



## **Minimal Warnings, Positive Tones: How Social Media Content Normalizes E-Cigarette use Among Indonesian Youth**

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### **Abstract**

Indonesia is the country with the largest cigarette consumption in Southeast Asia and among the highest in the world. Cigarette consumption in the country is comparable to daily food expenditure, reflecting its widespread use. In addition to conventional cigarettes, e-cigarettes are also increasingly popular, especially among young people. The rise of social media has significantly increased exposure to e-cigarettes, as platforms allow user-generated content where anyone can create and share promotional materials. Unlike traditional cigarette advertising, which is regulated by specific broadcast hours, e-cigarette promotion on social media is largely unrestricted, leaving it up to content creators to self-regulate. Using a quantitative content analysis approach, this study examined 200 posts (100 from each platform) from June to September 2023. Content was categorized based on age and health warnings, promotional elements, and tone. Data reliability was ensured through inter-coder agreement. Findings show that both users and influencers largely portray e-cigarettes in a positive light, emphasizing their luxury and safety, while often ignoring age and health warnings. Marketing strategies such as freebies, product reviews, and vape tricks are increasingly appealing to young audiences. These findings highlight the urgent need for stricter regulation of e-cigarette promotion on social media to protect young people from potential health risks.

**Keywords:** E-cigarette; social media; user generated content; influencer marketing; age and health warnings.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Before the emergence of e-cigarettes, traditional tobacco products were already widely consumed across Indonesia. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2021, the average monthly per capita expenditure on tobacco and betel products reached IDR 76,583, making it the second highest food expenditure after processed foods, which was IDR 197,682. This figure even exceeds expenditure on staples such as rice (IDR 69,786/month), vegetables (IDR 53,864/month), fish (IDR 53,534/month), and eggs and milk (IDR 35,241/month). In addition, until 2022, tobacco products were the second largest contributor to poverty in Indonesia.

Based on BPS data in March 2022 and 2023, cigarettes are in second place after rice as the largest contributor to food commodity expenditure. In other words, cigarette consumption in Indonesia exceeds the consumption of chicken, eggs, tofu, and tempeh. Indonesia not only excels in traditional cigarette consumption, but also surpasses other countries in the use of electronic cigarettes (vape). Based on BPS data from January to March 2023, Indonesia ranks first in the percentage of electronic cigarette users globally.

Given the high level of traditional cigarette consumption in Indonesia, the rise of e-cigarettes and their exposure on social media has the potential to influence consumer behavior (Indonesia, 2023). This is especially true since the majority of social media users are young people who are more likely to use tobacco products compared to those who are not exposed to smoking-related content online (Donaldson et al., 2022). According to a survey by APJII (Association of Indonesian Internet Service Providers) in 2024, Millennials and Gen Z



constitute the largest proportion of internet and social media users in the country, with Gen Z leading the demographic. Furthermore, due to the unregulated nature of e-cigarette-related content on digital platforms, the potential audience also includes younger users (<age 12/Post Gen-Z) as they also represent a growing demographic of social media users. On social media, e-cigarettes are often portrayed positively, associated with attractiveness, modernity, luxury, and safety. Various strategies are used, such as trick videos, promotions, giveaways, and endorsements from influencers, including models, bloggers, and celebrities, to attract young audiences (Lee et al., 2023). However, exposure to such content is not limited to brands or companies; user-generated content (UGC) also plays a significant role in shaping public perception. This is because UGC is the core of social media (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

The accessibility and interactive nature of social media transforms users not only into consumers but also producers (Benkler, 2006; 2013). UGC allows users to voluntarily create and share data and information in an informative or entertaining manner (Strategies, 2022). This sharing ease facilitates interactions between audiences and companies, encouraging the creation, sharing, and interaction around content (O'Brien et al., 2020). Furthermore, UGC has the power to influence opinions about products and drive purchasing behavior (Müller & Christandl, 2019).

The rapid growth of social media users worldwide has made influencer marketing a key tool in digital marketing (Jarrar et al., 2020). Influencer marketing leverages individuals with significant online influence to share brand messages with their audiences through sponsored content (Sammis et al., 2016). While much of the research on influencer marketing focuses on adult audiences and how influencers influence purchasing decisions (De Veirman et al., 2017), the role of influential users in promoting a particular brand or product through their social media activities is significant (De Veirman et al., 2019).

As of January 2023, Indonesia had 167 million active social media users, representing 60.4% of the total population (Databoks, 2023). In addition, according to the 2021 Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS), the number of e-cigarette users in Indonesia reached 6.6 million (Kompas, 2023). These figures place Indonesia as the country with the highest number of e-cigarette users globally (Databoks, 2023). In addition, e-cigarettes pose similar health risks to traditional cigarettes. E-cigarettes can increase blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory problems, potentially leading to lung disease, atrial fibrillation causing blood clots, and nicotine poisoning (Orellana-Barrios et al., 2015). Previous research on influencer marketing and e-cigarettes on social media has revealed a lack of prohibitions or restrictions on such content (Smith et al.; Lee et al., 2023).

