

Mate, an Argentinian icon used to promote cigarettes

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One of the marketing strategies the tobacco industry deploys is the use of culturally significant symbols, practices and values to promote its products.^{1,2} Between October and November 2023, Marlboro launched a promotion in Argentina related to the caffeine-rich infused herbal drink *mate*, a deep-rooted tradition among Argentines. The promotion was identified in a convenience store in Buenos Aires during routine monitoring of tobacco products. With the purchase of a pack of Marlboro Crafted cigarettes and an additional payment of 1000 Argentine pesos (US\$2.81), the customer receives a mate and bombilla, that is, the container and straw needed to drink the infusion with the same name (see figure 1). Notably, the standalone price of the same mate and bombilla online was 6000 pesos (US\$16.86), making this promotion a considerable value proposition.

Mate is an expression of Argentina's cultural identity and a symbol of union and friendship that represents the value given to interpersonal ties.³ Its consumption, at any time of the day, is central to daily life for many.⁴ It also has an important social role.⁵ Sharing a mate is a gesture of openness that invites people to connect with each other in an atmosphere of trust and friendliness, drinking together from the same mug. The yerba mate (the leaves used to prepare the infusion) is present in 90% of households, and in 2013, it was legally declared the National Infusion, with National Mate Day celebrated on 30 November each year. Given how popular drinking and sharing mate is in Argentina, being much more common than smoking, Philip Morris may be trying to leverage the positive feelings people have towards mate and associate them with tobacco. The ultimate aim for Philip Morris will be to increase sales of their products.

Tobacco companies have been identified as corporate cultural invaders before, seeking to link their

products to cultural symbols, icons and images.^{1,6} For example, a recent Philip Morris campaign in Mexico featured symbols on Marlboro packs reflecting those often used in Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) celebrations, alongside the colours of the Mexican flag.⁶ Previously, fileteado porteño, an artistic expression typical of the City of Buenos Aires, was used by British American Tobacco on Jockey Club cigarette packs and sticks in Argentina to promote the brand.⁷ It is important to highlight such instances where they occur.^{1,6}

Cultural appropriation is not confined to tobacco companies, with other multinationals tailoring marketing strategies to local contexts. In Guatemala, for instance, the 'think locally and act locally' marketing of Coca-Cola has attempted to integrate it into Mayan healing practices, local cooking and celebrations.^{8,9} The soft drink is now sometimes used to prepare typical dishes for special celebrations, not only in Guatemala but in other countries.⁸ A better understanding of the real-world impacts of tobacco companies' cultural appropriation practices is needed.

The mate example also illustrates how tobacco companies exploit any marketing opportunities available to them. In Argentina, the law¹⁰ prohibits the sale of non-tobacco promotional items that may be associated with, or help identify, tobacco brands, and free gifts that may encourage tobacco consumption. Therefore, the lack of branding on the mate included in the Marlboro Crafted promotion and the addition of a modest value to the pack price adhere to these regulations. However, the inclusion of mate to the pack may still create an association between the product and tobacco, even if indirectly. A similar phenomenon of multinational companies circumventing regulations took place in San Francisco, where municipal legislation banned free toys in children's meals unless nutrition criteria were met. To elude this, global restaurant chains started charging a few additional cents for the toy instead of modifying the nutritional content of their meals.¹¹

The Marlboro Crafted promotion exemplifies how tobacco companies can take advantage of loopholes to attempt to generate interest in their brands and increase sales, in this case appealing directly to a central element in Argentine culture. This points to a need for comprehensive bans on advertising and promotion of tobacco products, including promotions that involve non-tobacco items, even if they do not feature tobacco branding and require additional payment.

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Figure 1 Marlboro Crafted promotion, with mate and bombilla.



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