Promotion of waterpipe tobacco use, its variants and accessories in young adult newspapers: a content analysis of message portrayal

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Abstract

The objective of our study was to identify waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisements and those that promoted a range of products and accessories used to smoke waterpipe tobacco. The content of these advertisements was analyzed to understand the messages portrayed about waterpipe tobacco smoking in young adult (aged 18–30) newspapers. The study methods include monitoring of six newspapers targeting young adults from four major cities in the Southeastern United States over a 6-month period. A total of 87 advertisements were found; 73.5% (64) were distinct and content analyzed. The study results showed that of the advertisements analyzed, 25% advertised waterpipe tobacco smoking, 54.7% featured waterpipe tobacco smoking and other tobacco use, 14.1% featured non-tobacco waterpipe variants (i.e. vaporizers), and 6.3% featured waterpipe apparatus accessories (e.g. charcoal, hoses). The sociability (34%) and sensuality (29.7%) of waterpipe smoking were promoted themes. Alternative to cigarette use messages (3.1%), and harm-reduction messages (17.1%) emphasized that smoking waterpipe tobacco using the featured accessory or waterpipe variant was a healthier experience than cigarette smoking. The study concluded that the messages that promoted waterpipe tobacco smoking to young adults are parallel to those used to promote cigarette use. Tobacco control professionals should continue to monitor young adult newspapers as a source of waterpipe-related advertising.

Introduction

In an effort to reduce and prevent tobacco use among young people, the United States (US) federal government passed the landmark Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (TCA) in 2009 to authorize the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to regulate the manufacture, distribution and marketing of cigarettes, smokeless and roll-your-own tobacco. A ban on characterizing flavors (e.g. strawberry, grape) in cigarettes, with the exception of menthol, has also been implemented. While trend data show a steady decline in cigarette smoking [1], rates of flavored novel tobacco products, such as waterpipe tobacco, persist in USA [2]. The waterpipe is an apparatus used to smoke flavored and sweetened tobacco (referred to as shisha) [3]; the smoke is drawn through water and the smoker inhales it using a hose [4].

Waterpipe tobacco use is emerging as a popular behavior among US young adults. National estimates of past 30-day waterpipe tobacco use in USA are 9.6% among young adults [5], with sample-specific estimates ranging from 6.9 to 24.0% [6–11]. Whites [12] or people of Arab ethnicity [13] and those who have higher education levels [14] are more likely to smoke waterpipe tobacco.
Some reports suggest that males and females use hookah at similar rates [15]. Waterpipe tobacco smoking rates in USA are consistent with those among young adults in other Western and Middle Eastern countries, with rates ranging from 6 to 33% [16].

Smoking waterpipe tobacco is dangerous, and their smokers are exposed to similar amounts of nicotine and carbon monoxide [17–20] as cigarette smokers. Smoke from waterpipe tobacco contains many of the same carcinogenic toxicants [20] as cigarettes. Despite the deleterious short- and long-term health effects caused by its use [21], waterpipe tobacco smoking is not currently subject to FDA regulation. Though tobacco use is addressed broadly in the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control’s (WHO FCTC) prohibition of tobacco sales to and by minors (Article 16) [21], waterpipe tobacco smoking is not specifically addressed by any aspect of the WHO FCTC. An increase in the consumption of waterpipe tobacco smoking, along with lack of regulation, may offset declines seen in cigarette use in USA and may contribute to growing prevalence rates globally.

Many young adult waterpipe smokers believe that the passage of the tobacco smoke through the water serves as a filter for any potential harmful agent [6, 11, 12, 22]. As such, they often report that waterpipe tobacco smoking is less harmful and less addictive than cigarette smoking [10]. The enticing smell and taste of the flavored waterpipe tobacco also provide a more pleasant, less-irritating smoking experience than cigarettes for many young adults [22–24]. Young adult waterpipe tobacco smokers also believe that it is more socially acceptable and fashionable than cigarette smoking [10, 25].