Based on this, this study aims to find a positive correlation between e-cigarettes and social media exposure. To achieve this, this study attempts to examine the prevalence and distribution of e-cigarette content on YouTube and Instagram, assess the extent to which e-cigarette content contains age and health warnings, analyze the role of user-generated content and influencer marketing in e-cigarette promotion, and identify the dominant themes or tones used, especially how content is packaged to shape public perception. This study is grounded in Framing Theory, a concept first introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) and further developed by scholars such as Entman (1993). Framing theory explains how media and content creators shape reality by



selecting certain aspects of an issue to highlight while downplaying or omitting others. Through this process, messages are structured to influence how audiences understand, interpret, and evaluate information.

In the context of this research, framing theory is used to analyze how e-cigarette content on YouTube and Instagram is presented to the public, particularly how it is framed to appeal to young audiences. Influencers and content creators often emphasize lifestyle elements such as modernity, freedom, and social appeal while minimizing or completely omitting the health risks associated with e-cigarette use. This selective emphasis can lead to a distorted perception of vaping, especially among adolescents who are highly active on social media platforms.

Framing theory is especially relevant for this study because it allows for a deeper understanding of how user-generated content and influencer marketing can construct and reinforce certain narratives about e-cigarettes. By examining which frames are most dominant—whether health, glamour, safety, or technology, this study reveals how these portrayals may normalize vaping behavior and contribute to shifts in public perception, particularly in a digital environment with minimal regulatory oversight. Thus, this theory provides a useful lens to evaluate not only the content of e-cigarette promotions, but also the broader implications for health communication, digital advertising, and youth media literacy in Indonesia.

As a new and fresh concept for cigarettes, e-cigarette promotion also carries out its approach through new forms of marketing such as digital marketing. Unlike its traditional predecessors, social media plays a significant role in e-cigarette exposure and marketing. Social media refers to web-based or mobile technologies that allow users to interact with others through a platform (Kietzmann et al., 2011). User-generated content (UGC) is a major source of social media, connecting user profiles to form social networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015). UGC allows users to voluntarily generate and share data and information in an informative or entertaining manner (Krumm et al., 2008). Furthermore, UGC has the potential to influence individuals' opinions about a product, thereby influencing their purchasing behavior (Müller & Christandl, 2019).

Social media facilitates interactions between individuals. The ease of sharing information allows audiences and companies to engage and create, share, and interact with content (O'Brien et al., 2020). Popular social media platforms include Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram. YouTube and Instagram are among the most widely used platforms in Indonesia (Databoks, 2023). For example, in Indonesia, third-party retailers tend to promote e-cigarettes on Instagram and YouTube. Posts on YouTube generate the highest average engagement per post and one of the most highly engaged videos is related to e-cigarette content created by reviewers on behalf of retailers (Murukutla et al., 2022). Not limited to e-cigarettes, YouTube has become the platform where most adolescents aged 13 to 15 are exposed to tobacco marketing. Meanwhile, youth-focused social media platforms such as Instagram have become the most widely used channel for marketing e-cigarettes. More than two-thirds of tobacco-related marketing observed on social media continues to promote e-cigarettes (Vital Strategies, 2022). These platforms enable the creation of virtual communities and provide a basis for business activities, relationship management, and content creation across economic, political,



and other domains. Given this social and network context, specific regulation is required (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Since the late 20th century, the internet has transformed users from passive consumers into active participants in content creation, collaboration, and distribution (Naab & Sehl, 2017). The concept of the "prosumer", a blend of producer and consumer, emerged in the 1980s to describe this blurring of roles between professional content creators and ordinary users (Van Dijck, 2009). Addressing the paradigm shift in media content production and distribution, Jenkins (2006) notes: "Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupy a space at the intersection of old and new media, demanding the right to participate in culture" (p. 24). The behavior of users who voluntarily produce and distribute content on online platforms is called user-generated content (McKenzie et al., 2012). UGC is defined as any form of content related to a product, including photos, comments, and videos created by users (Itani et al., 2020).

In terms of media use, consumers' willingness to engage with UGC depends on their attitudes toward consuming or creating UGC. However, individual motivations can vary widely, influencing whether consumers choose to consume or create UGC for a variety of reasons (Terry et al., 2008). This digital participation shifts business interests from mere consumption to production activities, giving users more control over content (Van Dijck, 2009). User-generated content (UGC) enables businesses to uncover audience needs and preferences that are often missed by conventional marketing or research methods. (Timoshenko & Hauser, 2019).

