

# Coronavirus: Big tobacco sees an opportunity in the pandemic

May 14 2020, by Andrew Rowell

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Over the last few months, as COVID-19 has spread around the world, big tobacco has exploited the pandemic to push its branding and products. The industry never misses a trick when it comes to exploiting the chaos of international crises, [including wars](#). The current pandemic is no exception.

The strategy is to use the pandemic to try and shift their image from vilified industry to trusted health partner. The tactics they have employed to achieve this are shameless, even for an industry as controversial as tobacco. There are examples of tobacco companies offering assistance in the form of ventilators, gels, [PPE and even cash](#). They are even involved in [trying to develop](#) a vaccine. While there is no doubt that these have been gratefully received by authorities struggling with a chronic lack of resources, the industry has been up to other tricks, too. And one British FTSE 100 company is proving particularly adept.

In March, as many governments began to lock down their populations, British American Tobacco (BAT) began co-opting universal health messages. These were then placed on branded face masks, which were subsequently handed out to social media influencers for free.

Instagram remains one of the key marketing platforms for the industry. In 2019, BAT paid Instagram influencers to promote glo, its heated tobacco device, among other products. One of the [hashtags used was #todayiwill](#).

BAT's Instagram campaign ran into trouble, though. In December 2019, [in a landmark decision](#), the UK Advertising Standards Authority, ruled against BAT and three other firms for promoting an e-cigarette, Vype, on Instagram, after a complaint by ASH, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and STOP, of which the University of Bath is a partner. Later that month, under pressure to act, Facebook and [Instagram announced](#) that "branded content that promotes goods such as vaping, tobacco products and weapons will not be allowed".

Undaunted, BAT appeared to use the social media platform as a COVID-19 marketing tool, especially in countries where oversight was likely to be less stringent. BAT simply changed the #todayiwill hashtag to #todayIwillstayhome, to reflect the messaging from governments for

people to stay at home. Evidence uncovered by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, which has been tracking BAT's activities, found that in Kazakhstan among other countries, BAT provided influencers with "today I will stay home" glo masks. Other hashtags used included #glomask.

The company used other COVID-19 hashtags, too. An influencer appeared on one BAT Vype account in Spain, using #frenalacurva, the Spanish for "flatten the curve". BAT employed similar tactics in Latin America and Europe. This meant if you were searching on Instagram for these government messages, you would come across BAT's subliminal marketing.

Days before the glo-branded masks started appearing on social media and right in the middle of the pandemic, BAT launched a glossy rebranding exercise unveiling a new slogan "For a Better Tomorrow". The company replaced its old tired leaf logo with bright rainbow colours.

## **'New adults', new market**

[BAT's board told investors](#) that its redefined mission was now "stimulating the senses of a new adult generation". This essentially means entrapping a new generation of young people into nicotine addiction, from vaping, heated tobacco products to cigarettes.

Instagram will be key to reaching these "new adults". Despite the social media platform's new policy restricting branded content, the industry looks set to carry on exploiting the pandemic. And all the while Instagram's owner, Facebook, appears to be sitting idly by.

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