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# Selling Death on Social Media: How Bidis Are Reaching Consumers Online



## **Acknowledgements**

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India's homegrown bidi industry is notoriously unregulated and is extending its reach into another space often lacking in oversight: social media.

While all tobacco products are marketed on the internet where restrictions are more difficult to enforce, the marketing strategies used for each product vary. Bidi companies tend to use direct marketing to sell their products online. This is a concern because exposure to bidi marketing leads to an increased likelihood of use among new and current consumers.<sup>1</sup> Since not much is known about the prevalence of online bidi marketing, this report explores how and through which social media platforms bidis are marketed to consumers.

## Definitions

**Bidi:** (also known as beedi or biri) small hand-rolled cigarettes made of shredded tobacco wrapped in a tendu leaf.

**Bidi companies:** companies that manufacture and sell bidi products, including large factories and small-scale manufacturers.

**Smoking products:** a type of tobacco that is burned and the smoke is inhaled; includes cigarettes, cigars and kreteks. While bidis are a type of smoking product, for the purposes of this report they are not included in this definition.

**Smokeless products:** a type of tobacco that is sucked or chewed; includes khaini, zarda, gutka and pan masala.

## Key Findings

- 1. Bidis are openly marketed on social media with clear pictures of the product. In contrast, most tobacco products are promoted inconspicuously to comply with existing laws.<sup>1</sup>**
- 2. We found at least 30 distinct Facebook pages for bidi companies. Many of these companies appear to be utilizing Facebook pages to facilitate sales.**
- 3. Bidis are being marketed on social media almost exclusively through Facebook (98%); 337 instances of marketing were observed on the platform during our data collection period.**

**Direct marketing:** marketing of products through traditional media (television, radio, billboards, newspapers) and online media and at point of sale.

**Indirect marketing:** the promotion of the company and/or product and its use through brand stretching, price discounts and giveaways, and the sponsorship of events or activities.

**Surrogate marketing:** a form of advertising that is used to promote regulated products like cigarettes and alcohol by advertising unregulated products that are under the same brand name.

1. Current restrictions on tobacco marketing: Article 13 of the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control requires that parties comprehensively ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship across platforms. In India, this is reinforced by Section 5 of the national tobacco control law, the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003 (COTPA, 2003). This blanket ban applies to marketing on the internet. Source: <https://www.tobaccocontrollaws.org/legislation/country/india/summary>.

## Background

### Why are bidis a threat to public health?

India is both the second largest producer and consumer of tobacco products worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Of the 267 million tobacco users in India, nearly 72 million adults smoke bidis, making it the most widely used tobacco product in the country.<sup>3</sup> Easily accessible across rural and urban areas, bidis are estimated to outsell cigarettes in India by 8-to-1.<sup>4</sup> The widespread availability of bidis poses a threat to youth: 47% of users smoked their first bidi before their 10th birthday.<sup>5</sup> Bidi smoke delivers more tar, carbon monoxide and nicotine than other cigarettes<sup>6</sup> and severely increases the risk for several cancers, coronary heart disease and heart attacks.<sup>7</sup>

The health consequences of bidis extend to workers involved in the manufacturing process, who face an increased risk of aggravated tuberculosis and asthma, anemia, postural and eye problems, and gynecological difficulties.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, with 89% of the bidi industry unregistered, most of these health problems are underreported and remain unaddressed.<sup>9</sup> Bidis occupy a localized market, and are more often subcontracted to be produced in homes rather than factories.<sup>10</sup> Home-based bidi production offers manufacturers certain advantages. Because bidis are less regulated than other

tobacco products, bidi manufacturers can avoid taxes, pay employees less than the minimum wage, and avoid providing basic benefits. Low-income women and children constitute 90% of the bidi workforce, with children comprising as much as 15%-25% of total employment in the bidi industry.<sup>9,11</sup> A dangerous loophole in India's child labor laws does not cover children who help their families meet stringent bidi-rolling quotas.<sup>12,13</sup>

The unorganized structure of the bidi industry gives it an advantage over the cigarette industry. While India has made strides to discourage smoking cigarettes by adopting a number of policies, including higher taxes and graphic health warnings, there has been minimal progress applying these same laws to bidis.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, bidis continue to be sold at significantly lower prices and in packaging without clear health warnings, attracting a consumer base that tends to have lower levels of income and education than those who use other tobacco products.<sup>3,15</sup>

Bidis are ubiquitously sold by retailers, including small grocery stores, paan bidi shops, street vendors and tobacco specialists.<sup>15</sup> They are commonly marketed at these points of sale<sup>16</sup> through advertisements and colorful packaging, which may feature deities<sup>17</sup> and sports stars.<sup>18</sup>