The increasing use of UGC has paved the way for influencer marketing. Levin (2020) traces the roots of influencer marketing to Josiah Wedgwood, an 18th-century English potter and entrepreneur. Wedgwood leveraged his relationship with Queen Charlotte to design cream-colored tableware, which he marketed using the queen's persona in newspaper advertisements. This trend is also similar to today's digital marketing of e-cigarettes. E-cigarettes are portrayed as cool products and are represented by certain influencers. Influencers are preferred because they are considered to be in line with current trends (Chopra et al., 2021). Not only are they involved in promoting e-cigarettes, some influencers even have their own products. Examples include Anya Geraldine, Bobon Santoso, and Young Lex who have their own e-cigarette products and actively promote them on their social media. The content is mostly promoted on Instagram because Instagram is very popular and attractive to young people in Indonesia (Nugroho & Azzahra, 2022). In addition, Indonesia has the second largest share of Instagram posts in e-liquid marketing compared to other countries (Umaroh et al., 2023).

The increasing prevalence of internet and social media users has made influencer marketing a powerful tool in digital marketing (Belanche et al., 2021). Influencer marketing involves identifying and engaging individuals with significant influence over a specific audience or media target, encouraging them to participate in a brand campaign to increase reach, sales, or engagement (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Belanche et al. (2021) define influencer marketing as a marketing communication in which influential individuals promote a particular brand on their social media accounts. The main components of influencer marketing include the influencer's characteristics, content, their interactions with the target audience, and their impact on purchase and sales intentions (Leung et al., 2022). Influencer endorsements are considered essential in



helping companies build a positive brand image and achieve their business goals. (Chopra et al., 2020).

E-cigarettes are marketed through television, internet, and print advertisements, often featuring celebrities and portraying them as a healthier alternative to tobacco cigarettes (Grana & Ling, 2014). Celebrity endorsements of e-cigarettes have been documented since 2009 (Grana et al., 2011). E-cigarette companies also employ strong marketing strategies on social media, including influencer marketing (De Andrade, 2013). Initially, e-cigarettes were considered a safer alternative to tobacco cigarettes ((Tanuwihardja & Susanto, 2012). While e-cigarettes may reduce the harmful effects of tobacco products for adults, research suggests that e-cigarettes pose significant risks for adolescents, such as nicotine addiction (Smith et al., 2023). E-cigarettes contain nicotine and other chemicals that may harm adolescent brain development and lead to long-term negative effects (Park et al., 2020).

E-cigarettes produce a nicotine-containing aerosol by heating a solution, typically consisting of propylene glycol or glycerin, nicotine, and flavorings, and were first developed by Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik in the early 2000s (Grana et al., 2013). These devices resemble traditional cigarettes but do not burn tobacco (Cheng, 2014). Instead, they rely on a battery-powered mechanism that produces vapor through an atomizer activated by air intake (Trchounian et al., 2010). Inhaling this vapor is commonly referred to as vaping (Barrios et al., 2015). Most e-cigarettes contain addictive nicotine, which can cause cardiovascular and neurological disorders (Smith et al., 2023).

Due to the potential health risks posed by e-cigarettes, several countries have enacted specific regulations. Regulatory measures vary widely, ranging from advertising bans to outright bans on the sale and use of e-cigarettes in over 35 countries (Fraser et al., 2015). In Indonesia, discussions on regulating e-cigarettes began in 2014, but no concrete policies have been implemented. According to researchers at the Indonesian Youth Council for Tobacco Control (IYCTC), the rapid increase in e-cigarette users in Indonesia is largely driven by extensive advertising on social media (Kompas, 2022).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach (Smith et al., 2023). According to Salkind (2010), quantitative research uses mathematical models, theories, and hypotheses to measure and analyze empirical relationships found in natural phenomena. The results require empirical data collected in specific research categories or variables to allow conclusions to be drawn. By collecting data on similar research categories, comparisons with previous research can also be made (Smith et al., 2023).

The method used in this study is quantitative content analysis. Eriyanto (2015) explains content analysis as a scientific research technique that aims to understand the characteristics of content and draw conclusions from the content. This method minimizes researcher bias, allowing for an objective assessment of e-cigarette content on social media platforms. Content analysis also emphasizes systematics, with a clear and structured research process. In this study, the processes carried out include: (1) determining the population and sample, (2) determining



categorization, (3) compiling a code book, (4) testing validity and reliability, and (5) data analysis (Eriyanto, 2015).

