A Content Analysis of QR Code-Directed Websites Marketed on Cigarette Packs in China

Deana Trimble, BS; Lingwei Yu, MS; Kevin Welding, PhD; Joanna Cohen, PhD; Katherine Clegg Smith, PhD

Background
Quick Response codes, commonly known as “QR codes”, are used widely in China for mobile payment, marketing, public transportation, and various other applications. In this study, we examined the content of QR code-directed websites on cigarette packs collected in China.

Methods
• In February 2017, 739 unique cigarette packs were collected from Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Kunming, and Chengdu using a systematic protocol
• Cigarette packs were initially coded by two independent coders for presence of QR codes on packaging
• 115 cigarette packs were identified to have QR codes
• These codes were scanned using the WeChat app. The subsequent websites were double coded for required verification, the type, age- and health-related statements, engagement strategies, and marketing appeals
• Unique websites were identified based on website content

Results
From the 739 unique cigarette packs, 115 packs (16%) had a QR code on the packaging. Of the 115 QR codes, there were 25 (22%) unique websites, but due to a legal statement for one site, 24 websites were analyzed:

Website Content:
• 19 (79%) brand-specific websites; 5 (21%) social media websites
• 21 (88%) did not have age-restricted site access
• 17 (71%) did not mention health-related risks associated with product usage
• 14 (58%) had required verification such as phone number, location service enablement, and permission to view WeChat profile

Engagement Strategies:
• 9 (38%) had product authenticity verification
• 7 (29 %) had contests and giveaways
• 6 (25%) had a prompt to follow on social media
• 4 (17%) had advertisements for new or existing products

Website Appeals:
• 13 (54%) had national appeals
• 3 (13%) had youth appeals

Conclusions
The tobacco industry in China uses QR codes on cigarette packs for marketing purposes such as social media recruitment, contests and giveaways, and product advertisement. It is important to understand where packs send consumers online and what messages they receive. It is also important to consider QR codes on packaging when drafting policy.

Examples of QR-directed websites

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