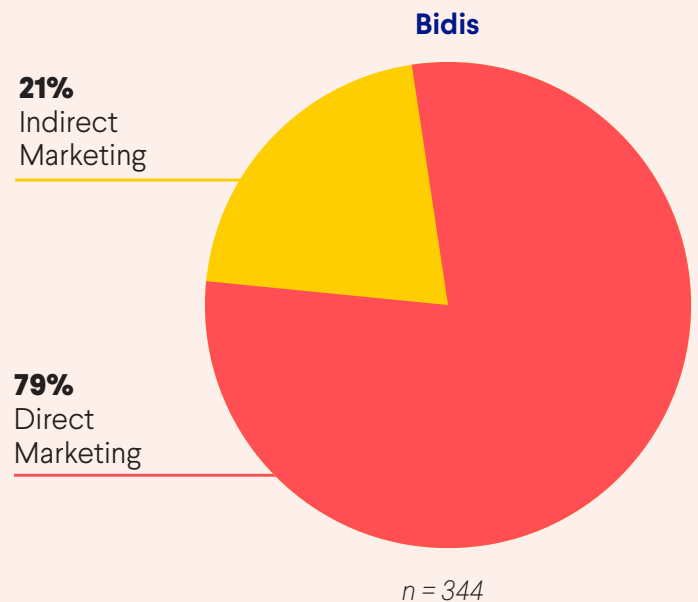


Photo by Pallavi Puri (July 2019)

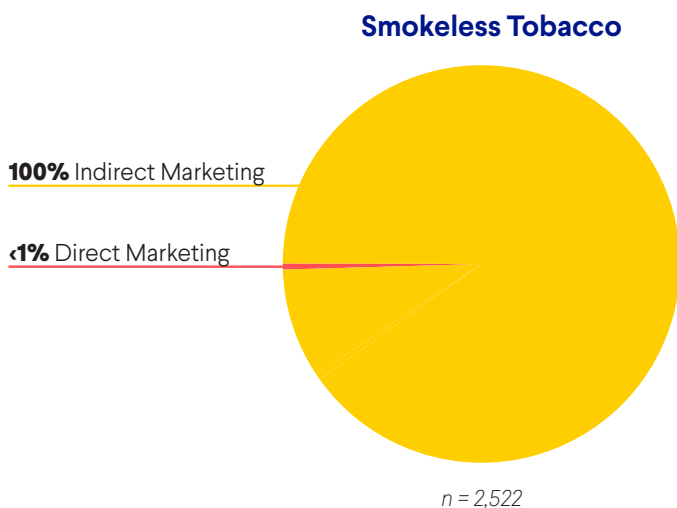
**Are bidis being marketed online?**

Our study found that bidis are marketed directly to consumers, who are encouraged to purchase products through a Facebook page. In 79% of cases, we found that bidi products were being directly marketed, often accompanied by product pictures. This contrasts with smoking and smokeless tobacco products; to circumvent laws prohibiting tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS), the tobacco industry markets these products in more clandestine ways—including through the use of indirect marketing. Because the bidi industry continues to be less regulated than the cigarette industry, bidi companies may opt to market products directly, knowing that they receive less scrutiny and face fewer repercussions for not adhering to the same regulations that restrict the marketing of other tobacco products. In addition to direct marketing, 19% of the bidi marketing we observed was indirect and linked to popular events and holidays, likely as an attempt to normalize tobacco use during the holidays and connect it with family and community.

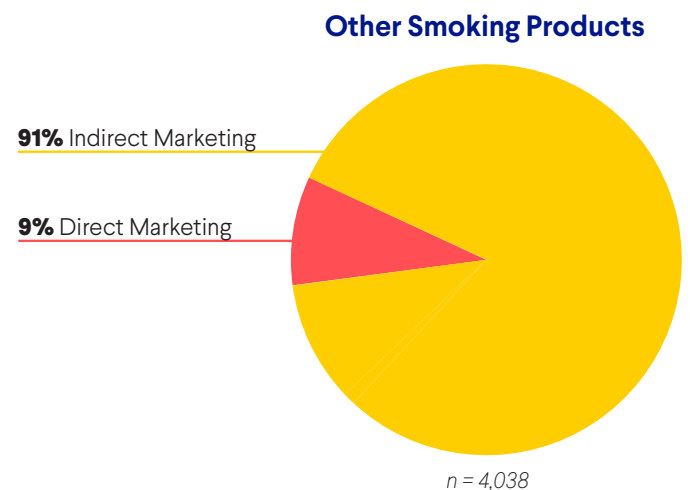
**Figure 1a:**  
**Type of Online Marketing**