The research strategy used manifest coding, which focuses on observable elements that are explicitly stated in the content (Eriyanto, 2018). For example, the number of posts related to e-cigarettes was counted, whether they displayed the product visually, mentioned it in the text, or included hashtags that referred to e-cigarettes. The content was then analyzed for its overall tone, which was categorized as positive, negative, or neutral.

The population in this study was video and photo content related to e-cigarettes on the social media platforms YouTube and Instagram. According to a report titled Digital 2023: Indonesia by Datareportal (2023), YouTube has 139 million active users, while Instagram has 89 million users in Indonesia. YouTube and Instagram were chosen for analysis because of their popularity and the availability of their content to the public. Both platforms have different content formats, with YouTube being dominated by videos, while Instagram displays a mix of images and videos. Referring to previous research, data for this study were collected between June 1, 2023, and September 30, 2023 (Smith et al., 2023).

Sampling was done using non-probability sampling with purposive sampling technique. This method identifies all possible cases in a very specific and hard-to-reach population (Neuman, 2014). On YouTube, the most watched videos were selected, as high views are likely to have a significant impact on public perception of e-cigarettes. On Instagram, due to the limitations of its search function, content was filtered using hashtags, including #vapingindonesia, #iqosindonesia, #relxindonesia, #vaporhitz, #rokoelektrik, #vapeindonesia, #vapeindo, #podsindonesia, and #vapehitz (Smith et al., 2023).

### **Data Processing & Analysis**

The data analyzed in this study came from YouTube and Instagram content (Smith et al., 2023). The data consisted of videos and images shared on these social media platforms. To analyze the content, two codebooks were developed, one for YouTube and one for Instagram. To analyze the content, two codebooks were developed. For YouTube, researchers recorded metrics such as number of views, likes, and dislikes; date of posting; content creator; number of channel subscribers; and whether the video was sponsored. Additional observations included whether the video featured age and health warnings and overall depiction of e-cigarettes. The content was then coded based on tone, categorized as positive (promoting the product or use), negative (dissuading the product or use), or neutral (open to audience interpretation). A random sample of 30 videos were coded independently by two researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability. Discrepancies were discussed and clarified, ensuring consistent coding.

For Instagram, researchers documented metrics such as the number of likes (a measure of user engagement, according to Chu et al., 2016) and other indicators of impact (Sherman et al., 2018). Additional variables included the date of posting, the identity of the poster, sponsorship status, and whether there were age and health warnings in the post or description. Researchers also looked at whether there were promotions or incentives offered, such as giveaways, and whether other accounts were tagged (e.g., vape brands or manufacturers). Posts were coded for tone using the same categories as YouTube (positive, neutral, or negative). Instagram posts



were categorized using a coding framework developed for YouTube, supplemented with inductive coding (Smith et al., 2023).

### Data Confirmation Technique

To ensure data validity, this study applied the principle of construct validity by comparing the findings with previous studies (Smith et al., 2023). Comparisons were made across time (e.g., changes over time), across research categories (e.g., platform-specific data differences), and between researchers (intercoder reliability) (Neuman, 2014). Intercoder reliability refers to previous research by Smith and Buckton, who used double coding and induction for YouTube videos and Instagram posts. Reliability was measured using the Holsti formula Neuendorf (2017), which calculates the percentage of agreement between coders. Reliability was considered acceptable if it exceeded 70%. By providing consistent indicators for comparison, equivalence in findings was determined if the results showed similar patterns. The main difference in this study is the exclusive focus on Indonesian content, while Smith's study sampled data from Europe, Asia, and America.

**Table 1. Instagram Reliability Test Results**

No	Sub-dimensions	Value
1	Who posted	0.97
2	Is it sponsored?	0.97
3	Age warning	0.93
4	Health warning	0.83
5	Promotion/incentive	0.83
6	Tone	1
7	Category	0.83

**Table 2. YouTube Reliability Test Results**

No	Sub-dimensions	Value
1	Who posted	0.93
2	Is it sponsored?	1
3	Age warning	0.97
4	Health warning	0.9
5	Promotion/incentive	1
6	Tone	1
7	Category	0.97

Reliability tests were conducted by two researchers acting as coders using Holsti's formula. Based on the reliability tests for seven sub-dimensions across both platforms, all values



exceeded 0.83, indicating "almost perfect fit." None of the sub-dimensions scored below 0.70 (Eriyanto, 2018). Based on the results of the reliability test, the subdimensions were considered quite reliable and met the requirements for use in this study.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Of the 100 YouTube videos identified, all were videos and YouTube Shorts ranging in duration from 30 seconds to 30 minutes. On the Instagram platform, 100 pieces of content were in the form of posts, both images and videos, and in the form of Reels. The coding process for each platform revealed several key findings.

