



A GLOBAL
TOBACCO
INDUSTRY
WATCHDOG



F1, McLaren, Instagram and Netflix: Big Tobacco's Race to Reach Young Indonesians

Case Study

This case study has been updated since its original inclusion in "[Driving Addiction: A Race for Future Generations](#)"

Indonesia has never held a Formula One race, but interest and TV viewership soared when Rio Haryanto became Indonesia's first F1 driver in 2016. F1 still works to reach the country's fans with racing content, with Big Tobacco along for the ride.

Tobacco companies also have eyes on Indonesia, as the world's second-largest market for cigarettes by volume, according to Euromonitor. A third of the country uses tobacco—killing [more than 290,000 people](#) annually—and tobacco spending in most households [crowds out spending on essentials](#) like food and clothing. Youth tobacco use is [also a problem](#).

It's no surprise Big Tobacco seeks ways to reach F1's increasingly young fanbase there.

How BAT uses F1, Instagram to sell e-cigarettes

The Tobacco Enforcement and Reporting Movement (TERM) examined how British American Tobacco (BAT) leverages its F1 sponsorship on social media.

Most frequently, BAT uses Instagram, which is especially popular with Indonesian youth, to promote Vuse electronic cigarettes. The campaign uses a #FreeYourGreatness hashtag—aimed at young, creative audiences—and TERM found at least 21 posts promoting BAT's partnership with McLaren between November 2023 and May 2024.

Content includes images of McLarens, Vuse/McLaren merchandise and interviews with creators. Posts applaud McLaren team performances and invite followers to watch races.

One post offered a chance to win Vuse/McLaren merchandise for posting the correct answer to a quiz, tagging friends and following Vuse Indonesia. Thus, F1's appeal may lure Instagram users into following Vuse, where they'll see more BAT advertising.

Influencers help BAT appeal to youth

F1-related posts include the hashtag, #DrivenByChange, which BAT uses to market risky products in the art and sports communities—who, like F1's newer fanbase, skew young. BAT actively recruits artists to the campaign.

One post declares, "From Jakarta to Japan, inspiration is always with you," urging visitors to follow @Ramengvrl, an Indonesian rapper with 234,000 followers, and artist @Popomangun, who has 52,000 followers, on their "journey with Vuse."

Posts show Ramengvrl and Popomangun participating in Vuse promotions at the Japan Grand Prix. Away from F1, the artists also collaborated on a music video with Indonesian superstar Ariel Noah, which was featured on Vuse Instagram accounts. Other posts highlight Saudi artist Nujood Al-Otaibi, who designed a McLaren helmet, and MILTZ, a Japanese artist who designed a McLaren livery.

YouTube ads for Netflix content

On YouTube, Netflix Indonesia airs advertisements for the F1 docuseries "Drive to Survive," as well as the miniseries, "Senna," based on three-time champion Ayrton Senna's career.

Trailers for "Senna" show Marlboro branding on the Brazilian legend's car, while "Drive to Survive" features other tobacco brands. This appears to violate a national health regulation prohibiting tobacco advertising on social media. Another regulation sets the minimum age for tobacco at 21, yet Netflix categorizes its productions as suitable for 18 and older.

Advertising drives youth use

This is concerning, considering [a 2023 paper](#) found exposure to tobacco advertising in Indonesia increased smoking rates among 10- to 18-year-olds.

While Indonesia is a massive cigarette market, its e-cigarette market is smaller, though research finds it already has Southeast Asia's [highest rates of youth e-cigarette use](#). This makes it a growth target for BAT, and tobacco companies have long used F1 to market products, especially in countries with lax laws [such as Indonesia](#).

F1's growing reach

Greg Maffei, former president of F1's rightsholder, [said this year](#):

"There's a lot of interest across Asia, as we have interest from many cities ... Thailand, Seoul, and we've had interest from Indonesia. There are lots of places which want a Formula One race."

A likely venue is Mandalika circuit on Lombok island, which hosts a race in the MotoGP motorcycling championship. It's already an advertising venue for the tobacco industry, as Djarum's LA Bold cigarette brand sponsors a popular MotoGP team.

The earliest an F1 race might arrive at Mandalika is 2026, with a home race further spiking Indonesian interest and increasing the reach of its sponsors.

TV audience growing as well

Despite Haryanto's rapid exit, F1's TV audience grew by 25% in 2018. Indonesia is one of F1's top 20 TV markets in terms of cumulative viewers.

This is notable because Indonesian F1 fans must subscribe to the F1 TV app—an "over-the-top," or OTT, streaming platform—or to local broadcaster MNC Vision, which offers an OTT platform and pay-per-view service. OTT platforms are concerning because there are currently no regulations governing tobacco advertising on such mediums.

Such gaps in the law help BAT advertise risky new products to young F1 viewers and potentially expand its customer base. As F1's Indonesian audience grows through streaming and dramatic productions, its willingness to let Big Tobacco co-opt its fanbase provides an ideal vehicle for addicting another generation of users.