**Figure 1b:**  
**Type of Online Marketing**



**Figure 1c:**  
**Type of Online Marketing**



**Where are bidis being marketed online and why is it a concern?**

**Bidis are being marketed exclusively through Facebook companies, including Facebook with linkages to Instagram and WhatsApp.** Almost all the observed bidi marketing (98%) was found on Facebook pages that often functioned as storefronts. In total, we found 30 Facebook pages for bidi companies, though there are likely more. Despite Facebook’s policy against selling tobacco products on its platform, it is clear that many bidi companies have found ways around these restrictions.<sup>19</sup> In addition to its well-established e-commerce function, Facebook offers an integration with WhatsApp, allowing

customers to inquire directly about products and even purchase them.<sup>20</sup> WhatsApp numbers are featured prominently across many bidi companies’ [Facebook pages](#), and visitors are encouraged to reach out to make inquiries or purchase products. The lack of age verification regulation on Facebook reinforces concerns that minors are easily able to access bidi products online. The Facebook pages we observed also fail to list the possible harms associated with consuming bidi products. Over the last few years, social media use has grown among India’s rural community—where bidis are particularly popular<sup>15</sup>—to 299 million active internet users.<sup>21,22</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**Anatomy of a Bidi Company’s Facebook Page**

**A screenshot of Thalappa Ganesh’s Facebook page.**

**Automated questions to ask the seller**

**Location**

**Contact number for connection via direct calls**

**WhatsApp number**

**Email address**

**Listing on Facebook as a retail store**

**Prompt to contact on WhatsApp**

**Prompt to send message**

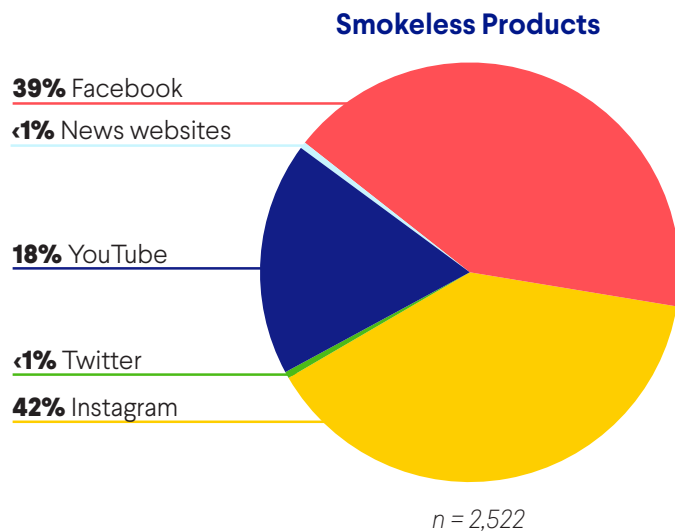
**Most recent post showing solidarity with Eid celebrations**

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/ThalappaGaneshBeedis/>

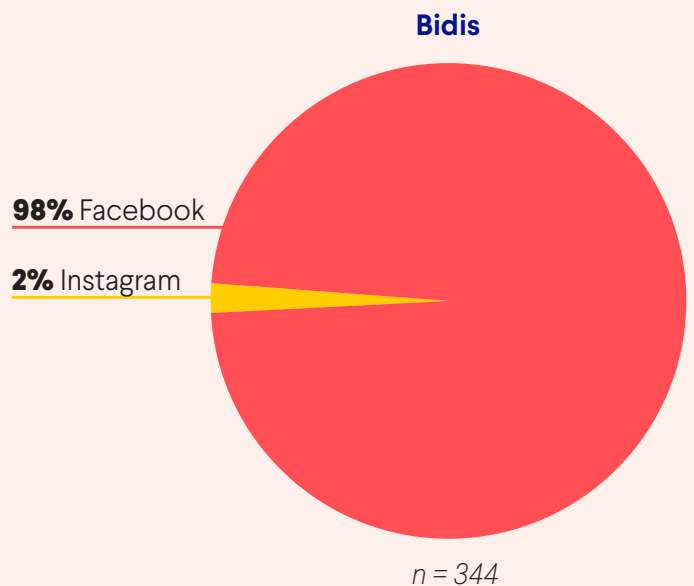
**Where are other tobacco products being marketed online and why is it a concern?**

