

# “It Looks Like an Accessory”: Perception of Heated Tobacco Products and its Marketing Communication among Generation Z

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**BACKGROUND:** Heated tobacco products along with electronic cigarettes represent the current trend in nicotine use. These novel products are appealing to teenagers and young adults especially. Generation Z representatives are characterized as native digital and internet users who are exposed to online marketing intensively including tobacco and nicotine products marketing. **AIM:** The purpose of this study was to explore how Generation Z perceives the promotional techniques of HTP products (IQOS and glo) in the Czech Republic. **METHODS:** We conducted qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with Generation Z representatives (n = 12) having previous experience with heated tobacco products. Open coding method was used for qualitative data analysis. **RESULTS:** Our study shows that participants of Generation Z are highly influenced by modern

marketing techniques of tobacco industry. According to respondents, fashion and lifestyle events and influencer marketing were the main communication channels associated with heated tobacco promotion. Practical, stylish, innovative, odorless and healthier were the most frequently associated words with heated tobacco products from the respondents’ point of view. Most of the respondents use loyalty programs, benefits and discounts. **CONCLUSION:** Marketing communication of heated tobacco reflects the lifestyle demand of young adults. Perception of this products as innovative, stylish and healthier may contribute to normalization of tobacco and nicotine use. Advertisement, promotion and sponsorship of novel tobacco and nicotine products should be comprehensively banned to prevent their influence on children, adolescents and non-smokers.

**Keywords** | Heated Tobacco – IQOS – Glo – Tobacco Marketing – HTP – Generation Z

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Heated tobacco products (HTP) represent a heterogeneous spectrum of electronic devices and tobacco sticks belonging together with electronic cigarettes and nicotine pouches to the category of so-called new nicotine and tobacco products. The principle of using HTP is inhaling aerosol containing nicotine and other chemical compounds. The tobacco stick is heated in a heating blade or heated sealed chambers of the device at a temperature around 350 °C (Simonavicius et al., 2018).

In the Czech Republic, 7% of adult population (15+) reported regular or occasional usage of HTP in 2021 (Csémy et al., 2022). The highest prevalence (12.1%) was found amongst adolescents aged 15–24. Compared to the European region (Gallus et al., 2022; Laverty et al., 2021), the Czech Republic ranks among the countries with an above-average prevalence rate. Czech market served as a testing market for IQOS of Philip Morris in 2018 and beyond due to the weak legal regulation of novel tobacco products and high level of tobacco smokers here (Hejlová et al., 2019). Czech IQOS launch was massively promoted using conventional advertisement at the point of sales, promotion on the internet (websites, blogs, e-shops), influencer marketing, membership marketing, sales promotion (coupons, quantity discounts, free sampling), sponsorship or media relations. HTP products are promoted as a “healthier option” to cigarettes or even a cessation tool to quit smoking (e.g. in the Philip Morris’ campaign UnSmoke Your World). However, this marketing strategy has been criticized for being misleading, manipulative for namely two reasons: by creating an image that using HTP products is significantly “less harmful” to smoking, smokers are prevented from quitting at all. Secondly, by creating an attractive, technology and lifestyle-based campaigns, HTP are promoted as a part of aspirational lifestyle to adolescents and young adults, and they can serve as initiation products to even those who did not smoke previously (gateway hypothesis) (McKelvey et al., 2018; The Lancet, 2019).

Tobacco industry utilizes one of the most sophisticated and also ethically questionable marketing strategies in retail sector. They also allocate enormous resources to advertisement, promotion and sponsorship globally. For example, in 2020, four biggest transnational tobacco companies (so-called Big Tobacco) spent more than \$7.8 billion on tobacco products marketing in US market (Federal Trade Commission, 2021). They also use various lobbying strategies and tactics to effectively position HTP not as smoking or nicotine products (Hejlová, 2022). It is well known and scientifically described (Brown et al., 2022; Freeman et al., 2022), that tobacco industry marketing has been targeting vulnerable groups such as youth, non-smokers or women and tries to make their products highly appealing (using flavours, attractive design, celebrity marketing, loyalty programs or novel digital devices). The same marketing strategies that had been used in conventional cigarettes sixty years ago are being applied to novel tobacco and nicotine products today. A study by Chen-Sankey et al. (2023) proved that young adults (20–23 years) who are exposed to modified risk marketing claims of HTPs are more likely to believe them and initiate using them.

