Connecting world youth with tobacco brands: YouTube and the internet policy vacuum on Web 2.0

Elkin, L., Wilson, N., Thomson, G.

Abstract
BACKGROUND: The internet is an ideal forum for tobacco marketing, as it is largely unregulated and there is no global governing body for controlling content. Nevertheless, tobacco companies deny advertising on the internet.

OBJECTIVE: To assess the extent and nature of English language videos available on the Web 2.0 domain ‘YouTube’ that contain tobacco brand images or words.

METHODS: The authors conducted a YouTube search using five leading non-Chinese cigarette brands worldwide. The themes and content of up to 40 of the most viewed videos returned for each search were analysed: a total of 163 videos.

RESULTS: A majority of the 163 tobacco brand-related videos analysed (71.2%, 95% CI 63.9 to 77.7) had pro-tobacco content, versus a small minority (3.7%) having anti-tobacco content (95% CI 1.4 to 7.8). Most of these videos contained tobacco brand content (70.6%), the brand name in the title (71.2%) or smoking imagery content (50.9%). One pro-smoking music video had been viewed over 2 million times. The four most prominent themes of the videos were celebrity/movies, sports, music and 'archive', the first three of which represent themes of interest to a youth audience.

CONCLUSIONS: Pro-tobacco videos have a significant presence on YouTube, consistent with indirect marketing activity by tobacco companies or their proxies. Since content may be removed from YouTube if it is found to breach copyright or if it contains offensive material, there is scope for the public and health organisations to request the removal of pro-tobacco content containing copyright or offensive material. Governments should also consider implementing Framework Convention on Tobacco Control requirements on the internet, to further reduce such pro-tobacco content.

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