While bidi marketing on social media occurs primarily on Facebook (98%), smoking and smokeless tobacco products are marketed across a wider range of social media platforms. Since the direct marketing of bidis is being used to facilitate purchases, companies are opting to use Facebook, which offers consumer-friendly functions that other platforms do not have, including a marketplace and connections to WhatsApp. On the other hand, marketing for smoking and smokeless tobacco products is almost entirely indirect, and functions to cultivate brand recall by normalizing the tobacco company's products in the minds of consumers. In order to create brand awareness among new age groups and types of consumers, traditional tobacco companies rely on diverse social media platforms, which allow them to reach varied audiences that are growing exponentially. Our findings confirm that smokeless tobacco products were marketed most often on Instagram (42%), followed by Facebook (39%) and YouTube (12%), while smoking tobacco products were marketed on Facebook (53%), followed by Instagram (31%) and Twitter (10%).

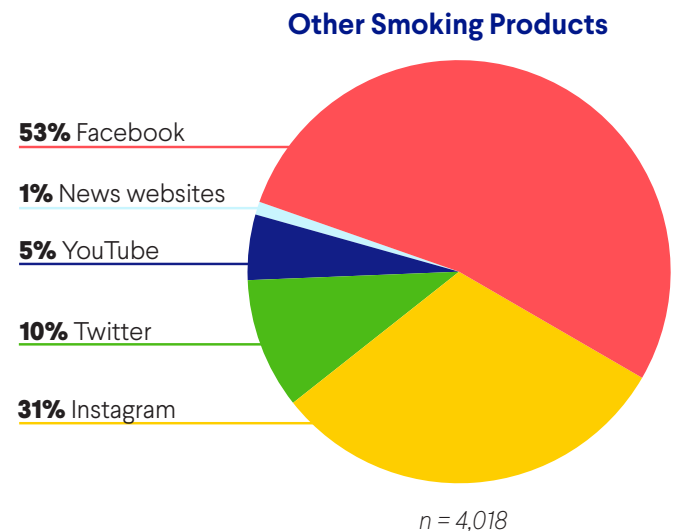
**Figure 3b:**  
**Social Media Platforms Used for Tobacco Marketing**



**Figure 3a:**  
**Social Media Platforms Used for Tobacco Marketing**



**Figure 3c:**  
**Social Media Platforms Used for Tobacco Marketing**



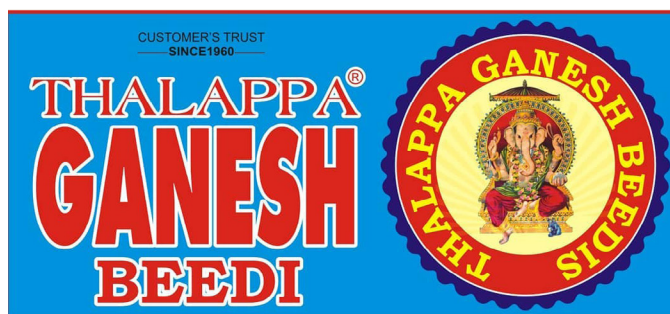
**What messages are used to market bidis online?**

**Bidi marketing is more upfront, whereas marketing for most tobacco products tends to be indirect.** Both indirect and direct tobacco marketing has been found to influence tobacco consumption, but direct marketing demonstrates a more blatant disregard of TAPS restrictions. We found that 33% of bidi marketing displayed images of rolled bidis with a brand name and logo. Marketing that uses only pictures and little to no text can often be a strategy used to appeal to populations with lower literacy levels.<sup>23</sup>

Bidis were marketed in relation to relaxation and entertainment 24% of the time. In 20% of cases, bidis were marketed in connection with events, including celebrity birthdays and popular sports. Bidis were even marketed online during religious holidays, including Holi and Eid, to normalize tobacco use and engage new customers. Certain bidi companies, including Thalappa Ganesh Beedis, go so far as to be named after and to feature Hindu religious figures on their packaging. And while some bidi packaging had a warning label covering approximately 85% of the package, many did not. This is consistent with previous evidence that bidi brands comply with health warning label regulations less often than other products.<sup>14</sup>

