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Electronic cigarette retailers use Pokémon Go to market products

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Recently, we witnessed a new marketing strategy in which vape shops and online e-cigarette retailers have harnessed the popularity of the interactive smartphone game Pokémon Go to promote vaping products. This approach combines the strengths of recent and traditional strategies thought to be effective in promoting tobacco use to adolescents and young adults: 1) cartoons¹; tobacco product placement in video games^{2,3}; and 2) interactive promotional contests^{4,5}.

Pokémon Go (created by the game developer Niantic⁶) is an augmented reality videogame for smartphones that utilizes the phone's Global Positioning System (GPS) system to identify real-world locations containing a variety of different Pokémon (i.e., cartoon creatures) that appear on the phone screen overlaid on a real-world background (Figure 1). The game's primary goal is for the player to travel in the real world, capture Pokémon and send them into battle against other Pokémon at "gyms". To facilitate gameplay, Niantic has designated numerous real-world locations as "PokéStops" (i.e., locations where users can obtain tools to increase their power).

The majority of these PokéStops have been repurposed from Ingress, Niantic's previous augmented reality videogame^{7,8}. Using Ingress, Niantic partnered with several businesses to promote products⁹, and Niantic has similarly partnered with retail establishments to sponsor PokéStops¹⁰ and/or gyms (e.g., at approximately 3000 McDonalds Japan locations¹¹), in an effort to leverage the game as a marketing tool to increase foot traffic. Anecdotal evidence suggests that several other retail establishments are already unofficially taking advantage of Pokémon Go to make their businesses more attractive to players, by promoting the PokéStops that happen to be in close proximity and/or by placing a "lure" (i.e., a powerful in-game item that increases Pokémon at the location)¹².

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We observed numerous instances online (i.e., Twitter, promotional emails, blogs, and websites) of e-cigarette businesses harnessing the popularity of Pokémon Go to market their products. For example, in July 2016 Joyetech—an online e-cigarette retailer—sent a promotional email urging its customers to post “a picture of your Pokemon and Joyetech device” to Facebook for a chance to win a new e-cigarette device (Figure 2). Additionally, online retailers have extolled the virtues of both vaping and playing Pokémon Go¹³. From July to October 2016 (i.e., as of this report), several vape shops and online retailers have incorporated Pokémon Go as part of promotions on Twitter, linking game performance with discounts on their products (e.g., “...show us a rare Pokemon that we don’t have and get 10% off entire purchase!”; “Check out our Pokémon Go sale! Level 10=5%, Level 20=10% OFF STORE WIDE!!!!”; “Come to our store, we just dropped a lure out...”).

Vape shops have also staged in-person events combining Pokémon Go play and interactive e-cigarette promotional contests. Figure 3 (left panel) shows an advertisement for an event at a vape shop in the Los Angeles area featuring “Lures, Pizza, DJ, Giveaways, and Prizes all night long at the Cloudscape Mural PokeStop”. Additionally, Planet Vape sponsored an event (“Pokemon Go Planet Vape Meetup!”) announcing that their store was a PokéStop (“We are lucky to have a Pokéstop just outside the front door!”) and offering prizes for best Pokémon caught in their shop¹⁴. Finally, Yelp (a website featuring crowd-sourced reviews of local businesses) recently introduced a “PokeStop Nearby” filter whereby reviewers can identify businesses (including vape shops) with a PokéStop in close proximity. Using this filter in a Yelp search for “vape shop”, we identified 19 shops in the City of Los Angeles that potentially were in range of a PokéStop. An in-person audit of 8 randomly selected shops revealed that 6 of the shops had PokéStops within range of the front door of the shop. Of these, one shop had a sign outside explicitly promoting their products using Pokémon Go (Figure 3: right panel), while another promoted their products using other cartoon images.

Interactive, augmented reality gaming represents a powerful new marketing opportunity for purveyors of e-cigarettes and other tobacco products, and it is apparent that e-cigarette retailers are taking advantage of Pokémon Go’s popularity to market their products. Since there are currently no age restrictions on playing Pokémon Go (a major demographic for Pokémon Go is adolescents under age 18 and the average player is 25 years old¹⁵), this game-based promotional strategy could increase tobacco marketing exposure among adolescents and young adult non-users, increasing their risk for future initiation^{16–21}. Further research is warranted to determine whether non-tobacco users visit vape shops and/or initiate e-cigarette use after being exposed to these advertisements via game playing, and whether current e-cigarette users increase use as a result of game play.

Policies specifically prohibiting the use of Pokémon Go and other cartoons/video games to promote e-cigarettes and related products²² should be considered, as this would be consistent with both current U.S. legal agreements by major tobacco companies to avoid use of cartoons in their advertisements (i.e., the Master Settlement Agreement), as well as the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control’s comprehensive ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products (i.e., Article 13). Given that Niantic maintains control over which areas can be designated as PokéStops and gyms, and that they have been responsive to requests to remove gameplay from certain locations

(e.g., Hiroshima Memorial Park, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC²³), it is possible that Niantic could be a willing partner in future regulatory efforts.

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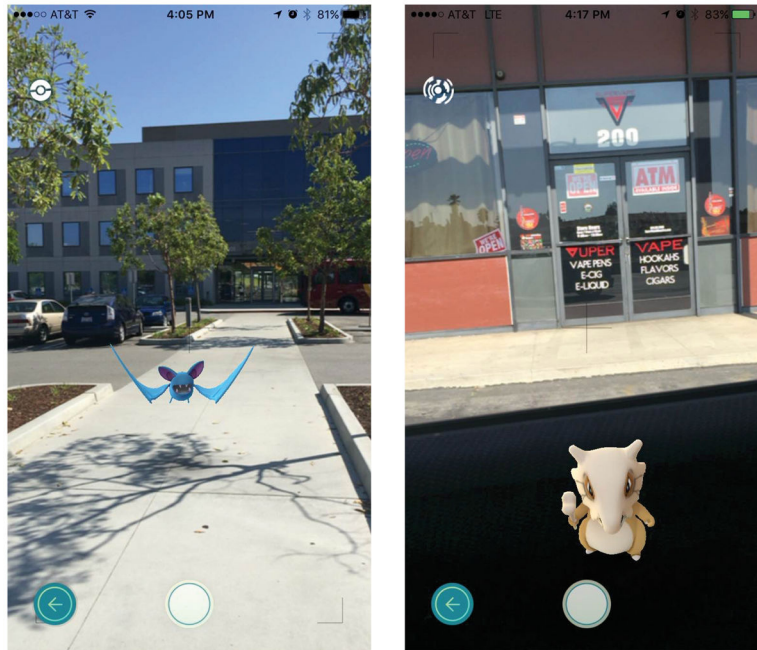


Figure 1. Smartphone screenshots of Pokemon images overlaid on real-world backgrounds (left panel: USC Department of Preventive Medicine; right panel: Los Angeles-based vape shop).



Figure 2. A promotional advertisement sent by the e-cigarette retailer Joyetech, encouraging customers to post pictures of a Pokémon with a Joyetech device.



Figure 3.

A flyer advertising an in-person event combining Pokémon Go gameplay, music, and product giveaways (left panel) and a sign outside a Los Angeles vape shop using Pokémon Go to promote its products (right panel).