

Highlights of



OBSERVATÓRIO SOBRE AS ESTRATÉGIAS DA INDÚSTRIA DO TABACO

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Highlights 25

EDITORIAL

Dear readers,

In the twenty-fifth edition of our journal "CETAB Highlights," we bring to the forefront an urgent and complex issue that demands the attention of all involved in promoting public health: Philip Morris's strategies to globally expand the market for electronic cigarettes.

In another unprecedented report, investigative journalist Pedro Nakamura revealed how the Paraguayan company Agatres uses a digital influence network to promote the sale of illegal vapes to young Brazilians. The report shows evidence of the complex web of digital marketing used to promote illegal vapes in Brazil, challenging current legislation and endangering the health of young people. The collaboration between social media platforms and companies like Agatres calls for stricter oversight and public awareness of the dangers of electronic cigarettes.

Also in this edition, readers will learn about the action launched by the Federal Police to crack down on slave-like health conditions found in an illegal cigarette factory in MG and PR.

Luis Guilherme Hasselmann
Journalist at CETAB

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Studies Reveal Philip Morris's Strategies to Expand the Electronic Cigarette Market

Electronic smoking devices (ESDs) such as electronic cigarettes, vapes, and pods have been prohibited from manufacture, commercialization, importation, and advertising in Brazil since 2009. In April 2024, the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa) extended restrictions on the sale, distribution, storage, and advertising with the publication of RDC 855 of 2024.

However, two international studies have revealed tactics that Philip Morris Japan (PMJ) has been using to influence policymakers, health professionals, and finance research favorable to its products, which compromises scientific transparency and obscures an environment that values high-quality, reliable information.

Researchers from STOP (a group monitoring the tobacco industry globally) revealed that PMJ aims to engage with regulatory authorities to create a favorable environment for its heated tobacco products. This includes secretly funding research and lobbying politicians and medical groups to allow the use of vapes in various places, even where it is already prohibited. STOP's analysis shows that PMJ intends to reach a much broader audience than just adult smokers.

This strategy makes young people in countries like Brazil even more vulnerable to the aggressive marketing strategies of the tobacco industry, which claims these products offer harm reduction, a claim that has been robustly debunked. True harm reduction can only be achieved with transparency, responsibility, and robust public policies that prioritize public health.

Another study, conducted by the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath and published in **Nicotine and Tobacco Research**, shows that PMJ secretly funded a study by Japanese academics and hired a consultancy to create a favorable environment for heated tobacco products. Researcher Sophie Braznell from the University of Bath highlights that these actions make it harder for policymakers and the public to make informed choices.



Lobbying and Promotion

PMJ planned to promote electronic devices during the Tokyo Olympics, a tactic to associate these products with health and target children and young people.

Concerns about Youth

A July WHO report highlighted the alarming increase in alcohol and electronic cigarette use among young people aged 11 to 15 in Europe. In Brazil, nearly a quarter of young people aged 18 to 24 experimented with electronic cigarettes in 2023, a 20% increase compared to 2022.

Jorge Alday, director of STOP, states that PMI's strategies in Japan are ethically questionable and undermine the company's credibility. He points out that similar actions have been adopted in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, the USA, Australia, Greece, and Germany.

Source: <https://tabaco.ensp.fiocruz.br/pt-br/node/4117>

Digital Influence and Illegal Vapes

Pedro Nakamura's report from Núcleo revealed how the Paraguayan company Agatres uses a digital influence network to promote the sale of illegal vapes to young Brazilians. The investigation showed how celebrities, models, and party pages on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were used to attract a young audience, despite Brazil's strict anti-smoking laws.

Agatres's Tactics

Agatres stood out by sponsoring trap music videos on YouTube and advertising at raves on social media to attract young people to vaping. Platforms like Meta and TikTok allowed the promotion of these products, ignoring Brazilian legislation.

Influencers mapped by the report, including singers like Kevinho, Kawe, Zé Felipe, and Matheuzinho, promoted Nikbar, Agatres's vape brand. Additionally, 12 parties sponsored by Nikbar were identified, with giveaways and vape distributions.

Interview with Experts

In the investigation, Anvisa highlighted its Epinet project, which monitors platforms and requests the removal of illegal content. Between January 2023 and June 2024, more than 16,000 URLs were removed.

Luis Guilherme Hasselmann, journalist at the Center for Tobacco and Health Studies (Cetab) at Fiocruz, commented in the article: "The tobacco industry has always used colors, styles, tastes, and flavors because the focus is on young people. The interest is to get them addicted to have a new consumer for the longest time possible."