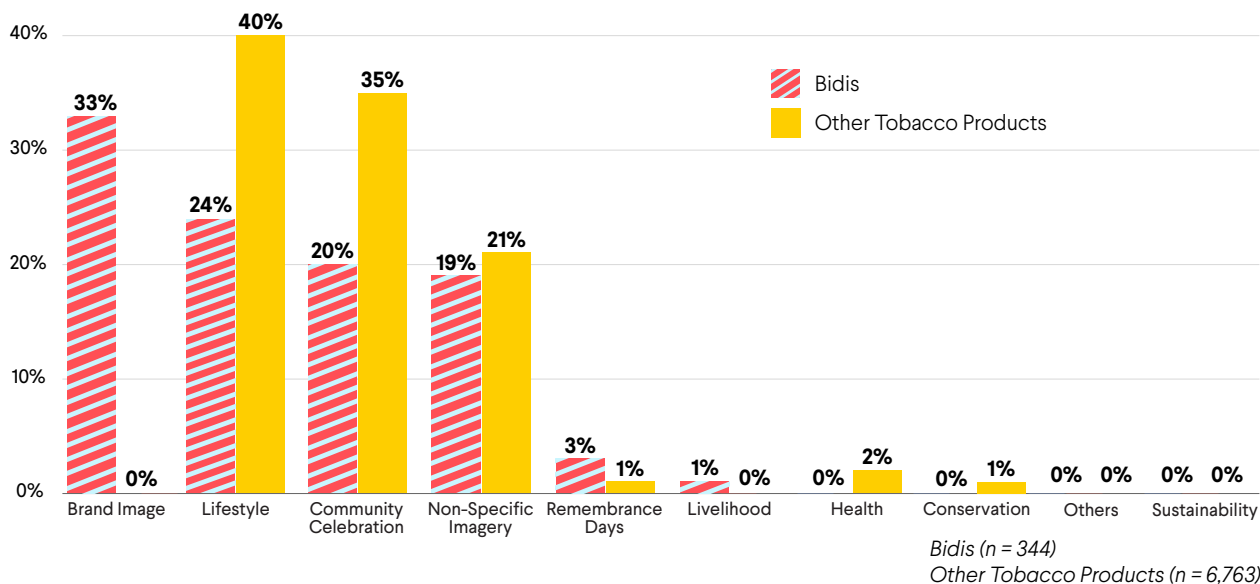


Example of an ad coded as “Brand Image” message framing, where only the branded package of the product or brand logo is displayed. The ad features a child in the center. Many family-based enterprises use images of family members as their brand image or logo.<sup>25</sup> Image pulled from 604 Masud Beedi’s Facebook page.



Example of an ad coded as “Brand Image” message framing, showing a bidi company, Thalappa Ganesh, that uses an image of a Hindu god, Ganesha, on its products and advertisements. Image pulled from Thalappa Ganesh Beedi’s Facebook page.

**Figure 4  
Marketing by Message Type**





**Where is online bidi marketing originating?**

**Bidi marketing originates across the entire country, reflecting the dispersed and highly fragmented industry.** Our findings are consistent with previous studies that have found that bidi production is hyperlocal and highly segmented, making it hard to regulate. We found that in comparison to other tobacco products that are marketed by a few major companies across six states, bidi marketing originates from a higher volume of companies and reaches across at least 11 different states.<sup>15</sup> This broad spread reflects the overall nature of the bidi industry, which operates in more than half of India’s 35 states.<sup>24</sup>

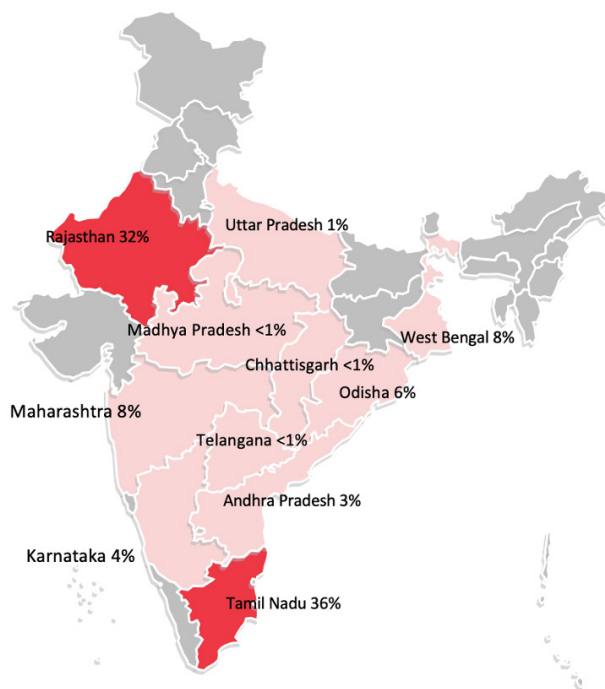
**Recommendations:**

- **Monitor and report** regularly to support restrictions on tobacco marketing. Bidi product marketing must be carefully surveilled both online and offline.
- **Build better accountability mechanisms** that stop the promotion and sale of tobacco products online.
- **Hold social media companies responsible** to close down tobacco marketing and sales on their platforms, in line with their own policies.
- **Educate and alert consumers** to recognize harmful marketing tactics.