**Table 3. Results of YouTube (left) and Instagram (right) findings**

Tanggall Posting		Jumlah post (n=100)	
n = 100		Tanggall Posting	
2022 (1)	0	2022	0
2023 (2)	100	2023	100
Siapa yang memposting		Siapa yang memposting	
User-generated (1)	39	User-generated	35
Organisasi/Perusahaan (2)	61	Organisasi/Perusahaan	65
Apakah disponsori		Apakah disponsori	
Ya (1)	43	Ya	70
Tidak (0)	57	Tidak	30
Peringatan Usia dan Kesehatan		Peringatan usia dan kesehatan	
Lengkap (1)	26	Lengkap	26
Tidak lengkap (2)	15	Salah satu	3
Tidak ada sama sekali (0)	59	Tidak ada	71
Promosi/Insentif		Promosi/Insentif	
Ya (1)	24	Ya	46
Tidak (0)	76	Tidak	54
Tone		Tone	
Positif (1)	48	Positif	45
Negatif (2)	14	Netral	49
Netral (3)	38	Negatif	6
Kategori		Kategori	
ASMR vaping	3	Kompetisi/Giveaway	5
Peringatan kesehatan individual	0	Peringatan kesehatan individual	3
Segmen berita/TV	5	Meme	4
Review produk/informasi	65	Lainnya	16
Informasi kesehatan publik	11	Foto pribadi	10
Perilaku terkait vaping	9	Review produk/informasi	50
Seni/trik/pranks terkait vaping	7	Informasi kesehatan publik	4
		Seni/trik/pranks terkait vaping	8

The identified samples were all uploaded in 2023 and from both platforms the posts were dominated by organizations or companies. On YouTube, 61% of the content was posted by companies, and on Instagram, 65% of the content was also posted by companies. Content with a negative tone was also very rare in the coding results and was a minority tone. Even on Instagram, there was only 6% of content that had a negative tone, while on YouTube there was 14% of content with negative tone.



On Instagram, a total of 100 content samples were collected using various hashtags related to e-cigarettes. The most frequently used hashtag was #vapeindo, which accounted for 24 posts, followed by #iqosindonesia (20 posts) and #relxindonesia (13 posts). Other hashtags such as #vapingindonesia (10 posts), #e-cigarette (7 posts), and #vapehitz (2 posts) contributed to the remaining sample. The variation in hashtag frequency indicates differing levels of engagement and popularity across e-cigarette brands and communities. The high number of posts under brand-specific hashtags (e.g., IQOS, RELX) also suggests strong brand presence and active marketing efforts on Instagram. Searches using hashtags such as #podsindonesia (5 posts) also reflect user interest in the hardware aspects of e-cigarettes, highlighting that content engagement extends beyond brands and flavors to include device-related topics.

From the coding results, it was also found that from both platforms analyzed, it was found that the content was dominated by the product review/information category. This type of content accounted for 65% of posts on YouTube and 50% on Instagram. Despite this dominance, age and health warnings were rarely included in the uploads. Only 26% of the content on each platform featured complete warnings related to age restrictions or health risks. When present, these warnings typically included statements such as “this product is not risk-free and contains nicotine,” “may cause dependence,” and “for adult use only (18+).”

The findings show a percentage that is not much different from previous research (Smith et al., 2023) regarding warnings about age and health. Both content on YouTube and Instagram only provide a few warnings about age and health and the tone that is least often found in the content is negative. Interestingly, the number of neutral tones is not much different from the positive tone. Content with a neutral tone generally only displays products and prices as a form of sales. Meanwhile, content with a positive tone displays the uniqueness of the product and persuades the audience to try it. Although neutral posts were less overtly persuasive, their lack of critique or warnings still positioned them as subtly promotional.

The coding results on both YouTube and Instagram show that content in the form of reviews and product information is the content that has the most engagement with the audience. This can be seen from the number of views, likes, and comments as top posts that outperform other types of content. Seeing these results, it can be concluded that interest in product review content indicates that there is considerable potential and interest in the audience to consume e-cigarettes. It's not surprising that the coding results found the majority of content like this is created by corporations or companies. Companies that aim to promote products and persuade audiences certainly will not give a negative tone to their own content. With this assumption, it's natural that content tends to have a positive tone accompanied by minimal warnings about age and health.

E-cigarette-related content often presents not only information about various flavors but also guidance on how to use or select devices such as cases or pods that enhance the vaping experience. As a result, e-cigarettes are framed not merely as “cigarette” products, but as lifestyle accessories. This framing distances them from the negative image traditionally associated with conventional cigarettes, which have long been stigmatized through graphic packaging and public health campaigns. In contrast, e-cigarettes are portrayed as modern, customizable, and even fashionable products. This perception is further reinforced by the lack



of specific regulations in Indonesia regarding the advertising and presentation of e-cigarettes. The product is frequently treated under the law as an electronic device rather than a tobacco product, creating a regulatory gap that allows for more lenient marketing and distribution practices.