Perhaps, these beliefs originate from unregulated marketing by the waterpipe tobacco industry. It is well established that the tobacco industry aggressively targeted young adults by promoting cigarette smoking as a means to satisfy the unique psychosocial needs and desires [26] that occur with their age-appropriate life transitions (e.g. seeking employment, developing new social networks and environments) [27]. Cigarette tobacco marketing strategies targeted to young adults have included price incentives [28] and promotions in venues popular among young adults, such as nightclubs and bars [29]. Cigarette marketing campaigns also highlighted the expected effects of smoking, such as its social acceptability [30], ability to produce positive effect and reduce stress [31] and sexual allure [32].

In an effort to understand one form of waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisement, recently Primack et al. [33] found that social aspects and psychological effects of hookah smoking, such as relaxation and pleasure, were themes advertised on websites for hookah tobacco smoking establishments. Carroll et al. [34] found that attractiveness, sexuality, sociability and exoticness were portrayed in a sample of 61 hookah-related videos found on YouTube. Consistent with themes found in these studies, Akl et al. [35] found that social appeal and relaxation, as well as affordability, sensory qualities (taste, smell, sight of smoking, sound of bubbling) and the convenience of waterpipe cafes, bars or lounges were common motives for waterpipe smoking. Taken together, these studies suggest that the waterpipe tobacco smoking messages that have been found in media typically used by young adults (e.g. the internet and social media) may parallel those messages found in young adult cigarette advertisements.

An important research priority that has emerged from the TCA includes understanding communication channels and messages that promote novel tobacco use such as waterpipe smoking [36]. To our knowledge, only the studies by Primack et al. and Carroll et al. have examined waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisements found on the internet and social media. The present study adds to this body of research by examining a snapshot of waterpipe tobacco-related newspaper advertisements found in a sample of young adult newspapers in the Southeastern United States. We identified waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisements, as well as a range of advertisements that featured the waterpipe apparatus and its accessories (i.e. charcoals) and non-tobacco waterpipe variants. We defined non-tobacco waterpipe variants as devices (i.e. electronic vaporizers) that mimic a traditional waterpipe.
apparatus, but are heated electrically and designed for non-tobacco use (see an example at www.vape-world.com). We sought to understand the types of messages portrayed in these advertisements, specifically those that have been portrayed in cigarette advertisements (i.e. socialization, price incentives, place-based initiatives). Consistent with prior work [37], we identified the major focus of emphasis of the advertisements by classifying them as those that either highlighted the unique psychological or psychosocial needs of young adults (i.e. were needs-focused) or those that highlighted the attributes of the waterpipe apparatus or waterpipe variant itself (i.e. were product-focused). Understanding the types of messaging that portrays waterpipe tobacco smoking to young adults may be helpful in developing interventions that seek to prevent the initiation or reduction of its use among young adults. Further, these preliminary findings may have implications for waterpipe tobacco use counter advertising efforts and may add to the body of scientific evidence that informs policy efforts that seek to expand the TCA regulatory policies to include waterpipe tobacco.

Methods

Sample
Initially, we examined college-based newspapers in the Atlanta area for the presence of waterpipe advertisements, during which we found no waterpipe-related advertisements at that time. We broadened our search for waterpipe-related advertisements in young adult newspapers in four major metropolitan cities (Atlanta, Tampa, Tallahassee and Miami) in two Southeastern states. We selected these areas because they are major cities in states documented to have the highest per capita representation of advertised online hookah establishments [33]. As such, broadening our search for print advertisements to these areas was a feasible approach. We defined young adult newspapers as those that targeted individuals 18–30 years of age. We obtained a listing of young adult newspapers for these areas from US Newspapers, an online directory of newspapers organized by states in USA [38]. A total of six young adult newspapers were monitored for the four major metropolitan areas. The newspapers were obtained from local kiosks (only if available in the metropolitan Atlanta area) and were also retrieved from the Internet. Among the newspapers monitored, five were monthly publications, whereas one was published weekly. We searched for waterpipe-related advertisements in these six newspapers for 6 continuous months (August 2011 to January 2012).

