Truth anti-smoking campaign: Messaging characteristics and the use of fear

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Abstract

truth® ("truth") is an anti-smoking campaign that was created to fight against the tobacco industry by showcasing the various health, social, and economic effects of smoking so that young people can make healthy and educated decisions. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the campaign's rhetorical messaging through a qualitative content analysis across all their social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube). Specifically, this study identifies common themes, characteristics, and fear appeal elements used in truth's messaging. Results of this study indicate that truth's social media posts adhere to many of the themes and characteristics that were identified in prior research on their television advertisements. The fear appeal elements of threat and efficacy, as defined by the extended parallel processing model, were also identified multiple times. Many of these messaging strategies have been adapted to the changing interests of adolescents to address the lesser-understood facts about vaping.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 480,000 Americans die every year from cigarette smoking, and 16 million more live with an illness that has been caused by smoking. The health outcomes of smoking include heart and lung disease, stroke, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), various forms of cancer, eye diseases, fertility issues, and a general decrease in life expectancy. Along with these negative health outcomes of smoking, other harmful effects include increased absenteeism from work and increased healthcare costs (CDC, 2020; CDC, 2021). Despite the numerous adverse effects of smoking and tobacco use, 26.4% of U.S. adults above the age of 15 years currently smoke, and nearly one-third of college students have smoked in their lifetime (Ickes et al., 2020; LaVoie & Quick, 2013). Therefore, smoking is a prevalent issue, even among adolescents. To mitigate the harmful effects of smoking among younger generations, the Truth Initiative educates these audiences on the negative outcomes of smoking to encourage healthier choices.

The Truth Initiative is the nation's first and largest public health organization that is dedicated to ending youth smoking, vaping, nicotine, and tobacco use. Initially founded in 1999, the Truth Initiative has strongly contributed to the decrease in youth smoking over the past 20 years. They explain that in 2000, the youth smoking rate in the United States was 23%, which dropped to 2.3% in 2021, and they claim that the Truth Initiative has helped prevent millions of young adults from becoming smokers (Truth Initiative, n.d.). The Truth Initiative is largely recognized by the public for its education campaign, truth® (referred to as "truth" throughout the rest of this paper). Truth focuses on fighting against Big Tobacco by showcasing the various health, social, and economic effects of smoking so that young people can make healthy and educated decisions. With the recent rise of e-cigarettes and the ongoing opioid epidemic, the

campaign has adopted a special focus on educating the younger generation on these lesser-understood substances (Truth, n.d.). Truth utilizes several channels of communication, including a website, TV ads, and social media accounts. Due to truth's self-reported success and the widespread harms of smoking, it is important to understand the campaign's messaging, as this can contribute to creating other successful public health campaigns. Thus, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the campaign's rhetorical messaging through a content analysis across all their social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube).

Literature Review

Existing research on truth examines their television advertisements, draft materials, and online video and written narrative content from the *Know Your Truth* sub-campaign on opioids (Adams et al., 2022; Ickes et al., 2020; LaVoie & Quick, 2013; Rath et al., 2021). These studies highlight several common themes, like the expression of anti-smoking and tobacco industry sentiments, aligning with truth's goal of rebelling against Big Tobacco (Truth, n.d.). For example, the *Big Tobacco Be Like* television ads highlight the misconceptions about vaping started by Big Tobacco with the main goal of making money (Ickes et al., 2020). Additionally, in their study funded by the truth campaign, Rath et al. (2021) uncovered five message themes among truth's drafted campaign materials that survey participants found important for reducing e-cigarette usage, including a primary theme of decreasing the "social acceptability of smoking" (Rath et al., 2021, p. 5). Other messaging themes and characteristics present in this research include the use of celebrities and social media influencers, incorporating trends, the idea that smoking behaviors impact other people and animals, and the harms of smoking and tobacco use (Ickes et al., 2020; LaVoie & Quick, 2013; Rath et al., 2021).