A study conducted in several European countries stated that young people are aware of the novel tobacco products, and warns about public health risks such as dual use of HTP and conventional cigarettes, which prolongs tobacco smoking and discourages smokers from quitting (quite contrary to the recent advertising campaign of Philip Morris International, which claims “Unsmoke”) (Gallus et al., 2022). As the tobacco industry targets their novel tobacco and nicotine products to the young adult population dominantly, it is necessary to explore how the advertisement and promotion have been perceived by the users themselves. In this paper we aim to explore on how Generation Z representatives perceive marketing communication of heated tobacco products in the Czech market.

Generation Z refers to the generation that was born in the 1990’s and raised in the 2000s during the most profound changes in the century, in a world of web, internet, smart phones, laptops, freely available networks and digital media (Dangmei & Singh, 2016). The lives of this generation, which includes the most active Internet users, are greatly influenced by technology and therefore they are exposed to online marketing strategies at very early age (Levickaite, 2010). According to the study by Sayyed and Gupta (2020) and Smith et al. (2023), Generation Z can be highly influenced on social media. Influencers are the principal aspects that have impact on purchasing power, so this generation tends to rely on their recommendations.

Generation Z is distinct in its consumption patterns, which can be categorized into four clusters: 1) Emphasis on innovation 2) The need for comfort 3) The need for security 4) Escapism (Wood, 2013). By the term “emphasis on innovation” we mean comfort in the virtual world and high expectations from technology. They place a strong emphasis on new technology advancements and continual progress. When purchasing technical products, Generation Z prefers those whose innovative features are immediately apparent in the product’s design (Wood, 2013). They want to keep up with other users and follow certain “fads” (i.e. trends) that they often see on social media (Król & Zdonek, 2020).

## 2 METHODS

The research was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews. The aim was to explore how Generation Z perceives the promotional techniques of HTP products (IQOS and glo) in the Czech Republic.

### 2.1 Study design

To investigate the ways in which individuals perceive the marketing messages of IQOS and glo in the Czech Republic, 12 interviews were conducted with selected participants. Research participants (members of Generation Z, aged 18 to 25) who have had previous experience with heated tobacco products consumption – answered 6 main questions divided into 3 themes about their perception of marketing strategies in the local market.

**Table 1** | Demographic data of the research sample (n = 12)

Respondent	Gender	Age	Status
R1	male	23	University student, part-time job
R2	male	21	University student
R3	male	22	University student, part-time job
R4	male	21	Full-time job
R5	female	20	University student
R6	female	23	University student, part-time job
R7	male	21	University student
R8	male	21	University student
R9	male	22	University student, part-time job
R10	male	23	University student, part-time job
R11	female	21	Full-time job
R12	female	22	University student, part-time job

## 2.2 Recruitment and data collection

Convenience sampling was used to obtain the research sample. The following criteria were defined for respondents to be included in the study: 1) members of Generation Z and over 18 years old, 2) previous experience with IQOS and/or glo, 3) Czech permanent or temporary residence, 4) consent to participate in the study.

An interview guide was developed by the research team (marketing experts in cooperation with addiction treatment specialist) to retain the flow of the conversation while keeping in mind researched topics and goal of the research. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the first quarter of 2021 in an online form due to the pandemic situation. The interviews were carried primarily using the social platform Messenger and FaceTime, while being recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed into a separate document. Six key questions were presented in order to get an insight into Generation Z’s perceptions of HTP marketing however the conversation remained open to questions arising from the responses.

## 2.3 Data analysis

A total of 12 interview recordings were transcribed, and the first thorough reading was performed. Data were analyzed using open coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). During the second reading, the replies were marked based on potentially beneficial statements, opinions, and behaviour patterns. Claims that appeared several times in participants’ responses and were closely related to research fields were selected for further investigation. Following that, the initial stage of the coding procedure was completed. Based on their logical relevance

to the data, the chosen categories (codes) were given names. Transcription, analysis and coding were processed manually in MS Word by the first author. To prevent observer bias and ensure validity we utilized repeated listening of the recordings and investigator triangulation (the second and the third author were involved in data analysis).