Measures
We developed a codebook, adapted from Curry et al. [37], that captured the waterpipe tobacco-related material found in the sample advertisements. For each advertisement, we documented the name and issue of the newspaper where it was found, its date of publication, and the advertisements’ size and placement within the print media. We coded for the presence (either an image or printed text) of waterpipe tobacco smoking; shisha, including its brand name and flavor; the waterpipe apparatus and its accessories (e.g. hoses and charcoal). We also coded for the presence of non-tobacco waterpipe variants (i.e. electronic vaporizers) and other tobacco products (i.e. cigarettes) found in the advertisements. The presence of the websites, including social media sites and the name of the sponsoring merchant shop portrayed within the advertisements, was also documented. Finally for each advertisement, we coded for the major themes presented, the advertisements’ selling proposition and its focus of emphasis.

Major themes
Specific themes thought to be related to waterpipe smoking including sociability [33, 35]; romantic or erotic content [39]; presence of a harm-reduction message (i.e. waterpipe is safer than cigarette smoking) [35, 40]; and alternative to cigarette smoking messages [35] were documented. These themes were selected based on prior evidence that suggested their importance for waterpipe tobacco smoking behavior.
Selling proposition and focus of emphasis
Consistent with the work of Curry et al. [37], the advertisements’ selling proposition and its focus of emphasis were documented. For selling proposition, we documented if important aspects of the product, such as taste, quality, or price, were highlighted. With regard to focus of emphasis, we documented the major emphasis of both the imagery and the text of the advertisements and categorized this emphasis as either needs-focused or product-focused. Needs-focused advertisements were defined as those that highlighted the psychological or psychosocial needs of the young adult consumers and waterpipe smoking’s fulfillment of those needs. Product-based advertisements were defined as those that focused on the attributes (i.e. physical characteristics) of the waterpipe product.

Establishment features
For waterpipe tobacco smoking establishment advertisements, such as those for hookah cafes, bars and lounges, we documented if the establishments provided waterpipes or made waterpipe tobacco smoking available to customers. We also coded for specific characteristics of the establishments, such as the provision of alcohol, food or entertainment [33, 41].

Reliability
The advertisements were coded by two independent raters who were trained on the purpose of the study and on the conduct of content analysis. We tested for inter-rater reliability on a random sample of 10% of the advertisements. These advertisements were not included in the final sample. Kappa scores ranged from 0.80 to 1.00 for the variables included in the codebook.

Data analysis
The content analysis was primarily quantitative, in that we recorded the frequency of messages related to waterpipe tobacco smoking found in our sample of advertisements. Data analyses were conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to calculate and summarize the presence of waterpipe tobacco smoking and other major themes of interest in the study. Associations between major themes and the focus of emphasis of the advertisements were also analyzed using chi-square analyses.

Results
Prevalence of the advertisements
A total of 87 waterpipe-related advertisements were found. Of these, 23 (26.4%) were duplicate advertisements. Sixty-four (73.5%) distinct advertisements were analyzed for this study. Half (55.3%, n = 35) of the advertisements were less than half a page, with 28.1% (n = 18) at half a page and 17.2% (n = 11) were a full page in length. Across the six newspapers, an average of 1.6 waterpipe-related advertisements per month was found.

Of the 64 unique advertisements, 25% (n = 16) advertised waterpipe tobacco smoking. These advertisements consisted of those that featured shisha tobacco, the waterpipe apparatus and advertisements of establishments that promoted or offered waterpipe tobacco smoking. Over half (54.7%, n = 35) of the advertisements featured waterpipe tobacco smoking and other tobacco products (i.e. cigarettes). The remainder consisted of advertisements for non-tobacco waterpipe variants, such as electronic vaporizer devices (14.1%, n = 9) and waterpipe apparatus accessories, such as charcoals, hoses and hookah stones (rocks used as a heating element in lieu of charcoals, 6.3%, n = 4).