Some existing research on the truth campaign indicates the use of fear appeals to highlight the various smoking and tobacco harms, as guided primarily by Witte's extended parallel process model (EPPM). Witte (1994) defined fear appeals as persuasive messages that highlight a threat to generate the emotion fear, but that then show possible solutions to the threat. In the EPPM, fear is affected by the audience's perceptions of threat and efficacy that they gain from their appraisal of the message. Threat consists of severity, which is the perception of the size of the threat, and susceptibility, which is the perception of an individual's risk of facing the threat. Efficacy, on the other hand, consists of response efficacy, the perceived effectiveness of recommendations to lessen the threat, and self-efficacy, the perceptions an individual has about their ability to implement the recommendations. Key to the EPPM and the successful use of fear appeals is the greater emphasis on effectiveness than threat messages, as this fosters danger control processes in which individuals respond to the threat by adopting recommendations. In campaigns that provide recommended behaviors to mitigate a threat, danger control processes are preferable to fear control processes in which the individual focuses on controlling their fear through behaviors like message suppression, reappraisal, and denial because it is positively related with intentions to change behavior (Moussaoui et al., 2021; Witte, 1994).

Two studies apply these EPPM characteristics to truth. In their study on *Know the Truth*, Adams et al. (2022) manipulated the campaign messages to determine how the emotional response to messages that explain threat before effectiveness differs from messages that explain effectiveness before threat. They found that the more commonly used threat to effectiveness flow increases self-efficacy and intentions to change behaviors based on campaign recommendations among the audience, which makes sense, given the previous research explained above. This study also introduces the connection between efficacy and hope, meaning that messages that

emphasize efficacy also create a feeling of hope for audience members. LaVoie and Quick (2013), however, conducted a content analysis that indicated that truth television ads do not follow what Witte (1994), Moussaoui et al. (2021), and Adams et al. (2022) suggest for the successful use of fear appeals. They found that the television ads emphasize the threat of smoking, but do not highlight the effectiveness component of the EPPM. This means that the truth ads may effectively show the harms of smoking, but because they don't provide people with information on how to quit or avoid smoking, their fear control processes dominate. The audience is not provided with sufficient self or response efficacy information, meaning that they may not have hope or intend to change their behavior.

Additional research on fear appeals expands upon this by indicating that while fear appeals may be inappropriate in health care when they are based on nonfactual evidence, they can be effective when they are based in evidence and include efficacy messages with the threat to promote healthy behaviors (Keith, 2017). Therefore, ethical fear appeals can be effectively used in health education by ensuring that the message clearly emphasizes self and response efficacy along with the threat. However, fear appeals do not always need to be associated with health. Smith and Stutts (2003) compared long-term health related fear appeals and short-term cosmetic/social fear appeals. While they found that health appeals in anti-smoking advertisements were overall more effective than cosmetic appeals at preventing or stopping participants from smoking, this study highlights other ways that fear appeals could be used to prevent smoking aside from health.

This research contributes to my study by identifying common messaging themes and characteristics, defining fear appeals and the EPPM, and exploring how the EPPM characteristics are implemented in truth messaging. The existing research on the truth campaign also primarily

focuses on television ads and website content. There is, therefore, a gap in research designed to understand their other channel, social media. According to Anderson et al. (2023), 71% of teens ages 13-17 use YouTube daily, 58% use TikTok daily, 47% use Instagram daily, and 19% use Facebook daily. Given the massive reach that truth's social media accounts have (between 12.9K and 1.7M followers across platforms) and the prevalence of social media use among young adults, the campaign's target audience, this study specifically focuses on understanding the messaging on these platforms.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions to expand upon and fill in gaps in the existing research on truth:

RQ 1: What message themes and characteristics were used on truth's social media accounts? How do these compare to the message to themes and characteristics past research has identified?

RQ 2: How do they utilize the elements of fear appeals, as defined by the EPPM?

Method

To answer these questions, this study utilizes a qualitative content analysis across truth's social media accounts. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because I am looking to uncover common themes, characteristics, and fear appeal traits. Truth uses four social media accounts: Facebook (1.7M followers), Instagram (64.4K followers), TikTok (12.9K followers), and YouTube (319K subscribers).

