

Uncovering the Truth: How the Tobacco Industry Misleads the Public

Introduction:

The tobacco industry is aggressively targeting children and youth in Sri Lanka to replace customers lost to tobacco-related deaths, putting lives at risk for commercial gain. Despite legal prohibitions, these industries continue to violate laws and exploit loopholes to promote deadly products.

Sri Lanka's main legal framework for alcohol and tobacco control—the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA) Act No. 27 of 2006 (Section 35)—prohibits all forms of advertising and promotion of these products in the media, including through the internet. According to the Act, a tobacco advertisement includes any message, image, symbol, color, sound, or combination thereof that promotes tobacco use, products, brand names, or manufacturers.

But the industry and their front groups are not backing down. They continue to engage in indirect promotions, brand image building, and media manipulation, finding deceptive ways to manipulate our children and youth. Harmful products are glamorized. Risks are hidden. Young people are exposed to subtle yet persuasive messages designed to make tobacco use look normal—even appealing.

These tactics are not just unethical—they are deliberately harmful. It is critical to identify, expose, and stop these deceptive practices to protect our youth and promote public health. The following sections reveal instances of the unethical tactics used by the tobacco industry and their front groups – both directly and indirectly – to promote their products while downplaying the harm.

1. Indirect promotion of smoking in traditional media

Teledramas

Certain teledramas attempt to normalize and glamorize smoking, particularly among women. Such representations can contribute to shifting social attitudes, making smoking appear more acceptable or fashionable, especially to young and impressionable audiences.



Print media promotions

Smoking is frequently portrayed in print media as being associated with personality, heroism, and affluence, contributing to the construction of a glamorized image around the act itself. In some instances, the narratives presented in newspapers appear to align with and even reinforce arguments put forth by the tobacco industry, subtly shaping public perception in its favor.

Regulations must be data-driven; not based on fallacies

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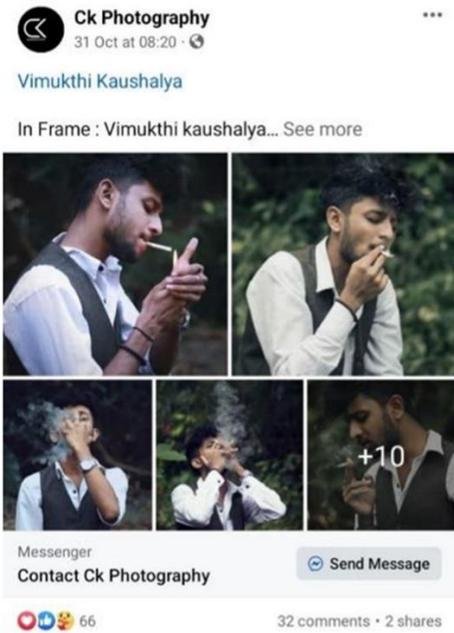
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June 9, 2024



2. Glamorization of tobacco products in social media

Indirect word-of-mouth promotions are increasingly visible on social media platforms, where tobacco products are glamorized, knowingly or unknowingly, through popular memes, songs, and other social media trends. The need for public awareness is more critical than ever.



3. Tobacco promotions by the film industry

Instances where smoking is promoted within the Sri Lankan film industry is becoming frequent.

Rani (2025)

A movie directed by Asoka Handagama and produced by Subaskaran Allirajah for Lyca Productions, released on 30 January 2025. The movie includes scenes where the lead female character, Dr. Manorani Saravanamuththu smokes cigarettes in an excessive proportion. The portrayal attempts to glamorize and normalize smoking among women by spreading myths related to tobacco use. The other characters are also seen smoking, with clear product displays on screen, an outright violation of ethics and the law.



Walampoori (2025)

A movie directed by Lakmal Darmarathna, released in May 2025. The movie poster shows the main characters holding cigarettes and smoking. The movie includes scenes that attempt to normalize smoking and alcohol use among working class men, using the influence of popular actors to mislead the public.



4. Introducing novel devices targeting the youth

Evidence shows that Big Tobacco is behind the introduction and promotion of alternative smoking devices such as electronic cigarettes. The 2016 Amendment to the NATA Act No. 27 of 2006 bans the manufacture, import, sale and offer for sale of “any smokeless tobacco product or mixture that contain tobacco”, “any flavoured, coloured or sweetened cigarette that contains tobacco”, and “electronic cigarettes that contain tobacco”. However, these products are being marketed and promoted mainly through social media platforms and websites by focusing on flavors and strength, which mask the real harm of such products.



5. Motivating tobacco cultivation by incentivizing farmers

Tobacco cultivation causes soil erosion, loss of arable farmland and reduction of essential water resources. It yields lower profits compared to other crops and poses risks to human health as well as the physical environment. The tobacco industry operates various initiatives aimed at concealing this harm and encouraging continued tobacco cultivation. For instance, the Ceylon Tobacco Company (CTC) carries out “corporate social responsibility” programs to incentivize tobacco farmers by using buzzwords on “sustainability”. The ‘Sustainable Agriculture Development Program’ is one such program where the company manipulates the discourse of supporting farmers to cultivate their own image.



6. Offering incentives to motivate tobacco salespersons

The Ceylon Tobacco Company has a history of attracting shop owners through the provision of various advantages and privileges under the brand “Abhisheka”, obtaining their cooperation for the purpose of increasing the sale of cigarettes. It is concerning that these benefits are being framed as “capacity building opportunities” for retail shop owners, masking the far-reaching harms caused by cigarette sales.