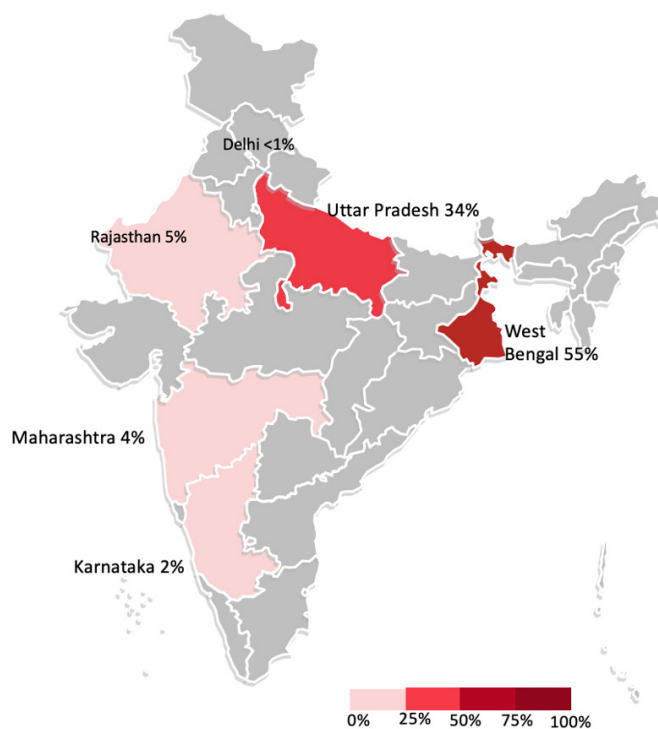
For more information, please visit the [TERM website](#) or [TERM Facebook page](#)

**Figure 5**  
**Online Marketing by State**

**Bidis**



**Other Tobacco Products**



Bidis (n = 335)  
Smoking and smokeless tobacco products (n = 5,682)

## Appendix A

### Methodology:

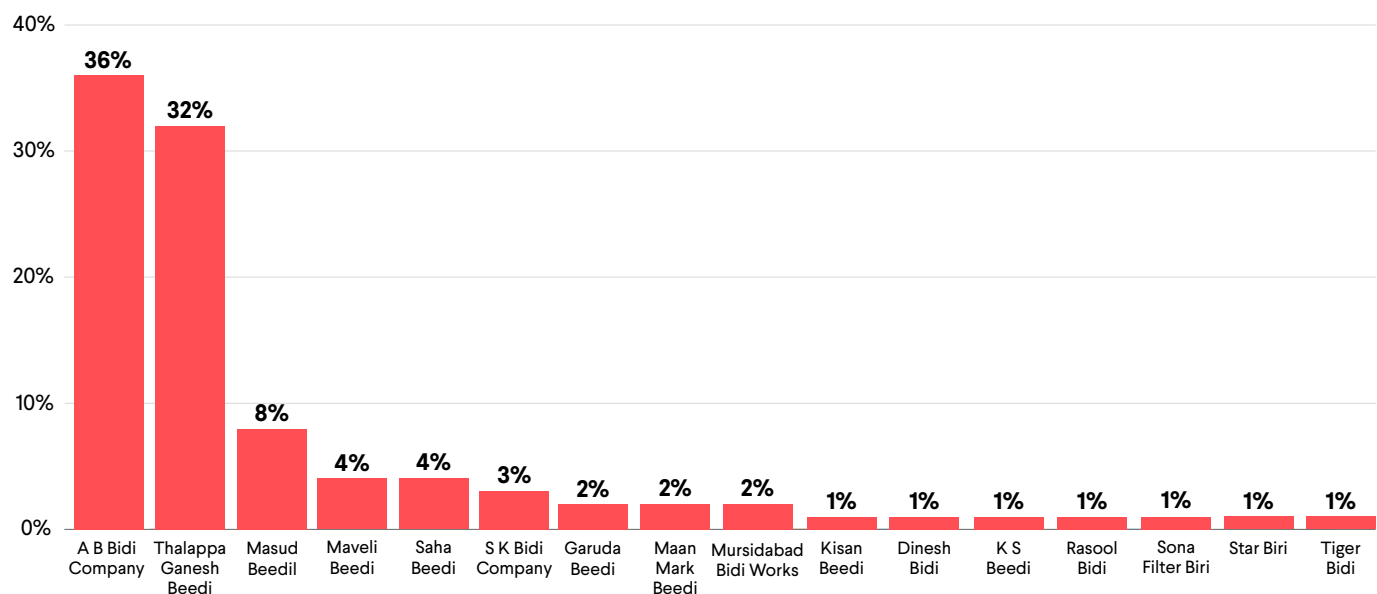
A digital media monitoring tool was used to gather the publicly available data presented in this report from various social media platforms, including but not limited to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and forums. The platform was machine coded to identify relevant posts. A generic search was conducted on social media using the keywords: “beedi” OR “#beedi” OR “bidi” OR “#bidi” OR “bidis” OR “#bidis” OR “biri” OR “#biri” OR “बीड़ी” OR “#बीड़ी.” A manual search and a systematic human-check also supplemented the automatic search. Marketing instances were selected by combining the generic bidi keywords with the following bidi brand names (502 Bidi, Ganesh 501 Bidi, GovindBidi, Hawra Bidi, Kismat Bidi, Pataka Bidi, Prakash Bidi, Sher Bidi, Shikari Bidi, S K Beedi, Maveli