## 2.4 Ethical aspects of research

The study’s participation was voluntary and anonymous. To ensure respondents’ anonymity, coding with the letter R, as of “respondent,” and a serial number were used. All participants were informed about the process, nature of the study, and question topics in accordance with the study’s principles and goals. After that, each respondent signed a consent form to take part in the study. Respondents could withdraw from the study at any time and were not forced to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, notwithstanding the anonymity of the study. Due to data security, the recordings were erased after transcribing.

## 3 RESULTS

In the first part we describe characteristics of the research sample. Then 4 segments resulting from the data analysis is presented: 1) targeting, 2) spontaneous awareness, 3) associations and 4) perception of loyalty programs.

### 3.1 Research sample

For the aim of this study, 12 individuals who met the required criteria were interviewed. The research sample was dominated by men (8 men vs. 4 women). All of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 25, and they all lived in the Czech Republic. *Table 1* contains further socio-demographic information on the research sample.

### 3.2 The respondents’ perceptions on the targeting of HTP marketing strategies

On the basis of the analysis that was performed it was found that the majority of the respondents (10 out of 12) perceives the HTP communication as targeted on Generation Z and young people in general. One of the most common justifications was that technical products appeal to young people more, especially when they are promoted by influencers and celebrities to position the product as a status symbol.

*“Marketing of HTP is focused mainly on young people and people in productive age. People who appreciate design and style, because the new IQOS models look really great. In comparison with the first model of IQOS, it looked like one was holding a pen. Now it looks like an accessory.”* (R3)

The technical part of the product was mentioned most frequently, followed by the quick adaptability of young people to

technological changes. Sponsorship and presence at music festivals and events designed for young people were mentioned as well. Furthermore, influencer marketing of IQOS and glo was generally perceived by some respondents as a marketing technique for younger generation to present products on social media in an engaging way.

### 3.3 Spontaneous awareness of marketing practices

For the majority of the respondents, the first mentioned associated people with HTP were friends and family. The individual who first introduced them to HTP has remained the key association with this product. The effect of word-of-mouth marketing strongly dominated in research sample.

Display ads in points of sale – in newspaper stores and shopping malls where they offer HTP – were among the most discussed marketing practices. Sponsorships and partnerships were registered by three respondents with spontaneous knowledge. They cited the IQOS partnership at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (R6) and glo partnership at the Mercedes-Benz Prague Fashion Week (R11). Only two of the questioned respondents said they did not see any HTP promotion in Czech market. R1 claimed to have registered promotion in the Czech market two years ago, sparking a societal debate regarding the ethical level of social media promotion. He recalls that, despite the fact that it is marketed as a “healthier alternative,” it is still an addictive substance that should not be exposed to youngsters.

Three respondents were able to spontaneously name Czech and Slovak influencers who promoted HTP on Instagram and Twitch: Vanda Jandová (R12), Pavlína Jágrová (R11), František Košarištan as Fero Joke (R12), Eva Kramerová as Evelyn (R12), Matej Slažanský as Selassie (R3), and Petr Jiráček aka Xnapy (R3) were among the names mentioned. R3 observed influencers Selassie and Xnapy using IQOS on the “stream,” which is a live broadcast for computer gamers.

### 3.4 Respondents' associations with HTP in 3 words or phrases

In this part of our investigation, respondents were asked to describe IQOS or glo in 3 words or phrases. The aim of this research question was to map spontaneous associations with HTP. The most usually connected term with HTP, as seen in the table 2 below, is practicality. The phrase “practicality” refers to the ability to consume HTP in a variety of settings, such as at home, in a car, in a café, or in a bar. HTP, according to three respondents, is healthier, odor-free, and innovative. Three responders mentioned the word innovative as one of the features, while two others mentioned the adjectives modern and stylish. Negative words such as stinky and incompatible were mentioned by some respondents as a spontaneous association. Respondents also associate the HTP brands with an alternative choice, the future of smoking, social acceptance and taste. The future of smoking was stated by R11, who

smokes IQOS. Overall, the positive connotations outweighed the negative ones.

