucumber, fruit medley and crème brûlée, yet combines nicotine with benzoic acid for a potent delivery.
Editorial

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Figure 2 The e-cigarette brand, Blu, is
produced by Imperial Brands in the UK, which
acquired the brand from the Lorillard Tobacco
Company in the USA. This advertisement for
Blu depicts a woman defiantly giving the finger
at the thought of an indoor smoking ban. The
copy of this advertisement states, ‘take back
your freedom to smoke anywhere with Blu
electronic cigarettes’.

Figure 3 This advertisement is a paid
influencer posting on Instagram for Juul.
Christina Zayas, based in Brooklyn, New
York, encourages dual use by stating, “When
smoking cigarettes is not an option, I’ve turned
to Juul”.

Figure 4 The copy of this Blu advertisement
states, “Nobody likes a quitter, so make the
switch today” and boldly questions “Why Quit?”

E-cigarette promotions often
show indoor settings to imply that vaping
is still possible when cigarette smoking
is not. Dual use is not harm reducing in
such instances as consumers remain ciga-
rette smokers, yet they are likely to vape
when they might otherwise be inhibited
from smoking (figure 3). There is indica-
tion that continued smoking, even if
reduced, is unlikely to result in notable
health benefits. Several studies have also
found that dual users, who are trying to
quit or reduce smoking, are less successful
in their cessation attempts. Given the
profit maximisation aims of the tobacco
industry, it is not in their strategic interests
to have consumers successfully quit and
exit the market altogether (figure 4).

Lempert and Glantz make a valuable
contribution by giving careful consider-
tation towards a submission of a premarket
application made by Philip Morris, to the
Food and Drug Administration (FDA), to
market IQOS in the USA. The authors
present strong arguments that question
the FDA’s decision to approve the IQOS
premarket application, which gives the
tobacco company authorisation for
marketing the product with modified risk
claims that are ultimately deemed ‘appro-
priate for the protection of the public
health’. Yet, it is important to recognise
that marketing and promotion initia-
tives by tobacco companies aim to influ-
ence overall consumption levels. A major
conclusion of the 2012 US Surgeon Gen-
eral’s report is ‘advertising and promotional
activities by tobacco companies have been
shown to cause the onset and continu-
ation of smoking among adolescents and
young adults’. The US National Cancer
Institute similarly concluded that the total
weight of evidence ‘demonstrates a causal
relationship between tobacco advertising
and promotion and increased tobacco
use’. Moreover, according to the
2016 US Surgeon General’s report, ‘the
marketing of e-cigarettes drives consumer
demand for these products’.

Ultimately, scholars have attempted to
quantify the harms and health benefits
of e-cigarettes at the population level.
The conclusion reached, in the USA
context, is that ‘e-cigarette use currently
represents more population-level harm
than benefit’. In summary, the goal
of harm reduction is not achieved if the
commercial marketing communication of
next-generation products serves to attract
new users such as youth that are never
smokers, encourages dual use (in combina-
tion with combustible cigarettes in accor-
dance with the use setting) or discourages
cessation or altogether quit attempts.

Indeed, a BAT investors presentation
from 2017 reveals both combustible tobacco
and vapour products were being forecasted as
growth opportunities. Moreover, a
2020 BAT investors presentation outlines
their evolving strategy regarding ‘A Better
Tomorrow’, which specifies increasing the
occasions in which nicotine is used, main-
taining tobacco while expanding through
new products that include ‘beyond nico-
tine’, and maintaining growing profits
(described as ‘superior returns’). The
maximisation of private profit is the
underlying goal of the tobacco industry,
with objectives of their marketing activi-
ties including sales and profit growth.

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