You have been QUALIFIED for a smokeless e-cig starter kit

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Shortly after the shock of seeing e-cigarette advertising on television, an unsolicited e-mail arrived promoting an ‘e-cig starter kit’ (figure 1). This showed ‘Megan’ (attractive, slim, elegant, professional, confident and happy) ‘smoking’ an e-cigarette, apparently on a plane. Incongruously, the e-cigarette billows smoke. The sender’s address and titles of embedded links suggest the ease of trying e-cigarettes, and that e-cigarettes are healthy and inoffensive. Ingeniously, the advert can be read as showing that holding a cigarette object is attractive and socially desirable, and that e-cigarettes are (somewhat) distinct from ‘ordinary’ cigarettes.

Emerging research raises concerns over whether e-cigarettes renormalise and reglamourise smoking and/or act as a gateway to smoking.1–5 Within present legislation, ‘Megan’ can ‘smoke’ her e-cigarette in public spaces because e-cigarettes are not subject to smoke-free regulation. They can also be advertised, although some may question whether a smoking e-cigarette complies with guidelines.

In 2013, US Democratic Congress members wrote to e-cigarette manufacturers regarding marketing tactics likely to ‘hook’ young people,3 and posted a presentation highlighting parallels with earlier cigarette marketing.4 As gender and health researchers, we also note the strong resemblance to images of women in advertising which so successfully drew earlier generations of women to smoking.5–7

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Figure 1 Screenshot of unsolicited email.