Influencer marketing-based content often reflects a strategic shift from promoting traditional cigarettes to endorsing e-cigarettes. In some campaigns, audiences are encouraged to participate in giveaways or contests by sharing their reasons for switching from conventional cigarettes to e-cigarettes. This approach positions e-cigarettes as a “healthier” or more acceptable alternative, effectively using them as a justification to quit smoking. However, this narrative is somewhat ironic. The coding results reveal that content with a negative tone mostly produced by hospitals or health organizations highlights the dangers of e-cigarettes and draws direct comparisons with traditional tobacco products. In contrast, content with positive tones is predominantly created by companies pursuing profit, and neutral content also lacks critical framing. As a result, negatively toned content serves as a crucial counterbalance and offers an important distinction within the broader landscape of e-cigarette messaging on social media.

The findings also indicate that e-cigarette-related content on social media is primarily targeted at young audiences. Across both YouTube and Instagram, young individuals consistently appear as promoters or featured figures in the content. Many posts highlight flavored products with colorful packaging and appealing designs features that are clearly curated to attract youth. This approach contrasts with traditional cigarette advertising, which typically portrayed adult men and emphasized masculinity or sophistication. Moreover, the study found a larger proportion of content that appeared to be non-sponsored or without direct incentives. Such content often in the form of product unboxings or personal uploads like vape tricks was especially prevalent on YouTube, which functions largely as a platform for sharing individual content. In contrast, Instagram featured more promotional material, with a higher volume of brand-driven or influencer-endorsed posts intended for marketing purposes.

From the information above, it was found that YouTube is a place to share information while Instagram is a place for promotional and sales activities. This finding is also supported by the number of sponsored content on Instagram which is much more than YouTube. Therefore, it is not surprising that e-cigarette content that does not have age and health warnings on Instagram is much more than on YouTube. Content that is intended for sale must take a persuasive stance and minimize as many as possible factors that can influence the public view of its products, especially negatively. This is different from content on YouTube where the existence of age and health warnings can be intended to limit "viewers", not limit "potential buyers" as in promotional content on Instagram.

These findings also indicate that user-generated content and influencer marketing played a major role in branding and shaping the image of e-cigarettes on social media. These was shown by how e-cigarettes are being presents as trendy and desirable products. In fact, the dominance of positive and neutral portrayals of e-cigarettes on social media like YouTube and Instagram suggests a potential influence on young audiences. Therefore, young people may become the prime example or even the one who leads the demographic of so-called “public interest” towards cigarettes.



The way e-cigarette content is framed on social media often reflects what Entman (1993) and later scholars describe as “strong frames,” which rely not on detailed health information but on emotionally resonant symbols, endorsements, and ideological cues (Chong & Druckman, 1993). Influencers frequently associate vaping with modernity, self-expression, or rebellion—cultural themes that appeal to young audiences. These frames operate as heuristics, allowing audiences to form positive opinions about e-cigarettes without evaluating their health risks. Rather than being informed through explicit messaging about the dangers of nicotine, users are persuaded by aspirational imagery, peer validation, and influencer credibility. When vaping is presented without visible consequences and with social approval (likes, shares, sponsorships), it reinforces the idea that vaping is not only acceptable but also desirable. The more frequently adolescents are exposed to vape-related content from influencers, the more likely they are to perceive vaping as a normative aspect of a modern lifestyle.

The promotion of e-cigarettes differs significantly from that of multipurpose or daily-use products, which often emphasize convenience or utility. Instead, it mirrors the promotional strategies traditionally used for conventional cigarettes. What e-cigarette marketing offers is not a functional benefit but rather a framed idea for the audience. Cigarettes have long been associated with masculinity, class, and a sense of elite taste, attributes that elevate the user’s perceived social status. Although it is widely known that smoking causes illness and increases the risk of cancer, cigarette advertisements often shift focus toward qualities linked to identity and character. This creates a perceived association between the product’s perceived quality and the user’s social value. At the same time, strong framing is employed to obscure the health risks of the product and diminish the impact of warning labels on its packaging.

A similar strategy is applied to e-cigarettes. However, unlike traditional cigarettes which use subtle or symbolic promotion, e-cigarette framing is much more overt, often embedded in light, entertaining content such as memes, ASMR videos, vape tricks, and personal photo posts. Whereas conventional cigarette ads often portray adult men and convey exclusivity, e-cigarettes bring the narrative closer to daily youth life. This approach is reinforced through product accessories and direct promotion. Moreover, e-cigarette marketing is amplified by influencers who are perceived as trendsetters and lifestyle icons, and eventually, by ordinary users through personal user-generated content. This phenomenon frames e-cigarettes as a cool and fashionable lifestyle choice, particularly for young people.