Sampling

I used a systematic sampling method to select every third most recent post (most recent posts were at the top of each page) until I got to five posts on each platform. This sampling

method left me with a sample size of N = 20. The beginning of the sample frame was December 1, 2023, but because not all platforms had a post from this date, any post prior to this date could be the start of the sample frame. For each platform, I first selected a random number from one to three using a generator to determine which of the most recent posts, as of December 1, would be analyzed. For example, when looking at the Instagram account, the number selected was three. The most recent post was on November 17, but I went instead to the third most recent post from September 29 and continued selecting every third post until I reached 5. This entire process was repeated for their Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. I excluded profile picture/cover photo updates from this process, which primarily impacted the Facebook sampling, because these updates do not include as much written content to analyze as normal posts that typically include written, visual, and sometimes audible content that can be used for education and persuasion.

Variables

While coding, I looked for the use of the themes and characteristics identified in the Literature Review. Themes are essentially the post's main message/takeaways ("What is the post saying/addressing?"), while characteristics are traits/ strategies the post incorporates ("What is the post doing?"). Fear appeal elements were also examined. These variables are defined here but can also be found in Tables 1-3 in the Appendix.

Themes

Rebellion. Rebellion includes anything relating to—mainly speaking against—Big Tobacco/smoking industries. For example, messages that suggest or discuss "they are the enemy," greed, lies, etc. would be considered as part of this theme.

Peer and social pressure. This theme relates to messages that encourage the audience to avoid peer pressure or reshapes the perceptions of social norms. One common example of this from literature is addressing statements like "it's normal in college."

"Your actions impact others". This theme involves telling the audience how people feel about their actions and other negative perceptions of smoking and tobacco use. This theme also includes showing the harm these behaviors have on other people, animals, or the environment.

Characteristics

Keeping up with trends. Common examples of keeping up with trends include using hashtags unrelated to the campaign that are part of trending topics, referring explicitly to a trend or challenge, or using clips from popular videos.

Using celebrities or influencers. Celebrities and influencers are defined in this study as anyone with more than 10K followers on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter. This characteristic involves references to celebrities or influencers, specifically about something they have said or done. It also can include appearances by a celebrity or influencer or tagging a celebrity or influencer who is otherwise unrelated to the campaign.

Fear Appeals

The definitions for each of these variables were taken from Witte's (1994) EPPM. Because they were defined in the Literature Review above, this section includes possible examples of these things on social media or other important distinguishing factors.

Threat severity. Threat severity is split into illustrating long-term health effects of smoking and tobacco use, like cancer and disease, and short- term cosmetic effects like bad breath and yellow teeth (Smith & Stutts, 2003).

Threat susceptibility. The most common example of threat susceptibility is any sort of message that shows the audience that the harmful effects can happen to them if they engage in these behaviors.

Self-efficacy. This can involve providing tips on quitting or telling the audience what they can do to avoid the negative consequences outlined.

Response efficacy. Response efficacy messages show the audience how quitting and avoiding smoking protects you from the outlined threat.

Coding Procedure

To code a post, I first recorded the platform, date, and format. Depending on the format, I watched the video or reviewed the images, and I also read the caption for each post. Once I determined *which* themes and characteristics were used, I took any notes necessary about *how* they were used. This included recording the main idea and any interesting quotes, as well as noting if one variable seemed more prioritized in that post if multiple were used. All elements of the content were including in analysis (verbal/non-verbal, imagery, writing, etc.).

Analysis Method

To analyze my findings, I utilized a closed coding process in which I grouped my variables (themes, characteristics, and fear appeal elements) into their own sections on my coding sheet. After collecting data, I looked at each coding sheet to determine what they each said about each variable. Each post has been given a label, as shown in Table 4 of the Appendix, along with a brief summary of the post.

Findings

Research Question 1

Themes

Each theme was identified in at least one post, but anti-social influence was far less dominant than rebellion and "your actions impact others." Not only was it only used one time, but it was also only briefly mentioned in the post and was more of a secondary idea, whereas the other two themes were found more frequently and were usually the primary idea of the post.

Rebellion. Rebellion was the most frequently used theme, as five of the 20 posts included negative remarks about the tobacco industry. In post 15, the video states, "the vaping industry claims they never intended for their products to be enticing to young people, but if that's true, then why do so many of their products taste like candy?" Rebellion was also used in post Y4 to expose the industry's greedy tendencies, saying, "What's worth more to Big Tobacco, 320,000 human lives, or 33B dollars? Sadly, we know the answer." Post Y3 is dedicated to empowering youth to speak out against these industries, saying, "When tobacco and vaping industries undermine our efforts to protect the environment, our mental health, and social justice, we stand up, speak out, and make change happen." Lastly, the videos in F1 and F2 highlight the sneaky advertising strategies used by the vaping industry by showing that advertising agencies and gas stations would not be interested in promoting the product if the negative effects were stated upfront.