Advertising sponsorship
Over a third (31.3%, n = 20) of the advertisements were sponsored by tobacco smoke shops (those selling tobacco products, i.e. Smoke 911), whereas 23.4% (n = 15) were sponsored by adult (18 years and older) novelty shops or those selling aids purporting to increase the pleasurableness of sexual activity. Establishments, such as restaurants, bars or nightclubs, that featured or promoted waterpipe smoking sponsored 20.3% of the advertisements. The remaining sponsors (17.2%, n = 11) consisted
of those that sold waterpipe accessories such as hookah charcoals or hoses and vaporizers (i.e. Herb Iron, VapeWorld). Few (7.8%, \(n = 5\)) advertisements were sponsored by waterpipe vendors (those that sell waterpipe, shisha and waterpipe accessories, i.e. Hookah John).

**Portrayal of waterpipe tobacco smoking**

To understand the manner in which waterpipe tobacco smoking was portrayed, we examined 51 advertisements that specifically highlighted waterpipe tobacco smoking (\(n = 16\)) and waterpipe tobacco smoking and other tobacco products (\(n = 35\)). One-fourth (25.0%, \(n = 16\)) of these advertisements included images of the waterpipe apparatus, which were displayed by colorful (e.g. gold, green, red) and ornate illustrations of waterpipes of various sizes and shapes. Images were not used to portray other tobacco products, such as cigarettes and cigars. Rather these products were presented only using black and white text. Of these 51 advertisements, the phrase ‘hookah tobacco’ was found in 15.7% (\(n = 8\)), whereas the word ‘shisha’, the sweetened, flavored tobacco smoked in a waterpipe, was found in only 3.9% (\(n = 2\)). Notably, 43.1% (\(n = 22\)) of these advertisements did not include the word ‘tobacco’ anywhere on the advertisement. Only 3.1% (\(n = 2\)) of the advertisements portrayed an individual smoking a waterpipe.

**Themes**

Table I presents the themes, selling proposition, focus of emphasis and establishment features that were found in the 64 advertisements. The most common (37.5%) theme was one that portrayed a season (i.e. fall) or holiday (i.e. Christmas). Over 30% of the advertisements had sociability as a theme. This theme was most often featured in the advertisements for the establishments (i.e. bars, lounges, restaurants) that provided hookah smoking. Sociability was exemplified by images of groups of individuals who appeared to be celebrating and by phrases such as ‘come chill and experience the new social lounge’, ‘come celebrate’, ‘mix and mingle’ and ‘party the night away’.

The romanticism/erotica theme, exclusively found in advertisements sponsored by adult novelty shops, was also featured in the advertisements. Phrases that conveyed sexual allure, such as ‘blast into sexy with us’ and ‘give erotic’, were commonly featured along with colorful images of a hookah pipe or with the text ‘hookah pipes’ found on the advertisements.

Notably, a sizable proportion (20.3%, \(n = 13\)) of the advertisements that promoted non-tobacco waterpipe variants to smoke shisha included harm-reduction (\(n = 11\)) or alternative to smoking (\(n = 2\)) messages. The harm-reduction messages emphasized using waterpipe variants (i.e. vaporizers) to provide a healthier smoking experience. These messages were emphasized by terms such as ‘just what the doctor ordered’, ‘clean’, ‘cleaner burn’, ‘smoke more diffused’ and ‘smoother smoke’.

The alternative to smoking messages promoted the use of the vaporizer in settings where cigarette smoking was prohibited. Phrases such as ‘if you work in a building that’s not cool with “smoking” … [this] is a game changer’ exemplified the alternative to smoking message. Notably, none of our sample advertisements included health warnings or discussed the dangers of waterpipe tobacco smoking.

