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. 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. 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. 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. 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, 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 video games; using cartoon-based marketing; and leveraging social media to market to youth. 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. We also found nicotine liquid named and marketed after popular anime shows and characters, including...
The use of anime-inspired imagery (cartoons) on e-cigarette 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. 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 combustible tobacco and e-cigarette products.

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