

On Twitter, e-cigarette ads spread like secondhand smoke

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Are 500 retweets the modern equivalent of "everyone's doing it" when it comes to e-cigarette marketing? While the Food and Drug Administration has proposed a ban on the sales of e-cigarettes to people under 18, as we are beginning to understand the health effects of the substitute to smoking, a recent study by researchers at Drexel University and the University of Southern California suggests that e-cigarette marketing on social media is about as containable as second-hand smoke.

Several states have enacted laws limiting where e-cigarettes can be used—after citing [public health](#) concerns—but as no federal law has been created to curtail e-cigarette advertising, companies are resorting to tactics employed by the heyday of the Marlboro Man. But this time, their message is wafting even farther in the wind of social media, according to the study.

"As public health researchers our job is to figure out whether people are seeing messages that might lead them to make unhealthy decisions," said Kar-Hai Chu, PhD, a researcher scientist of preventative medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, who authored the study. "If an e-cigarette tweet reaches underage users and makes them curious about trying e-cigarettes, that is something we would want to know. The results of the study could help provide guidelines and advice for many potential regulations."

It's common marketing practice today for companies to use social media to extend the reach of their advertising. Through targeted advertising and well-crafted interactive social media campaigns, it is even possible to deliver the message to a specific audience and track its reception. The point raised by this study is that the residual dispersal, beyond the primary audiences, cannot be controlled in a social media environment that does not limit the age of its users—and this is a major consideration that must be understood before any regulations could be enacted.

The study, which was recently published in the Public Library of Science's journal *PLOS ONE*, is one of the first to track just how far e-cigarette marketing spreads on Twitter and how far removed end recipients are from being users or supporters of the product. A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted that 39.8 percent of teens who are exposed to e-cigarette advertising see it on the internet.

"We chose Twitter because hundreds of millions of people all over the world use it to express their opinions about important topics, so it's a huge source of information and a quick and efficient way for researchers to learn about those opinions," Chu said. "A fascinating thing about Twitter is that users choose which messages they think are important to pass on to their friends. From a marketing perspective, companies and brands are very active on Twitter, including Blu, the brand we chose for this study."

The researchers looked at three months of data from Twitter users that originated with tweets from the Blu e-cigarette company's official handle "@blucigs." It tracked the growth of the audience pool from followers of @bluecigs to the followers of those who retweeted @blucigs to the followers of those who retweeted the retweets. Blu is the largest e-cigarette brand on the market today and its marketing arm is active on social media.

"The retweet network in our data demonstrated how rapidly and widely messages diffused—reaching an exponential number of users," said Christopher Yang, PhD, a professor in Drexel's College of Computing & Informatics, who was a co-author of the paper. "By the second level of followers, there was a large change in the types of users who were seeing the messages, exposing those who might not explicitly support e-cigarettes, or potentially vulnerable populations such as youth."

By the end of the three months, a single tweet that originally reached 214 @blucigs followers, eventually made its way via retweets to more than 2,600 unique users and, according to the study, many of them gave no indication that they were at all interested in e-cigarettes.

Of the more than 2,600 recipients of e-cigarette marketing retweets, ranging from those who publicly mentioned use of or support for e-cigarettes in their profiles, to others with a basic profile—who made no

such mention or designation about e-cigarettes—more than twice as many basic users were reached by the message as supporters.

"The diffusion of tobacco-related marketing messages through social media suggests a need for real-time surveillance of brand marketing messages through internet channels that do not require age-verification," Yang said. "As consensus on the public health impact of e-cigarettes grows, restrictions may need to be placed on how companies [market](#) their products via social media."

The regulation-free landscape of e-cigarette marketing stands in stark contrast to limitations placed on tobacco product advertising over the last two decades—barring it from venues where underage children might be present and curtailing any messages that appear to be directed at an underage audience.

As e-cigarette use among underage populations continues to grow and pressure mounts on the federal government to shield children from the reach of e-cigarette brand marketing, it will take research like this to better understand the reach of advertising on [social media](#) and inform legislation that draws a line without limiting free speech.

Provided by Drexel University

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