Beedi, Garuda Beedi, Raja Bidi, Radheshri Beedi, Dinesh Bidi, Mursidabad Biri). Posts shared by the brand’s page containing only images, or both images and text, were included in our final counts. Social media posts depicting instances of bidi marketing were captured and analyzed manually, then classified into appropriate codes, including type of marketing, message framing and location. Social media pages that included the name of the bidi brand and were listed as a “retail shop” were selected and classified as pages linked to bidi companies. Posts were identified in English and Hindi for a data collection period from Dec. 16, 2020 to Aug. 15, 2021.

Fully detailed methodology, including coding, is available upon request.

## Appendix B

**Figure 6: Total Marketing by Bidi Company**



Dec. 16, 2020 to Aug. 15, 2021 (n = 344)

## Appendix C

### Message Framing for Marketing

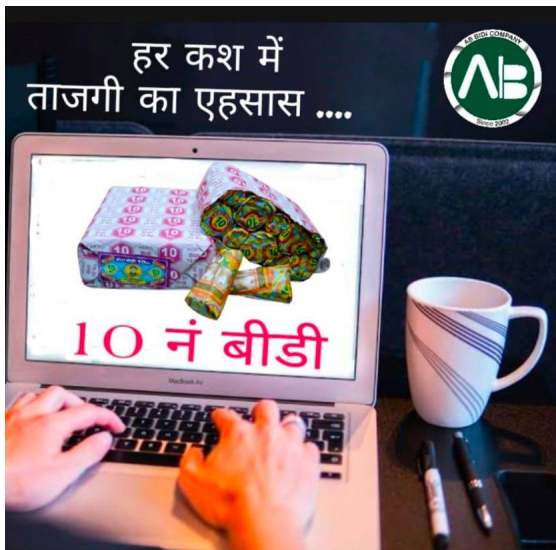
The majority of bidi marketing used direct images of the product, while marketing of other tobacco products used messages related to lifestyle and community celebration.

Marketing instances were recorded between Dec. 16, 2020 and Aug. 15, 2021.

### Table 1: Type of Message Framing

Images were manually coded according to the following categories:

Message Categories	Summary
<b>Lifestyle</b>	There were 83 instances of marketing recorded during this period that used lifestyle message framing. Posts that used keywords depicting bidis as aspirational, fun or luxurious were coded as lifestyle. Some posts also used keywords related to the taste and other attributes of bidis, like “aroma,” “rich taste,” “instant energy,” “feel of cigarette,” etc.



Translation: Every smoke gives a feeling of freshness; On the laptop: 10 no. beedi.



Translation: Those who smoke a bidi even while it's hot, are the ones who live life.

**Community celebration**

There were 68 instances of marketing observed during this period that focused on community celebrations. Messaging that mentioned and/or was timed with national and international observances was coded as community celebration. During this period, there were mentions of religious festivals and observances, such as Eid, Holi, New Years and Christmas. National and international sporting events also appeared in this type of messaging.



Translation: Om Namah Shivaye  
Best wishes on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri (Lord Shiva's festival).



Translation: Wishing you a very Happy New Year

**Brand image**

There were 114 instances of marketing that contained pictures of tendu leaves and bidi packs, as well as pictures depicting production, storage and retail sales with minimal text beyond pictures of the packaging. The images had a logo of the brand or displayed branded bidi packets.