### 3.5 Experience with loyalty programs

Most respondents have some experience with loyalty program. Seven respondents confirmed that they are enrolled in a loyalty program of the HTP brands. They have either signed up for membership perks or been signed up by store staff. Three respondents went straight to the store to register, either because their equipment was broken or because they wanted to get a new one.

*“I went to the store to have my IQOS fixed when it had broken down. The service was great because it was free. That was when I registered.”* (R5).

R3 acknowledged the breakdown of the equipment and subsequent registration, for which he earned tobacco sticks and discounts for accessories.

*“Yes, I have experience because I came to IQOS when my device had broken down. They exchanged it for me and gave me a discount on the purchase if I buy an ashtray or replaceable attachments. I was also a member of the IQOS club. Once I brought a friend there. I think the discounts only apply to 3 or more contacts. As a result, I didn't take advantage of the discounts.”* (R3)

Tobacco companies recognize that personal recommendations from satisfied people work best for users, as seen by the fact that the majority of respondents started with HTP on the advice of close people and friends. Respondents were interested by the look and technological appeal and naturally asked their friends about the device, which was often their first contact with HTP. Loyalty programs encourage consumers to connect the human factor with the product and build trust through word of mouth.

*“In the very beginning, when IQOS was only starting in the Czech market, I remember having a few people in my social bubble, who shared always some posts on social media like: “Are you interested in IQOS? Text me...” IQOS created their network of people, who brought other people and had benefits, discounts or money from it.”* (R12)

Respondents who are not enrolled in the loyalty programs recognize the existence of a well-thought-out model, but they would not persuade anyone to buy tobacco products. However, if they knew of someone who was interested in HTP, they would recommend it for the benefits for both of them.

**Table 2** | Words describing HTP according to respondents

Word	Equivalent	Respondents, who used the word	Times mentioned
modern	-	R12, R2	2
stylish	elegant	R12, R2	2
practical	handy	R11, R8, R7, R6, R3	5
future	-	R11	1
healthier	healthier form of smoking	R10, R7, R5	3
without odor	odor-free	R9, R6, R5	3
innovative	innovation	R1, R9, R8	3
harmful	unhealthy	R9, R6	2
compatible	-	R8	1
white	-	R12	1
smelly	-	R7	1
incompatible	-	R5	1
alternative	option, choice	R4	1
tasty	-	R3	1
more socially acceptable	-	R2	1
friends	-	R1	1
better skin	-	R1	1
future	-	R4	1

## 4 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Key findings and discussion

This study aimed to explore how Generation Z representatives perceive marketing communication of HTP in the Czech market. Research has revealed that Generation Z is highly influenced by modern marketing techniques of tobacco industry. They notice promotion of HTP mostly on fashion and lifestyle events and by influencers on social media such as Instagram, but also at gaming livestreams. Most respondents have some experience with loyalty programs, where they also took advantage of benefits and discounts, or even recommended tobacco to their friends. When asked to name 3 words associated with HTP, respondents subconsciously repeated words used in HTP campaigns such as practical, stylish, innovative, odorless and healthier. These findings were confirmed in a study by Hair et al. (2018) in which participants reported IQOS as clean, chic and pure product, indicating the effectiveness of marketing strategy.

As the study has shown, tobacco industry uses highly sophisticated marketing strategies, focusing especially on new channels such as social networks and targeting their native users. Tobacco is one of the most regulated commodities worldwide therefore the tobacco industry is looking for ways to keep tobacco products on the market. These include developing new products (e.g. heated tobacco or nicotine pouches), circumventing laws, moving products to other markets, brand stretching, building brand credibility (using sponsorship or running

foundations) or even interfering in public health policy (WHO, 2019). For example, our previous study (Kulhánek et al., 2021) confirmed that tobacco industry has turned the ban on menthol cigarettes to its advantage to promote their novel products (HTP, e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches) as more attractive than combustible tobacco in the Czech market. Advertising and promotion on the Internet and social media is a critical area that is not sufficiently regulated in many countries. Study from Romania (Chirila et al., 2023) confirms that all their participants (age 18–26) had been approached by promoters or acknowledged social media influencers. The display of tobacco and nicotine products on social networks is associated with a number of legislative and ethical dilemmas. For example, these posts are visible to all social media users including children and non-smokers, which is against WHO FCTC recommendations (WHO, 2003).