Anti-social influence/norms. One post, post F4, briefly rejected a common thought about the social norms of vaping, saying "But it was all harmless fun... right?" in reference to how the writer experienced harm because of this incorrect way of thinking.

"Your actions impact others". This theme was found in four of 20 posts. Both I2 and Y2 illustrate the idea of quitting for someone else, with statements like "who are you quitting for" present in both. Though the answer for some could be "self," this question implies that there may be more reasons to quit than just for oneself. Post Y3 emphasizes the negative effects that

the toxins that come from a vape have on the already declining environment. In T4, the truth account duetted a video in which a dog is seen lying in a pile of various types of e-cigarettes. While there is no explicit statement of how vapes affect dogs, the caption "knick knack paddy whack, give a dog aNyThINg but a vape" indicates the potential harm of having e-cigarettes around pets.

Characteristics

Both characteristics were identified, with most instances occurring on TikTok.

Using celebrities or influencers. Two posts used celebrities or social media influencers. Is a screenshot of a news article in which the singer Drake says, "You got some real life evaluating to do" about fans who vape. While T3 did not tag a specific celebrity, the AwesomenessTV account has 1.7 million followers, and some of their influencers were in the video truth reposted (explained above).

Research Question 2

Fear Appeals

Each fear appeal element was found at least once in the sample. However, the elements were usually found in separate posts, with only a few instances where one post contained multiple elements. No posts contained each element.

Threat severity. Threat severity was the most frequently used fear appeal element, as it was found in half of the sample. Many of these severity messages focus on the mental health effects of vaping, specifically depression and anxiety (F1, F2, T2, Y1, Y2, Y3, and Y5). Other posts indicate the long-term physical health effects with personal testimonies such as "I was hospitalized for a week... I almost died" (F4) and "Having smoked so much, I've probably caused some permanent harm" (Y2). Post Y4 emphasizes the deadliness of menthols, a chemical in vapes, saying, "hundreds of thousands of lives could be lost by 2050 if menthols stay on the market."

Threat susceptibility. Susceptibility was found one time. In the personal story of someone who was hospitalized from vaping, the writer states that this hospitalization happened before their 17th birthday (F4). Though not necessarily explicit, this statement indicates that smoking can cause harm to people of a younger age.

Self-efficacy. Six of 20 posts incorporated messages to increase self-efficacy. This was most commonly done through offering quitting assistance via texting support numbers or joining online support chats (I3, I4, Y1, and Y2). According to these posts, texting truth's phone number has helped 400,000 people quit vaping. Post T2 provides the simple, uplifting message of "deep breath, you got this" when referring to avoiding smoking during holiday stress. Post Y2 follows someone who is trying to quit vaping. Self-efficacy was included in this video through him

explaining the strategies he's found to break the habit and statements like "If I can go one week, I can go two."

Response efficacy. Response efficacy was identified in two posts. Post I1 shows a girl with the caption "me after quitting vaping and enjoying all the money I saved," highlighting one of the positive outcomes that quitting had on her life. Post Y2 also includes response efficacy through the statement, "When I'm not vaping, I feel much more empowered and like I have the driver's wheel in my own life."

Discussion

Research Question 1

All variables were found at least once in the sample of social media posts. This indicates that truth's social media uses similar themes and characteristics as their more traditional channels of communication to some degree. Rebellion was one of the primary themes identified in the existing literature, and due to the frequency of posts that indicate anti-vape and tobacco industry sentiments, rebellion is a key theme in this sample of social media posts as well. Even in posts like I5 that incorporate the other variables as well, the main underlying message within the post is speaking against Big Tobacco for its lies and greed that are putting lives at risk. As mentioned in the literature review, these calls to action and speaking against Big Tobacco are part of the truth campaign's ultimate goal. In a sense, they contribute to truth becoming almost a countercampaign to the tobacco industry's unethical advertising strategies (*We Are Truth*, n.d.). Given that the target audience for truth is adolescents, and that research suggests that adolescents have rebellious tendencies (LaVoie & Quick, 2013), this theme might be a useful strategy for appealing to the audience.

