Tobacco products promoted on Facebook despite policies, researchers find

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Tobacco products are marketed and sold through unpaid content on Facebook—in some cases, without regard for the age of potential buyers—despite policies from the social media company that restrict or

prohibit the promotion of such items, researchers from the Stanford University School of Medicine have found.

Although Facebook bars paid tobacco advertisements, a new study found extensive unpaid, or "organic," marketing, principally via brand-sponsored Facebook pages. In a comparison of the pages' content with Facebook policies covering commerce, page content and paid advertising, the study revealed numerous instances of apparent conflict with the rules or their spirit, though inconsistencies in and unexplained changes to some of the policies made it unclear exactly how those rules apply.

Among 108 company-sponsored pages for leading brands of cigars, e-cigarettes, hookah tobacco and smokeless tobacco, the study found more than half provided "shop now"-type buttons allowing users a way to buy their products. About two-thirds of the pages included sale promotions, such as coupons and discounts, and all but one featured imagery of a tobacco product. Though Facebook requires restricted access for people under 18 from pages promoting what it calls the "private sale" of regulated goods or services, including tobacco, fewer than half of the brand-sponsored pages included such an "age gate."

"Clearly, there are a lot of policies with the laudable intent of keeping tobacco promotion and sales out of Facebook," said Robert Jackler, MD, professor and chair of otolaryngology-head and neck surgery and principal investigator of Stanford Research Into the Impact of Tobacco Advertising. "These policies are voluntary, and they're a sign of Facebook's commitment to social responsibility. With some 2 billion users and an enormous volume of daily postings, Facebook has a daunting task of policing its content."

Jackler, the Edward C. and Amy H. Sewall Professor in Otorhinolaryngology, is the lead author of the study, which will be

published online April 5 in *The BMJ Tobacco Control.*

Marketing through unpaid content

Jackler and his fellow researchers looked to Facebook for the study because younger people are more likely to begin using [tobacco products](#), with the risk of becoming nicotine-addicted, and because youth tend to be more active on social media.

The researchers searched for company-sponsored Facebook pages among 388 leading tobacco brands and found such pages for 108, including for more than half of the top 46 hookah tobacco brands and of the top 92 e-cigarette brands. While the researchers identified pages for none of the 21 top traditional cigarette brands, they found that 10 of 14 online tobacco stores with company-maintained Facebook pages promoted popular cigarette brands, such as Marlboro and Camel, and included links to purchase them.

The researchers then evaluated the pages in the context of Facebook's content policies that mention tobacco.

The advertising [policy](#), which applies to paid ads and commercial content, does not permit images of tobacco; however, 107 of the 108 company-sponsored pages included such imagery, the study found.

The commerce policy, which governs items, products and services sold on Facebook, prohibits the sale of tobacco and related paraphernalia. As recently as last summer, Facebook also specifically banned private individuals from buying, selling or trading tobacco products, but that provision had been removed by February 2018, the researchers found. Additionally, the advertising policy bars the promotion of tobacco product sales—for example, with language like "Buy cigarettes and e-cigarettes here today." But in their study, the researchers found purchase

links on 58 of the brand-sponsored pages and sale promotion on 71 of them—including, in both cases, about three-quarters of the e-cigarette brands.

Minors and user-engagement strategies

On many of the pages, the researchers found a lack of safeguards meant to prevent access to minors. Several also showed evidence of strategies to interact with users, enable ongoing exposure to their brands and create online communities to promote tobacco products.

The platform's "page terms," which apply to all Facebook pages, require restricted access to people under 18 from pages promoting the private sale of tobacco products. According to the researchers, it was unclear what was meant by "private sale" and whether the policy would apply to the public sale of tobacco products by commercial entities. Regardless, the study found that a majority of the examined pages—56 percent of the tobacco-brand-sponsored pages and 90 percent of the online vendors' pages—failed to incorporate measures to screen out underage consumers.

The study also examined the number of Facebook "likes" for each brand and vendor page. It found that 30 had accumulated 10,000 or more likes, with four of the pages counting more than 50,000 likes.

"From an advertiser's point of view, you want to make sure you've gotten someone's attention," Jackler said, "and the fact that they've responded approvingly means your message has gotten through with some potency."

Ultimately, he said, the study reveals loopholes within Facebook's tobacco-related policies that the company could potentially close.

"Our hope is that our study, by highlighting the degree to which tobacco

marketers evade Facebook's intended restrictions, will encourage the company to make a renewed effort to implement its well-intentioned policies," Jackler said.

Provided by Stanford University Medical Center

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