If an influencer’s promoting a tobacco product and not properly labeled as an advertisement, it is difficult to recognize whether it is a paid collaboration or a personal opinion of the author. The tobacco companies violated self-regulation measures in influencer marketing when they contracted influencers under the declared age limit of 21 years (Hejlová et al., 2019; TobaccoFreeKids, 2019). The use of sponsorship and celebrity marketing to target teenagers and young adults is also problematic. As our results show, representatives of Generation Z associate HTP communication with entertainment, current trends, fashion and healthy lifestyle. These means of communication contribute to the normalization of nicotine use. Based on the theory of observational learning (McAlister et al., 2008), social

media users may repeat patterns of their role models (i.e. influencers, YouTubers, celebrities) including tobacco and nicotine use. These patterns are further manifested among adolescents as social pressure for desired behavior. Options of free samples and gratuity packages are seen as very attractive by young consumers (Chirila et al., 2023) and may thus increase an intention to use the product for the first time. As a result, initial experiments with the use of tobacco and nicotine products can then be an initiating moment in the development of nicotine addiction. The respondents of our study also often encountered HTP loyalty programs (such as IQOS club). Incentives serve for sales support and building customer community. In this case, the reward points are not collected in traditional way of plastic cards but online through the user account. HTP loyalty programs thus reflect preferences of Generation Z in using technologies and online platforms. In addition, member-get-member marketing and testimonials are used to increase the conversion rate. As the respondents stated they first heard about HTP from their family members or friend via word-of-mouth communication.

## 4.2 Study strengths and limitations

This study has several strengths but also methodological limitations. The strengths are the narrow target to Generation Z representatives as the dominant users of new media and technologies and vulnerable group of the tobacco industry marketing. This study flexibly responded to the current trend of HTP use among young adults and contributed to the mapping of new ways of promoting HTP. Limitations include the imbalance of the research sample in terms of gender (predominantly women) and socioeconomic status (predominantly university students). The study could be further expanded by following respondents over a longer period and by triangulation using focus groups.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Our study proved that marketing strategies used by tobacco companies, which promote HTP as cool, healthier and innovative products, resonate well within the Gen Z consumers. Findings of this study show that HTP marketing reflects the lifestyle demands of young adults. It utilizes elements that are appealing to Generation Z representatives. HTPs are perceived by young adults as innovative, stylish and related to a healthy lifestyle. This perception of HTP marketing may contribute to the normalization of tobacco and nicotine use. Our study provides insight into the consumers' attitudes and emotions, which are strongly affected by the marketing communication of tobacco companies. They correspond with the quantitative study results that young consumers, who are exposed to marketing claims, are more likely to believe the "less harmful" narrative of HTPs, less considering possible health risks of tobacco initiation, consumption or dual smoking (Chen-Sankey, 2023). We found that the previously detected marketing strategy to present HTPs as technology gadgets and design accessories works well for the Gen Z consumers, which creates a stealth communication of the highly addictive nicotine products (Hejlová et al., 2019). Our study is in line with existing body of research which monitors high risks of this marketing strategy, including the gateway (initiation) hypothesis (McKelvey et al., 2018; 2019; Czoli et al., 2020; Berg et al., 2021).

The major challenge for policy makers remains how to regulate promotion of novel tobacco and nicotine products on the unregulated Internet and social media and thus prevent their influence on children, adolescents and non-smokers. We found that for young consumers, especially stealth marketing on social media and influencer marketing represents both a powerful tool to promote tobacco products as cool and attractive, and possess a major threat to public health strategies and tobacco cessation initiatives. Although we did not focus specifically on the gateway hypothesis (stating that HTP serve as initiation products to youth and young adults even if they were not smoking cigarettes before), we would strongly recommend to explore more deeply in qualitative research the motivation, opinions or values associated with HTP specifically among consumers who did not previously smoke, and thus can not use the argument of "lesser harm".

**Authors' contributions:** LI and DH designed a study methodology. LI performed data collection and analysis. AK conducted a literature review and prepared Introduction and Discussion and formal editing of the manuscript. DH and LI participated in data presentation. All authors approved the final manuscript.

**Declaration of interest:** No conflict of interest

**Figure 1** | Word cloud reflecting respondents' associations with HTP



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