

British American Tobacco circumventing ad ban, experts say

[theguardian.com/business/2020/mar/17/british-american-tobacco-circumventing-ad-ban-experts-say](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/mar/17/british-american-tobacco-circumventing-ad-ban-experts-say)

Sarah
Marsh

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British American Tobacco (BAT) is marketing e-cigarettes and heated cigarettes with pictures of attractive models and using hashtags such as “I dare you to try it”, despite a crackdown last year after it paid social media influencers to promote its products.

BAT had come under fire after hiring young models to sell its products despite having an explicit policy banning under-25s from appearing in adverts.

In the UK the Advertising Standards Authority banned e-cigarette-makers from paying influencers to promote their products on Instagram. After the ban, Facebook and Instagram both announced in December that they would no longer allow influencers to promote tobacco or e-cigarettes.

Since the policy changes, experts say BAT is now running its own accounts that mirror the youth-oriented content promoted by influencers, using models posing under red lights or at festivals.

The company is also using paid adverts and branded content on Facebook, despite it not being allowed under the social media platform’s rules. The adverts include a number from the Glo Poland account, which were put up at the beginning of March.

Many of the adverts are coming from the Glo Romania page and are running on Instagram. That page is managed by six people in the UK.

BAT runs a number of pages globally to promote e-cigarette brands such as Vype and heated-cigarette brands like Glo. It is also promoting hashtags on Instagram such as #vypefriends, #vypelife and #teretoaprobarlo, which means “I dare you to try it” in Spanish.

BAT said “te reto a probarlo” was used by BAT Colombia as part of the “you’ve got to try it” campaign launch for the Vype ePen3, which was targeted at adult consumers.

The Guardian has seen multiple posts using questionable hashtags, including of two models, one wearing his hood up and posing with the “I dare you to try it” hashtag, and another of a man in sunglasses with the hashtag “vype friends” and “music”.

“Tobacco companies like British American Tobacco maintain that their marketing is only ever targeted to and intended for current adult smokers. Yet much of the content posted from these BAT-run accounts mirrors the youth-oriented content promoted by influencers,” said Caroline Renzulli, a spokeswoman for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Renzulli noted that since the ban on influencer content they had seen the increased use of pages and accounts run directly by BAT “to circumvent the new policies”.

She added: “Tobacco companies exploit every loophole to advertise to young people – so it’s no surprise that British American Tobacco has already found a way around Facebook and Instagram’s new policies. Social media companies are best placed to stop tobacco companies from exploiting their platforms to target youth – the question is, when will they finally do so?”

Andy Rowell, spokesperson for the STOP partnership, a global tobacco industry watchdog, said: “The internet is the tobacco industry’s dream marketing platform, as they can get away with pretty much anything. It’s the advertising equivalent of the wild west. Their online playbook is clearly trying to depict vaping as cool by using attractive young adults posing in trendy places, bars and pools.”

Simon Cleverly, Group Head of Corporate Affairs at BAT, said: “All our marketing is guided by our international marketing principles. Fundamental to these is the requirement that any communication will be aimed only at adult consumers and is not designed to engage or appeal to youth.”

He said that they had a clear purpose to make adult smokers aware of these new products, so they needed to use the channels they are on.

“In many respects, social media allows us to exercise greater control than more traditional media, like billboards and TV, and as such, ensuring our communications are targeting adult consumers only,” he said.

The Vype page also ran a number of posts last November of people going hiking. The page wrote: “If you’re out and about, the Vype #ePod is small enough to go anywhere with you. #GoVype #ExperienceVype #instavapegram #instavaper #vapepics”.

The Guardian has also seen posts by influencers promoting these products that were put up after the Facebook ban and have gathered tens of thousands of likes.

It comes despite the fact Facebook does not allow adverts for tobacco or tobacco-related products, including cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco, tobacco pipes, hookahs, hookah lounges, rolling papers, vaporiser devices and electronic cigarettes. Instagram has similar rules in place.

Facebook said it had removed the adverts brought to its attention by the Guardian and did not allow the sale or advertising of tobacco-related products on the site or on Instagram.

“We have invested heavily in a combination of technology and human review to find and remove content that violates our policies. Our enforcement is not perfect, but we continue to find ways to strengthen our review and enforcement of our policies,” said a spokesperson from Facebook.

The Glo worldwide account has more UK followers than any other country. According to the influencer marketing service Klear, 28% of the audience is based in the UK. Although BAT is not yet selling Glo in the UK market, the company currently has 42 trademark registrations and two pending trademark applications in the UK that cover the branding and logos related to it.