Disguised Advertising

Many social media promotions were not flagged as advertisements, making it difficult to monitor. Influencers often tagged Nikbar profiles or posed smoking the brand without indicating whether the post was a paid advertisement.

Controversial Partnerships

Nikbar also partnered to launch vapes with clothing and beverage brands, as well as sponsoring podcasts and music videos. This often disguised marketing exposes young people to high levels of nicotine, leading to symptoms of intoxication and addiction.

Source: <https://tabaco.ensp.fiocruz.br/pt-br/empresa-tece-rede-de-influencia-digital-para-empurrar-vapes-ilegais-jovens>

The Pitfalls of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Tobacco Industry

A recent article in Gazeta do Sul about Japan Tobacco International's (JTI) donation of computers to municipal schools in the Vale do Rio Pardo and Centro-Serra regions illustrates once again the widely criticized strategy of tobacco companies: corporate social responsibility (CSR). Under the pretext of supporting education and disaster recovery, JTI and other tobacco giants seek to build an image of benevolence that masks the devastating impacts of their products on public health.

The April floods were a tragedy that left a trail of destruction and mourning, with entire communities needing assistance to rebuild. JTI's donation of 142 computers may seem commendable, but it's necessary to look beyond the surface. While the company promotes its charitable actions, it continues to profit from selling products that cause millions of premature deaths annually.

JTI's rhetoric is carefully crafted to divert attention from the harm their products cause. Cristina Quatke, JTI's corporate affairs manager, claims that the donation is "an investment in the future of the children and young people in these localities," conveniently forgetting to mention the negative impact of tobacco on these same communities' health. The tobacco industry has historically used these CSR tactics to create a façade of responsibility and divert focus from their primary activity—producing and selling deadly products.

The public-private partnerships mentioned by Ibarama's Education Secretary, Diulia Francesquett, are another example of CSR pitfalls. While these collaborations can bring immediate benefits, such as replacing equipment lost in the floods, they also serve to legitimize the tobacco industry's presence in communities. This creates a bond of dependency and social acceptance that hinders tobacco control efforts.

Moreover, JTI's volunteer program, Voluntários do Bem, is an extension of this strategy, mobilizing resources and people in actions that seem altruistic but are actually part of a public relations campaign to clean up the company's image. The JTI Matchfunding campaign, which doubles donations made by volunteers, is another example of how the company tries to maximize its perceived positive impact while the harm from its products remains a permanent shadow.



It is crucial for society and the media to critique and deconstruct these CSR actions by the tobacco industry. Support for rebuilding communities devastated by natural disasters is necessary and welcome, but it cannot be used as a smokescreen for the damage caused by tobacco. JTI and other companies in the sector must be held accountable for the consequences of their products, and any attempt to improve their image through charitable actions should be seen for what it really is: a strategy to divert attention from their harmful practices.

Source: <https://tabaco.ensp.fiocruz.br/pt-br/jti-doa-computadores-para-escolas-municipais-em-acao-de-reconstrucao-pos-enchentes>

Slave Labor in Cigarette Production in MG and PR

The Federal Police launched Operation Uncover to crack down on crimes related to slave-like conditions, smuggling, and consumer protection violations. The action mobilized 50 federal police officers, along with the Federal Revenue Service, to execute warrants issued by the 1st Federal Court of Guairá. In total, six search and seizure warrants and two preventive arrest warrants were executed in the states of Minas Gerais and Paraná, as well as an order to seize assets worth R\$68 million.

According to investigations, the criminal group recruited Paraguayan citizens through contacts in the neighboring country and brought the workers to Brazil to work in a clandestine cigarette factory located in São Sebastião do Paraíso/MG. The investigations revealed that the Paraguayans entered national territory by land through the Paraguay-Paraná border and were taken by group members to the factory's location. During the production period, the workers remained confined to the factory premises without communication with the outside world and slept in precarious accommodations.

It is estimated that the factory's production capacity was about 250,000 packs of cigarettes per day. During the operation, production line machinery, trucks used for transporting goods, 50 tons of raw tobacco, various inputs, and more than 1,500,000 packs of cigarettes packaged for sale were seized.

Source: <https://tabaco.ensp.fiocruz.br/pt-br/pf-deflagra-operacao-uncover-em-acao-destinada-desarticular-fabrica-clandestina-de-cigarros>



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