

USC Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science (TCORs) for Vulnerable Populations

Diffusion of Marketing Messages about Tobacco Products through Social Media (Project 1 – Marketing Communications)

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P50 CA-180905-01

Abstract:

The rapidly increasing use of the Internet and social media sites as a source of information presents an opportunity for tobacco promotions and normalization of emerging tobacco products before they can be regulated. Despite the rise in Internet use, there is limited understanding of the role of the Internet and social media sites in transmitting pro-tobacco marketing messages to tobacco users and potential users. More information is needed about the ways in which the tobacco industry places tobacco-related messages online, how individuals receive, perceive, and disseminate information about tobacco products, and how this information impacts their use of tobacco products. This study will provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which tobacco companies communicate with their customers and potential customers through social media, as well as the ways in which tobacco users transform and disseminate these messages through their social networks. This will provide important new information about how new tobacco products travel to vulnerable populations and which types of health education messages are needed to counter these influences. The proposed study will achieve the following aims:

- Document how the tobacco industry communicates with potential customers online. Monitor Tobacco Company and brand websites to describe framing and content of tobacco messages about risk and benefits of emerging tobacco products (snus, dissolvables, e-cigarettes and little cigars).
- Understand how individuals transform tobacco messages online. Monitor social media sites (Twitter, YouTube) and message boards on tobacco company sites to detect trends in tobacco-related content over time. Conduct content analyses of these messages. Identify online opinion leaders who provide influential information about tobacco products, and document their characteristics.
- Describe the tobacco-related messages that individuals receive online. In collaboration with Project #3, which is conducting surveys of young adults in Southern California, determine how individuals communicate and share tobacco-related information through social media. Assess the types of tobacco marketing they receive and share with others. Assess their level of health literacy about tobacco products and identify topics on which public education is needed. Identify communication channels and messages that could be used by FDA to disseminate these messages most effectively.