E-cigarette content, particularly in the form of product reviews, constitutes the most prevalent category across platforms despite the fact that these products contain nicotine. This level of promotional freedom is rarely seen with conventional cigarettes. In Indonesia, smoking is culturally embedded especially among adult males and often regarded as a lifestyle practice. However, it remains a sensitive and restricted topic within mainstream media. In contrast, e-cigarettes are increasingly portrayed as daily consumer items, openly reviewed and promoted on social media. This discrepancy is largely attributed to the lack of comprehensive regulation surrounding e-cigarette content. In practice, e-cigarettes are not treated with the same level of restriction as traditional tobacco products. While the majority of content is still produced by corporate accounts, the significant volume of user-generated content reflects not only public



engagement with e-cigarette narratives but also the public's role in reinforcing a positive framing of vaping through organic content creation.

Conventional cigarettes, with limited variation in form or function, have long been stigmatized as hazardous products. This perception is reinforced by regulatory mandates requiring the inclusion of health warnings on packaging and in mass media advertisements. In contrast, e-cigarettes offer a diverse range of flavors, device types, and customizable features, contributing to their perception as more approachable and user-friendly product. This perceived distinction is further amplified by the nature of their promotion. E-cigarette content is frequently disseminated by young individuals on youth-oriented platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, targeting young audiences. This contrasts significantly with conventional cigarette advertising, which traditionally centered on adult men as the intended audience. The relatively lax regulatory environment surrounding e-cigarettes enables their content to circulate without the obligation to include health or age warnings, although these products still contain nicotine with associated health risks. Such regulatory laxity contributes to the normalization of e-cigarettes in youth-oriented digital environments.

Without strong external regulation, the portrayal of e-cigarette content as something trendy (positive tone) or consumable (neutral tone) implicitly conveys the message that e-cigarettes products are safe to use. This reflects a deliberate framing strategy used by e-cigarette companies to construct a favorable perception of their products. As a message design strategy, framing refers to the strategic presentation of information in such a way that draws attention toward certain aspects of information while simultaneously drawing attention away from other aspects. As a consequence of this presentational difference, individuals' attitudes about the topic become more aligned with framed information, leading to more message-consistent effects, referred to as a framing effect (Caciopore et al., 2015). This exemplifies what Entman (1993) describes as emphasis framing, whereby communicators strategically include certain elements of information while omitting others in order to define an issue and guide audience interpretation.

The effect could be seen from the user motivations, as reflected in the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (2021). Motivations are closely linked to how e-cigarettes are socially and aesthetically positioned in public discourse. Key reasons for use include social interaction (62.7%), flavor appeal (62.6%), and personal enjoyment (43.6%). Furthermore, 22.9% of users perceive e-cigarettes as less harmful than conventional tobacco products, which is reflected in the 30.3% of users who report using e-cigarettes as a tool to quit smoking. This belief is especially common among youth aged 15–24, students, and the self-employed. Notably, flavors emerge as the most dominant motivator, especially among young and urban users, with 67.8% of individuals aged 15–24 and 66.2% of urban residents identifying flavor as their primary reason for use. This indicates how framing can shift attention away from potential harm and instead anchor meaning in pleasure, modernity, or social relevance, thus contributing to the social acceptance and normalization of e-cigarette use.

This is also aligns with Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1969), which suggests that repeated exposure to consistent media messages gradually shapes how individuals perceive and interpret reality. The consequence of this is the normalization of vaping as a low-risk or even harmless



activity. Repeated exposure to e-cigarette content that lacks health warnings could lead audiences to perceive vaping as a normal part of everyday life. When such content is consistently framed in positive or neutral tones, it reinforces the illusion of safety. As a result, audiences may begin to internalize what they see on social media as reflective of reality, particularly when the messages resonate with trends, lifestyles, or values commonly portrayed in digital culture (Griffin et al., 2018).

This trend can be traced back to the longstanding cultural role of traditional cigarettes in Indonesia, where smoking has long been embedded in daily routines and social interactions. This is supported by data from Global Adult Tobacco Survey (2021), Indonesia have the highest smoking rate in the world among adult males. In addition, survey data also indicate that the prevalence of e-cigarette users in Indonesia has increased tenfold over a decade, rising from 0.3% in 2011 to 3% in 2021. Indonesia also ranked first in the world for the most vape users (Statista, 2023, 2024).