The other themes utilized also highlight similarities between truth's social media and their other channels. Most notably, post T4, the video with the dog surrounded by vapes, can be easily compared to the *Catmageddon* TV ad that was initially studied by Ickes et al. (2020). Both messages show the audience how their smoking could impact others, specifically their beloved pets. This theme helps adolescents who may not have developed the necessary processing skills to think about how to protect themselves in the long term but are able to think about how to protect their pets in the short term. However, one potential additional theme arose through this content analysis, as posts F3 and F5 were unrelated to smoking. Rather, they seem to relate more to social justice, a call to action that is like rebellion in that this younger generation seems to have an interest in it. Calls for social justice were also connected to the negative environmental effects of smoking in post Y3.

While both message characteristics, the use of celebrities/influencers and trends, were identified, they were not standout findings of this sample. However, I think this may be in part due to the limited scope of the outlined definitions. I defined celebrities and influencers as people with over 10,000 followers. Posts F1 and F2 cast actor Regan Burns, who has been in several movies and TV shows, including the popular Disney Channel show *Dog with a Blog*, but because he is not active on social media, he was not included as a celebrity. Trends were also difficult to code because they are not often stated explicitly, as defined in this study, but they usually depend on an individual's knowledge and social capital to be identified.

Research Question 2

Like the message themes and characteristics, all the elements of fear appeals were found in this sample. As mentioned, many of the threat severity messages highlight the mental health effects of smoking, like the "depression stick" advertisements (F1 and F2) and the "breath of

stress air" video (Y5). When compared to Smith and Stutts' (2003) study on fear appeals in antismoking campaigns, this is a new type of threat appeal, as it differs from long-term health effects, which highlight the physical effects like disease and cancer, and short-term cosmetic effects, which highlight changes in bodily appearance. Especially given the recent increase in mental health discourse, this is an important finding. These severity messages also typically were used to delegitimize the common use of smoking to decrease anxiety (T2, Y1, Y2, and Y3). Of course, the use of severity messages that highlight the negative long-term health effects of smoking in these posts should not be overlooked either as they also are effective appeals in antismoking (Smith & Stutts, 2003). Interestingly, the use of cosmetic appeals was not identified in this sample of social media posts. This indicates that the primary type of fear appeal in this sample related to health effects, excluding one type of fear appeal that research indicates is common in anti-smoking campaigns.

As emphasized by the EPPM and studies on the appropriateness of fear appeals for health-related issues, threat messaging should not be included without either self or response efficacy (Adams et al., 2022; Keith, 2017; Moussaoui et al., 2021; Witte, 1994). While not all threat messages in this sample also included efficacy, several did. Additionally, these posts typically followed the more effective emotional flow process of fear/threat to hope/efficacy, as Adams et al. (2022) studied. Post Y1 did this by first showing how vaping increases anxiety and then directing the audience to find solutions on the truth website. The common use of self-efficacy messages in this sample also fits in with truth's goal of persuading the audience to quit smoking and tobacco use (*We Are Truth*, n.d.). By providing support for people in various ways, like texting, support groups, tips, and general encouragement (13, 14, T2, Y1, and Y2), the campaign is not just telling people why smoking is harmful, but they are also providing

confidence for audience members who understand the harms but don't know how to prevent them. Response efficacy is also a key part of this by making it clear to the audience that quitting and avoiding smoking are successful behaviors at protecting against the threat. One post that incorporated response efficacy, I1, states, "more money, less problems." This is a new appeal that associates smoking with financial threats instead of the common health threats.