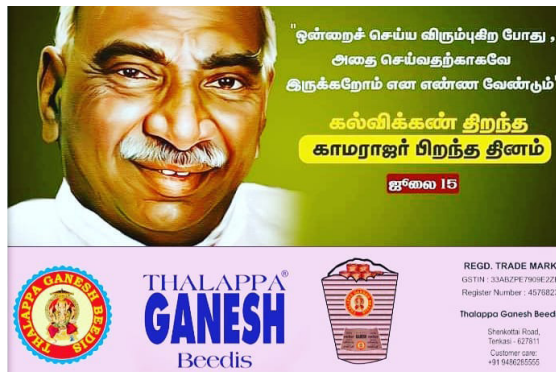


Translation: Riddhi Siddhi Bidi, for Real Smoking Pleasure.



**Remembrance days**

There were 9 instances of marketing observed during this period that focused on remembrance days. Messaging that mentioned memorial days for persons of national or international importance and birthdays of popular figures was included in this framing.



Translation: "If one intends to do something, one needs to be determined as to think that is life's purpose" - Quote from K. Kamaraj, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, celebrating his birthday on July 15.



Translation: In remembrance of those who sacrificed their lives for the country Vijay Divas, 16 December 1971.

**Livelihood**

There were 4 instances of marketing observed during this period that depicted images of people engaged in different stages of bidi production.



**Non-specific Imagery**

There were 66 instances of marketing that didn't have any text or fall under any specific category. These posts were coded as nonspecific. Posts that were categorized as nonspecific are different from image-only posts because they do not include the logo of the company and are not branded for display. Often, they are images of rolled bidis or tendu leaves.



## Appendix D

### Type of Marketing

Most of the bidi marketing was direct and there were fewer instances of indirect marketing to events and holidays. There were far fewer instances of indirect marketing.

Marketing instances were recorded between Dec. 16, 2020 and Aug. 15, 2021.

**Table 2: Type of Marketing**

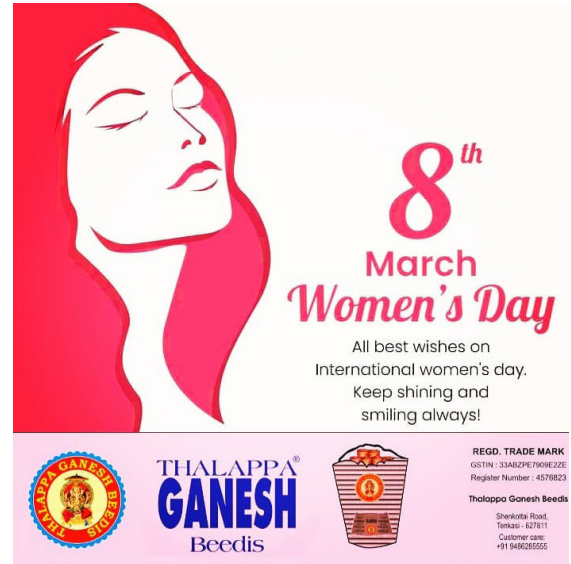
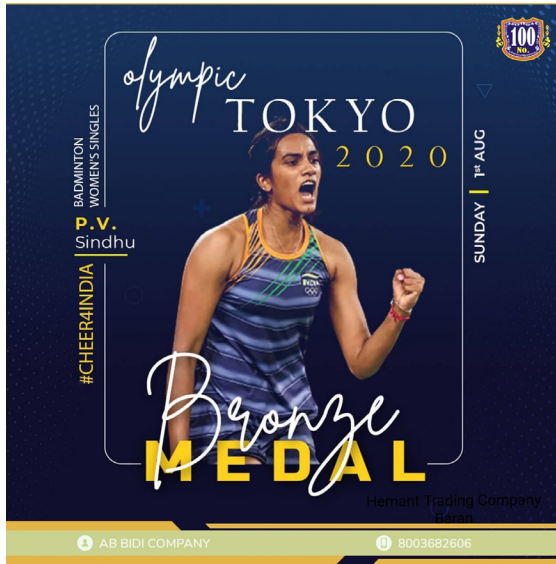
Marketing Tactics	Summary
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<b>Direct marketing</b>	There were 271 instances of direct marketing observed during this period. When images of the product were depicted, this was coded as direct marketing. This marketing was done primarily via Facebook. Ads depicted the qualities of well-made bidis and offered aspirational messaging on bidi smoking. Some posts provided details on where to order products.
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**Indirect Marketing**

There were 73 instances of indirect marketing. This included any marketing that was timed with a national or global event—observances such as Independence Day, Christmas, New Years—and national religious festivals such as Eid and Holi, where a celebratory tone was used to not directly promote or market bidis but to promote a brand image and boost brand recall. Some messages also promoted bidi brands by marketing surrogate products, such as match boxes with the same logo/brand name as bidi products.



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