Not only in Indonesia, public interest in cigarette products in other countries is also high. This can be seen from [previous research](#) which also has content in the form of reviews and information as top posts. However, the provision of sponsorship or incentives for content in the study was recorded as relatively minimal and a very large percentage compared to this finding. This figure is supported by the number of content uploaders dominated by user-generated content with a much higher percentage compared to corporations. From the findings of this and previous studies (Smith et al., 2023), it can be concluded that the presence of sponsors or the provision of incentives does not greatly affect the interest and willingness of content uploaders to upload e-cigarette content. Rather, cultural acceptances, social trends, and personal interest may play more influential role. This is because interactions within one's environment both social and online can strongly influence how individuals perceive reality (Littlejohn et al., 2017). Therefore, implementing firm regulations on e-cigarette marketing is essential.

As a country with large population who used tobacco and paired with the lax regulations, Indonesia has become a desirable target for the e-cigarette industry, with e-cigarette marketing in the country growing steadily since 2015 (Eijk et al., 2022). In Indonesia, there are currently no specific regulations governing e-cigarettes beyond the general provisions of the Law on Commodity Trading and Excise. While the sale and distribution of e-cigarettes are permitted and formally recognized, there is a notable absence of policies addressing their sponsorship, promotion, and advertising on digital platforms. This regulatory gap is concerning, as widespread exposure to e-cigarette advertisements and content has been shown to significantly influence user behavior (Depue et al., 2015; (Wulan et al., 2022). Young people, in particular, are more susceptible to such exposure and are therefore more likely to engage in e-cigarette use. According to survey conducted by Vital Strategies (2021), at least 51% of Indonesian adolescents aged 13 to 15 have been exposed to tobacco marketing online, and among them, 41% reported seeing tobacco promotions by influencers or celebrities on social media platforms. Moreover, evidence suggests that non-smokers who are exposed to e-cigarette content are 2.8 times more likely to experiment with vaping in the future (Villanti et al., 2015).

This marketing approach by utilizing social media and influencer endorsements is also used to promote conventional cigarettes. Initially, conventional cigarette advertisements were



broadcast on television with limited broadcast hours, namely from 09.30 pm to 05.00 am (Government Regulation Number 50 of 2005 concerning the Implementation of Private Broadcasting Institutions). Similar to e-cigarettes, exposure to conventional cigarette content has also been found to encourage behavior to consume cigarettes (Prabandari & Dewi, 2016). In addition, conventional cigarette products are now also targeting young people who are the largest users of social media (Septiono et al., 2022). Indonesia could try to take an approach to controlling e-cigarette marketing by adopting advertising standards according to the level of the content. For example, there are the UK's Advertising Standard of Authority (ASA) and Committee of Advertising Practise (CAP). ASA takes measures against e-cigarette promotions that violate advertising rules while CAP issued an Enforcement Notice to advertisers, emphasizing the crackdown on ads for vapes and e-cigarettes that breach established guidelines (Advertising Standards Authority, 2024).

CAP rules that advertisers cannot directly or indirectly market nicotine-containing e-cigarettes that aren't licensed as medicines on most social media. Whether it's paid or non-paid posts, e-cigarette promotion on social media is prohibited and only allowed on company websites. Even then, they need to follow the terms to not appeal and sell the products to consumers below 18<sup>th</sup> ages and to only insert factual claims about the products. The Enforcement Notice was sent to e-cigarette manufacturers and retailers with sanction to anyone unwilling to comply (Advertising Standards Authority, 2024). These kinds of measures could become a protection against e-cigarette exposure towards young people, especially someone below the age limit while also preventing the positive stigma of e-cigarettes that could be spread to them through social media. Without social media enforcement, the law banning e-cigarette ads by social media companies (Meta, TikTok, etc) would just become a formality or "toothless" law considering self-regulation by social media platforms doesn't work (Jancey et al., 2024). Given that social media algorithms prioritize highly engaging content, e-cigarette promotions, particularly those featuring influencers and interactive elements like giveaways, are likely to reach a wide audience, including underage users. The implications of this exposure highlight the need for regulatory measures that restrict the visibility of e-cigarette promotions to vulnerable demographics and ensure that online or social media platforms enforce compliance with age restrictions more effectively.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that influencer marketing, as a form of user-generated content (UGC), significantly influences public perception of e-cigarettes on Indonesian social media. Popular influencers make vaping content appealing to youth by framing e-cigarettes as lifestyle products rather than nicotine-based substances. Most content lacks health warnings and presents vaping in a positive or neutral tone, contributing to its normalization among adolescents. This portrayal, shaped through Framing Theory, emphasizes aesthetics and social acceptance while downplaying risks. The absence of strict regulations, especially on youth-focused platforms, allows e-cigarettes a broader digital presence than traditional tobacco. The findings stress the urgent need for comprehensive policies addressing both paid and organic content, along with stronger enforcement of age restrictions and health warnings.



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