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Cigarette couponing goes mobile

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Smartphone use has rapidly increased, and by 2021, there will be an estimated 6.1 billion Internet-enabled mobile phone users worldwide.¹ This phenomenon has created new opportunities for the public health and medical communities, which have used smartphones to collect health information, conduct surveillance, and promote behavior changes, such as smoking cessation.²⁻⁴ The popularity of smartphones has also attracted leading American cigarette manufacturers Altria and Reynolds American, who have begun offering digital cigarette coupons redeemable using smartphones.

Altria has introduced the MHQ App, which offers two coupons per week. Using the smartphone's global positioning system, the app identifies nearby tobacco retailers that accept Marlboro digital coupons (figure 1A). The app user selects a retailer for redemption, and a digital coupon (e.g., "\$1.50 off one pack") with a barcode is generated (figure 1B). Retailers then scan the barcode on the smartphone. Using the MHQ App requires users to have a registered account at Marlboro.com, and the app claims it verifies users are smokers and at least 21 years old.

Similarly, Reynolds American has test marketed smartphone coupons in Ohio and Iowa. The coupons can be sent via "text, email, mobile apps and social media"⁵ and are redeemed at Reynolds American kiosks, positioned near registers of tobacco retailers.⁵ Notably, the introduction of digital coupons was associated with a 6% increase in sales of Reynolds American's Camel cigarette brand.⁵

According to a financial report released by Wells Fargo Securities, the potential benefits of digital cigarette couponing include increasing traffic to retailers, lowering costs, and enabling targeting of "the millennial consumer."⁶ Mobile technology could potentially be used to also "push" coupons to customers when they approach tobacco retailers (i.e., cross a "geo-fence"), which may promote unplanned cigarette purchases.

Mobile phone applications appear to be an extension of tobacco companies' digital marketing strategy and may provide a new channel for reaching youth. Tobacco companies have used social media, such as YouTube and Twitter, to market their products.^{7,8} A 2012 national survey of youth found that 7.4% of American middle and high school students

reported tobacco coupon exposure from digital communications (i.e., email, Internet, social networks, and text messages), compared to 6.0% from mailed coupons.⁹

Tobacco promotions have been evolving with the changing media environment, and continued monitoring of youth exposure to digital couponing, and of tobacco industry digital marketing strategies, is needed. The extent to which mobile couponing is being used in other countries is not known, but given the popularity of smartphones around the world, digital coupons may soon be implemented elsewhere. Article 13 of the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control recommends banning all forms of advertising, promotion, and sponsorship, and the implementation guidelines mention the Article's application to digital media, including mobile phones and the Internet.¹⁰ To protect youth, laws that monitor and restrict cigarette marketing may need to be updated in response to tobacco companies' usage of mobile phone marketing and other new digital media.

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Figure 1.

(A) Screen image of the MHQ App displaying a map of retailers near user's geographic location that accept Marlboro mobile coupons; (B) Mobile coupon displayed through the MHQ App (retailer name and barcode number blacked out). Coupons are valid for five minutes and the middle number displaying a 5 min countdown.