

Unmasking the Tobacco Industry's Digital Loopholes in Sri Lanka

By Thanuri Charithma Somasiri

Sri Lanka is often recognized as a regional success story in tobacco control. Strong laws, including the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA) Act No. 27 of 2006 and the 2016 ban on electronic cigarettes containing tobacco, have created important legal protections against tobacco and nicotine products. Yet behind this legal progress, the tobacco industry has quietly rebuilt its influence online. Today, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and entertainment media have become the industry's new storefronts.

The numbers show why this matters. In Sri Lanka, 19.4% of adults use tobacco products, while 5.7% of school students report smoking cigarettes. Although these rates are lower than in many countries, the industry is adapting aggressively to secure the next generation of consumers. What was once billboard advertising has now evolved into algorithm-driven promotion, influencer culture, memes, and cross-border entertainment content designed to normalize addiction among young people.

The tobacco industry has always depended on recruiting youth. Internal industry strategies may change, but the objective remains the same: creating lifelong nicotine dependence for profit. Evidence shows that tobacco companies increasingly exploit digital platforms, influencers, entertainment media, and flavored products to socially normalize nicotine use among children and adolescents.

In Sri Lanka, this manipulation is becoming highly visible. Research conducted by the Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) found that many young people perceive e-cigarettes as fashionable and modern, despite their legal status. This reflects a deliberate industry strategy: reframing nicotine addiction as a lifestyle choice rather than a public health threat. Social media sellers often avoid displaying company names or identifiable information, making enforcement and accountability far more difficult.

This is not accidental marketing. It is a calculated exploitation of regulatory loopholes.

The industry's digital strategy works because it disguises advertising as culture. Smoking imagery is increasingly embedded into music videos, films, influencer content, and memes that circulate peer-to-peer. Unlike traditional advertising, this content feels organic and socially validated. A meme shared by a friend or a glamorous smoking scene in a film can influence young audiences more effectively than a billboard ever could.

Women and girls are also being targeted through carefully engineered messaging. Sri Lanka's smoking prevalence among women remains low at 0.5%, but this has made women a strategic market for expansion. Tobacco use is increasingly framed as a symbol of

independence, intelligence, or modernity. This “progressive” branding attempts to transform addiction into empowerment while concealing the devastating health consequences behind carefully curated aesthetics.

Cross-border entertainment adds another layer of concern. South Indian films that glamorize smoking continue to shape attitudes among young audiences in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, social media influencers portray smoking and vaping as fashionable, rebellious, or relaxing. Global evidence shows that every additional hour spent on platforms promoting nicotine-related content increases the likelihood of lifetime e-cigarette use among students.

The industry’s tactics are becoming even more deceptive through what advocates now describe as the “aesthetics loophole.” Smoking is repackaged into visually appealing online identities, often tied to humor, romance, or wellness narratives. Cannabis smoking is also falsely linked to traditional medicine or wellness culture online, despite no historical basis for smoking cannabis in Sri Lankan traditional medicine. These narratives are dangerous because they obscure addiction behind entertainment and social acceptance.

At the center of this strategy is nicotine addiction itself. The tobacco industry intentionally engineers products to maximize dependence, particularly among adolescents whose brains are still developing. Novel nicotine products, including nicotine salts and flavored devices, are specifically designed to make initiation easier and addiction stronger. The industry continues to market these products as innovation while denying responsibility for the long-term harms they create.

Sri Lanka’s laws already prohibit tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship, including internet-based promotion under Section 35 of the NATA Act. However, enforcement mechanisms have not kept pace with decentralized digital marketing. The “storefront” is now a private WhatsApp group. The “advertisement” is a TikTok trend. The “brand ambassador” is an influencer presenting addiction as self-expression.

This crisis cannot be addressed by the health sector alone. A multisectoral response involving health authorities, digital regulators, education sectors, law enforcement, and technology platforms is urgently needed. Governments must strengthen penalties for online violations, improve monitoring systems for cross-border digital promotion, and hold social media platforms accountable for facilitating illegal tobacco marketing.

Most importantly, society must stop treating these tactics as harmless trends. The tobacco industry is not simply adapting to the digital age; it is exploiting it to normalize addiction among young people. Every meme, influencer campaign, and glamorized smoking scene contributes to an industry strategy built on recruiting the next generation into lifelong dependence.

Sri Lanka has already shown leadership through strong tobacco control laws. The next challenge is ensuring those protections survive in the digital world.

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