

Study finds tobacco industry is specifically targeting Arab and Ultra-Orthodox news media in Israel

July 16 2024



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A recent study has revealed that there are significant disparities in how Philip Morris International's IQOS heated tobacco product is portrayed

in newspapers and other media aimed at different demographic groups in Israel.

Specifically, news media targeted at Israel's Arab population tends to present IQOS more positively and is more likely to include misinformation regarding its safety, social benefits, and accessibility, often relying on PMI as a primary information source. This contrasts with the portrayal in mainstream media and media aimed at the general public. These differences suggest potential biases which may influence consumer perceptions and behaviors regarding tobacco products.

A recent research initiative, published in *Tobacco Control*, led by Doctoral candidate Amal Khayat, Prof. Hagai Levine and Prof. Yael Bar-Zeev from the Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine at the Hebrew University-Hadassah, together with Prof. Carla Berg, Prof. Lorien Abrams and Dr. Yan Wang from George Washington University, has uncovered significant disparities in the portrayal of Philip Morris International's (PMI) IQOS, a prominent heated tobacco product, among [minority groups](#) in Israel.

The research found distinct differences in how Arab and Ultra-Orthodox media depict IQOS compared to the mainstream media. Arab media, in particular, tended to present IQOS more positively, and more likely to spread misinformation regarding its safety and social benefits, and frequently relying on PMI as a primary information source. Moreover, Arab media articles emphasized the accessibility of IQOS retail locations, mimicking advertisements.

PMI's IQOS ranks as the top heated tobacco product globally and was introduced in Israel in 2016. Notably, advertising for all tobacco products, including IQOS, is prohibited in Israel except in print media. However, the study suggests that news media may serve as an alternative advertising channel, circumventing these advertising restrictions.

The favorable depictions of IQOS and PMI in media articles can significantly influence consumer perceptions and behaviors. While paid advertisements are known to target specific demographics, the impact of "earned" media such as news articles on these groups remains less clear.

Methodologically, the study analyzed media articles from January to October 2020 from Ifat media, utilizing abductive coding techniques. Statistical tests were employed to compare article characteristics across different subpopulations (Arab, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and the general public). The analysis focused on understanding how IQOS and PMI were framed in the media to assess the tone and content of coverage.

The findings, based on 63 unique articles, revealed significant biases in media targeting of different subpopulations. Specifically, articles directed at Arabs and Ultra-Orthodox Jews portrayed IQOS more positively compared to those aimed at the general public—100% and 75% versus 52%, respectively. Arab media notably emphasized IQOS accessibility (81% versus 17% and 13%) and its social benefits (88% versus 8% and 17%) more prominently. Furthermore, 100% of articles in the Arab media reflected content from the tobacco company press release, compared to 35% in the general public media.

Prof. Levine, senior author of the research, says, "The study underscores the critical need for rigorous media surveillance and regulatory measures, especially in media outlets targeting minority populations, to ensure fair and balanced reporting. The positive framing of IQOS in minority-targeted media highlights the potential influence of targeted marketing on public perceptions and tobacco product usage across diverse demographics. Minority populations in Israel, and likely in other countries, are not protected from the manipulative, vicious marketing strategies of the tobacco industry, corrupting media outlets."

Lead author Amal Khayat adds, "We recommend enhanced media

surveillance and regulation, particularly in minority-oriented media, to ensure accurate reporting on [tobacco products](#). Understanding how different subpopulations, such as the Arab minority in Israel, perceive tobacco-related information can guide regulatory interventions to counteract potential misinformation and prevent disparities in tobacco-related behaviors.

"Our study also calls attention to the use of news media as an alternative marketing channel by tobacco companies in regions with advertising bans, advocating for measures to protect public health and mitigate the promotion of potentially harmful products."

More information: IQOS news media coverage in Israel: a comparison across three subpopulations, *Tobacco Control* (2024). [DOI: 10.1136/tc-2023-058422](#)

Provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Citation: Study finds tobacco industry is specifically targeting Arab and Ultra-Orthodox news media in Israel (2024, July 16) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-07-tobacco-industry-specifically-arab-ultra.html>

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