**Establishment features**

Advertisements for establishments that featured waterpipe smoking (20.3%, \(n = 13\)) had notable characteristics. Along with promoting the availability of waterpipes or waterpipe smoking, these advertisements also emphasized the availability of food, entertainment (i.e. live band) and a relaxing environment. Phrases such as ‘Free V.I.P. section’, ‘experience the Chic Life’, ‘don’t miss out on the future of Atlanta’s night life’, and ‘newest and most upscale hookah lounge’ exemplified the luxury of hookah smoking. It is important to note that none of the advertisements featured or promoted waterpipe that contained alcohol inside. However, some of the waterpipe establishment advertisements promoted the availability of alcohol. Alcohol was featured in 15.6% (\(n = 10\)) of the advertisements. Of those, 90%
(n = 9) promoted alcohol use, whereas 10% (n = 1) targeted non-alcohol drinking young adults with the phrase’... comfortable way to spend an alcohol-free night’.

**Selling proposition**

Quality of the product was an important selling proposition in the advertisements, with nearly 40% of the advertisements highlighting the quality of the waterpipe apparatus or its accessories (39.1%, n = 25). Terms such as ‘premium’, ‘ultimate’, ‘timeless’, ‘legendary’, ‘distinct’, ‘most authentic’ and ‘upscale’ were often used to describe the quality of the waterpipe apparatus or its accessories. Price was also a common selling proposition, and appeared as either a discounted cost for a waterpipe smoking session by an establishment or as a financial incentive provided to the reader by the tobacco shops or hookah vendors. The cost of a waterpipe smoking session was featured in 9.4% (n = 6) of the advertisements. Discounted costs for hookah bars or price specials for waterpipe smoking sessions ranged from US $10 to $15. The featured price of the waterpipe was listed as US $24.95 in 6.3% (n = 4) of advertisements. These advertisements, though distinct, were sponsored by the same vendor. Over half (59.4%, n = 38) of the sample advertisements included some type of financial incentive, including the presence of a coupon (29.7%, n = 19), sweepstakes (10.9%, n = 7) or specials (9.4%, n = 6). Some advertisements provided free samples of waterpipe accessories (i.e. waterpipe coals) with the redemption of a coupon.

Additionally, we coded for the presence of Internet and social media such as a Facebook or Twitter link in the advertisements. The majority (70%) of the advertisements listed a merchant website address (www.hookahjohn.com). Notably, 18.8% of the advertisements included some form of social media, either by image or text. Most advertisements included a Facebook (14.1%) or Twitter icon (12.5%) for the merchant’s site. One advertisement (1.6%) included Quick Response (QR) codes that allowed readers to scan the code with mobile devices and be directed to the corresponding websites.

**Focus of emphasis**

Moreover, we recoded whether the advertisements were promoting the product itself or promoted a particular need that the product would meet for the audience. The majority of the advertisements were product-focused (89.1%), highlighting attributes, such as the physical characteristics of the waterpipe or the taste and smell of the shisha, whereas 10.9% were need-focused, emphasizing the psychological needs (i.e. positive affect) that waterpipe tobacco smoking would fulfill.

**Discussion**

In the context of other legislative difficulties associated with the waterpipe industry (i.e. waterpipe tobacco not subject to the same level of taxation as cigarettes, lack of health warnings on waterpipe tobacco [33, 40]), unregulated advertising of waterpipe tobacco smoking is occurring. The increasing prevalence and promotion of waterpipe cafes in communities around USA [33, 40] and promotion of waterpipe tobacco smoking, its accessories, and non-tobacco waterpipe variants on the internet and social media [33, 34] are but a few examples of the
rogue, unregulated advertising by the waterpipe tobacco industry. To better understand the scope of waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisements, we documented the presence of waterpipe tobacco-related advertisements in print media that targeted young adults and identified specific messages that promoted its use. We found waterpipe tobacco-related messages in 64 unique advertisements in young adult newspapers in four major metropolitan cities in the Southeastern United States. The most widely circulated newspaper in our sample had approximately 211,000 readers per month that were under the age of 35 years [42]. These figures speak to the reach of the advertisements and the substantial number of young adults who were potentially exposed to the waterpipe-specific messages.

