

Tobacco Greenwashing: Misinformation/Disinformation in the Times of COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted an unprecedented number of social and behavioral change factors such as isolation, social distancing, masking, and necessitating prioritised personal health and hygiene care. This viral disease directly and sometimes fatally impacts the lungs, respiratory tract, and cardiovascular functions, and hence, has a direct relevance to tobacco use by smoking/vaping. Resultantly, tobacco products have been subjected to excessive negative attention. Some countries, such as South Africa, have responded by outright banning of tobacco products inviting legal action by British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International (see, for example Deutsche Welle News 2020; Bowker and Prinsloo 2020). Whereas, others, such as Pakistan, despite the crumbling health sector, have allowed Philip Morris to operationalise manufacturing during the ongoing pandemic (Ahmed 2020).

The lockdowns, due to COVID-19, have also disrupted economies around the globe, resulting in business closures, shutting down of factories, besides limiting manufacturing, distribution, travel, and supply chains. The tobacco industry immediately responded by engaging in greenwashing tobacco products and polluting the scientific knowledge base, through misinformation and disinformation.

To mitigate slowing tobacco consumption reduced sales and falling clientele, the tobacco industry deliberately affianced in polluting the knowledge and scientific evidence related to the detrimental impact on health caused by smoking/vaping (The Union 2020; WHO n.d.). To achieve this, the tobacco industry has been influencing research agendas, creating disinformation in efforts to delink the smoking-cancer relationship, misinforming the public regarding the cause-effect relationship between tobacco use and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), and deluding healthy indoor climatic agendas.

This panel will deliberate on the following main issues:

1. Perils of misinformation and disinformation adding ‘infodemic’ to an ongoing pandemic and worldwide health emergency.
2. The tobacco industry’s dangerous practice of polluting the knowledge base to maintain high sales to client ratio by greenwashing its products.
3. Policy recommendations to counter practices which are detrimental to the creation of sound/scientific knowledge/evidence related to the ill-effects of tobacco use on individual health, and health systems in countries like Pakistan and other South Asian countries.

References

Ahmed, A. 2020, ‘Companies begin Resumption of Operations in Pakistan,’ *Business Recorder*, 6 April.

Bowker, J. and Prinsloo, L. 2020, ‘BAT Appeals to Court After South Africa Digs In on Tobacco Ban,’ *Bloomberg.com*,
<<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-30/bat-appeals-to-court-after-south-africa-digs-in-on-tobacco-ban>> [Accessed 24 June 2020].

Deutsche Welle News 2020, 'South Africa: Tobacco Ban Opens Doors for Black Market,' <<https://www.dw.com/en/south-africa-tobacco-ban-opens-doors-for-black-market/av-53904878>> [Accessed 24 June 2020].

The Union. 2020, 'STOP finds Big Tobacco Front Group still Spending Millions on Spin, Not Science,' <<https://www.tobaccofreeunion.org/index.php/news-2>> [Accessed 10 June 2020].

WHO n.d. 'Tobacco Explained - The Truth about the Tobacco Industry...In Its Own Words,' World Health Organization, <<https://www.who.int/tobacco/media/en/TobaccoExplained.pdf?ua=1>> [Accessed 24 June 2020].

Panel Organisers

Mr Waseem Iftikhar Janjua, Project Lead for Tobacco Control & Senior Research Associate, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: waseem@sdpi.org

Syed Ali Wasif Naqvi, Research Associate, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: wasif@sdpi.org