Conclusion

This content analysis indicates that truth's social media accounts utilize many of the same themes, characteristics, and fear appeal elements that have been identified in previous research on truth's other campaign materials. They are primarily used in the same manner, but many have been adapted to the changing interests of young people and address the lesser-understood facts about vaping. This study was not free from limitations, however. As mentioned, the characteristics were difficult to define, ultimately impacting the coding process. Additionally, a more open coding process may have allowed me to search for new themes and characteristics not identified by existing literature. Social justice was identified only because those posts did not include any variables, but if I had included an "other category" I may have been able to identify other key variables that overlapped with the ones I was looking for. This change could be used in future research, but other possibilities include comparing messages between platforms, especially considering the varied reach and posting frequency. Further, examining the comments on their posts could provide insights into the public opinion of truth. Overall, this study fills a gap in understanding truth's recent messaging. Because truth strives to reduce the harms of vaping and smoking, this study highlights educational and persuasive strategies that could be applied to other public health campaigns.

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Appendix

Table 1

Message Themes

Rebellion	Anything relating to (mainly speaking against) Big	
	Tobacco/ smoking industries— e.g. "they are the enemy",	
	greed, lies, etc.	
Peer/social pressure	Avoiding peer pressure; reshaping perceptions of social	
	norms—e.g. addressing statements like "it's normal in	
	college"	
"Your actions impact others"	How people feel about audience's actions/negative	
	perceptions of smoking and tobacco use; potential harm	
	audience could be doing to other people, animals, or the	
	environment if they engage in these behaviors	

Table 2

Message Characteristics

Keeping up with trends	Using hashtags unrelated to the campaign that are part of	
	trending topics; referring explicitly to a trend or challenge;	
	using clips from popular videos	
Using celebrities or influencers	References (about something they have said or done) or	
	appearances by someone with more than 10K followers on	
	any of the social media platforms in this study; tagging	
	someone unrelated to the campaign in the post	

Table 3Fear Appeal Characteristics

Threat severity	Taken from Witte's (1994) EPPM and defined above; split into	
	illustrating long-term health effects (i.e. cancer, disease) and short-	
	term cosmetic effects (i.e. bad breath, yellow teeth) (Smith &	
	Stutts, 2003)	
Threat susceptibility	Taken from Witte's (1994) EPPM and defined above—e.g. these	
	things can happen to you	
Self-efficacy	Taken from Witte's (1994) EPPM and defined above—e.g. tips on	
	quitting, you can avoid consequences by doing these things	
Response efficacy	Taken from Witte's (1994) EPPM and defined above—e.g. this is	
	how quitting/avoiding smoking can help you avoid consequences	

Table 4

Post Labels

Platform	Date	Reference	Brief Summary
		Name	
Facebook	10/19/2021	F1	"Depression Stick"— Ad agencies learning that
			vapes increase feelings of depression and anxiety

	9/19/2021	F2	"Depression Stick"—Gas station employees
			learning that vapes increase feelings of
			depression and anxiety
	9/11/2020	F3	Register to vote
	7/2/2020	F4	#ShareYourTruth writing contest winner—
			Hospitalized for "harmless fun"
	6/24/2020	F5	"Lawmakers declare racism a public health
			emergency" article by The Guardian
Instagram	9/29/2023	I1	"More money, less problems" when you quit
	8/30/2023	I2	Who are you quitting for?
	7/31/2023	13	Drake says you need to reevaluate your choices
			and quit vaping
	7/5/2023	I4	Information on a Discord channel to get help
			quitting
	6/9/2023	15	Follow the Flavors truck speaking against
			flavored tobacco flavors— "Nicotine addiction
			shouldn't taste like candy"
TikTok	12/1/2023	T1	"Mesmerizing" video with statements like
			"vaping sucks your feed shouldn't" and "no need
			to v@pe up a perfectly good moment like this"
	11/28/2023	T2	Holidays may be stressful, but vaping will
			increase anxiety and stress levels

	9/29/2023	T3	Repost from AwesomenessTV—vaping is a red
			flag in a partner
	9/26/2023	T4	Dog with vapes
	9/15/2023	T5	Send this to someone who is quitting vaping
YouTube	10/3/2023	Y1	Vape increases feelings of anxiety by giving you
			"toxic therapy"
	5/5/2023	Y2	How quitting support helped Dyshere stop
			vaping
	10/14/2022	Y3	Take action against vaping—vaping industry
			causes environmental damage and lies to
			consumers
	4/18/2022	Y4	Big Tobacco cares more about money than
			protecting lives by discontinuing their use of
			menthol
	3/11/2022	Y5	"Breath of Stress Air"—vaping increases
			feelings of stress and anxiety