Notably, 25% of the advertisements in our sample exclusively advertised waterpipe tobacco smoking. Over half (54%) of the advertisements featured multiple tobacco products, including waterpipes, cigarettes and cigars. Notably, both the waterpipe tobacco smoking-only advertisements and those that featured multiple tobacco products appeared to subtly frame waterpipe tobacco use as distinct from other tobacco product use. Consistent with findings from Primack et al., over 40% of the waterpipe tobacco advertisements in our sample did not include the word ‘tobacco’ on the advertisement. Less than 5% of our sample advertisements included the term ‘shisha’, the flavored tobacco that is smoked in waterpipes. Given that young adults may not be aware that shisha is tobacco, this finding is a cause for concern. The use of color and visually appealing images were also used to make distinctions between waterpipe tobacco and conventional tobacco products such as cigarettes and cigars. Some advertisements featured colorful images of waterpipes while displaying cigarettes and other conventional tobacco products in black and white text. Taken together, these findings indicate that perhaps our sample advertisers attempted to portray waterpipe tobacco use as a behavior that is unconnected to other tobacco product use.

Alternatives to cigarette use and harm-reduction messages were found in the advertisements. Notably, these advertisements featured shisha, waterpipe apparatus accessories (e.g. charcoals and hoses) and non-tobacco waterpipe variants, such as waterpipe stones or electronic waterpipe devices (i.e. vaporizers) that appear to be similar to electronic cigarettes. The alternative to cigarette messages promoted the ability to smoke a waterpipe tobacco using a vaporizer in settings where cigarette smoking was prohibited. Further, the harm-reduction messages emphasized that smoking waterpipe tobacco using the featured accessory or waterpipe variant was a healthier experience than cigarette smoking. These messages were portrayed by phrases such as ‘you get a cleaner burn’ and ‘a smoother smoke’. The availability of these advertisements perhaps is an indication of the growing reach and popularity of non-tobacco waterpipe variant devices that can be used to smoke shisha in lieu of a waterpipe. Recent studies have documented the marketing of these new variants and their claims of reduced harm [40, 43, 44]. The harm-reduction claims raise cause for concern, however, as these products have not yet been tested for their reduced toxicity or disease risk. As such, these claims may be misleading and may affect consumers’ perception of risk and influence their waterpipe tobacco smoking behavior. The TCA prohibits ‘reduced harm’ claims for cigarettes without an FDA order to allow marketing [36]. The fact that reduced harm of waterpipe tobacco smoking messages are promoted and waterpipe tobacco is not included in the TCA is troubling. Additional research that examines the toxicity of these products and their potential impact for reducing harm is needed. Continued monitoring of the types of non-tobacco waterpipe variant products that are available and their expansion in the marketplace are also warranted, as these products may have implications for future tobacco control legislation.

Though portrayed as distinct from other tobacco products, the messages that promoted waterpipe tobacco smoking were parallel to those used to promote cigarette use to young adults. The sample advertisements highlighted the attributes of the waterpipe tobacco or its accessories using terms such as ‘premier’, ‘distinct’ or ‘legendary’, perhaps conveying the message that waterpipe use was associated with a sense of sophistication.
Advertisements that use euphemistic terms, such as ‘premium’, to describe the quality of waterpipe products, along with the lack of health warnings, may also minimize the harmfulness of waterpipe tobacco smoking. Use of these terms has been documented in cigarette advertisements [45]. Similarly to cigarette smoking promotions [29, 46], place-based initiatives were also used to promote waterpipe tobacco use. Waterpipe tobacco is often smoked in hookah cafes, bars, restaurants or other establishments that are dedicated to hookah tobacco smoking [47]. Over 20% of the sample advertisements were sponsored by restaurants, bars, nightclubs or lounges that promoted waterpipe tobacco smoke. Consistent with prior research [33], these advertisements highlighted the ‘traditional and authentic’ qualities of establishment, as well as the availability of food and alcohol. Though a practice that is commonplace in the Middle East [48], it is important to note that none of the advertisements featured waterpipe that contained alcohol inside. In particular, an advertisement emphasized the alcohol-free environment of the hookah establishment. As noted by prior studies, establishments that do not sell alcohol possibly target those who cannot yet legally drink or are non-drinkers [25].

Socialization and entertainment (e.g. live music and big-screen televisions) were also themes contained in the advertisements sponsored by waterpipe smoking establishments. Many advertisements emphasized the relaxing and inviting atmosphere of the establishments and some suggested socializing with friends while smoking a waterpipe (i.e. ‘smoke with friends at iSesh’). These appear to be important motives for waterpipe tobacco smoking among young adults [35, 40, 49], as other studies have found that waterpipe tobacco smoking is commonly smoked in groups [23] and relaxation, pleasure and entertainment are themes that have appeared in other waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisements [33, 34]. Exposure to these types of messages may reinforce the perception that waterpipe tobacco smoking is a socially acceptable and fashionable behavior among young adults [10, 25, 40, 49].

Of note, the sensuality of waterpipe smoking was promoted in almost 30% of the advertisements; this theme was found in advertisements sponsored by adult novelty shops. Sensuality was often projected by images of provocatively dressed women. Women participants in a recent qualitative study of waterpipe tobacco smoking in the Eastern Mediterranean Region alluded to the sensuality of waterpipe smoking, noting specifically that waterpipe smoking conveyed sexual allure [39]. Not surprisingly, the tobacco industry has historically used sensuality to market cigarette products [50], and the waterpipe tobacco industry is also using a similar tactic to promote waterpipe tobacco smoking.

Price and financial incentives, such as discounts on the price of waterpipes and ‘hookah bar happy hour specials’ offered by waterpipe smoking establishments, were common. Young adults have reported that they smoke waterpipe because it is more affordable than cigarettes and the cost of a waterpipe smoking session can be shared with friends [22]. Congruent with any new product promotion strategy, the availability of coupons and financial incentives contributes to the perception of the affordability of waterpipe smoking over cigarettes [22, 51]. Though we found no waterpipe advertisements in the college newspapers in Atlanta, some of our sample advertisements were targeted to college students. For example, some coupons were only valid with student identification, whereas others included the name of the college on the advertisement (i.e. ‘UCF’s oldest smoke shop’).

Our study was restricted in that the sample included newspaper advertisements from one region of USA. Our data were also cross-sectional in nature and newspapers were examined during a brief period of time. Thus, our findings may not represent all waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisements nationally or at other times during the calendar year. The seasonal/holiday theme was prominent among the advertisements. The presence of this theme was most likely an artifact of time during data collection—the fall and winter months, which include major shopping holidays (i.e. Christmas). Advertisements found during other times of the year may promote different themes. Age range was the only demographic variable available for our sample newspapers. Access to other demographic
variables (e.g. race/ethnicity, education level, etc.) of the newspapers’ readers may have provided useful insight into which population groups, if any, were being subject to these messages. As such, our findings should be interpreted with caution.

Despite these limitations, our study makes an important contribution to the literature by highlighting messages that promoted waterpipe tobacco smoking, its variants and accessories in young adult newspapers. Though not conclusive evidence, our preliminary findings suggest that our sample advertisements were designed to convey the ability of waterpipe smoking to satisfy the psychosocial needs and desires (e.g. sociability and sexual allure), emphasize waterpipe tobacco smoking as a behavior that reduces harm and promote waterpipe tobacco smoking as an alternative to cigarette smoking. Many of the messages highlighted in the advertisements reflect the prevailing beliefs about waterpipe tobacco smoking among young adults [40]. However, we are unable to determine if these advertisements only reflect young adults’ waterpipe tobacco smoking beliefs or if the messages influence their waterpipe tobacco smoking beliefs.

In light of the passage of the TCA, the increased advertisement restrictions on flavored cigarette products, and evidence that documents the health risks associated with waterpipe tobacco smoking, policymakers and tobacco control professionals should continue to monitor waterpipe tobacco smoking advertisements to better inform intervention development and the expansion the TCA regulation of waterpipe tobacco products.

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Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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