

Unicorns cartoons: marketing sweet and creamy e-juice to youth

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned characterising flavours for cigarettes with the exception of menthol and tobacco.¹ New regulations, released in May 2016, deemed electronic cigarettes to be tobacco products under the FDA's regulatory authority.² Nicotine-containing liquid (e-juice) used in e-cigarettes is marketed in thousands of flavours. While the initial set of FDA rules did not address e-juice flavours, future FDA action may do so. The agency's determination on whether or not e-cigarettes should be subject to flavour regulations similar to those already in place for traditional combustible cigarettes will depend on evidence of differential appeal of these products to youth.

Unicorns are mythological creatures which permeate popular culture, especially children's literature (eg, *The Princess and the Unicorn*), television (eg, *My Little Pony*) and games (eg, *Rainbow Unicorn*).³ A search for 'unicorn children's' in the Amazon.com book section returned 5223 items (15 May 2016). The number one item is titled: 'Sparkly the Unicorn: Cute Bedtime Story for Kids with a Lesson About Caring and Love'. The purpose of this article is to describe unicorn-themed flavoured e-juice and their associated advertising messaging.

RESULTS

In analysing over 12 000 e-cigarette advertisements, we have encountered a remarkable assortment of unicorn-themed e-juice products^{4 5} (table 1). Most illustrations of unicorns show them as happy, playful and cuddly creatures. Unicorn e-juice products most often are named after the creature's supposed secretions and excretions: milk, breath, tears, blood, puke, vomit, poop, piss, spew and jizz [sic] (figures 1–4). In advertisements, the e-juice emanates from the appropriate bodily orifice of the unicorn in the form of an attractive rainbow of colours.

Descriptions of the flavour of unicorn e-juice products vary, but are usually of the sweet, fruity and creamy descriptors of a type which appeals to youthful palates. Exhale Vapors describes their 'unicorn puke' e-juice: "Unicorn Vomit is a rainbow of flavors that comes comes straight from the puke of a unicorn (figure 1). Taste of sweet candy and ice cream flavors."⁶ In an article on e-cigarette flavours, the *New York Times* quoted a teenager as describing the taste of 'unicorn puke' as 'every flavour skittle compressed into one'.⁷ Gizmodo followed up with an article titled 'Cool Teens Prefer "Unicorn Puke" Flavoured e-cigarettes'.⁸

Cuttwood Vapors maintains that their sweet and creamy product comes from real animals: "Unicorn Milk comes to you fresh from Cuttwood's grass-fed, hormone-free Unicorn farm in Los Angeles. What does Unicorn Milk taste like exactly? It's like a blend of four different cream flavors, mixed with all natural strawberry extract. Yum!"⁹ (figure 2). It is only natural to wonder what 'unicorn poop' would taste like. According to Vapor Chef: "...everyone knows Unicorns are made of cupcakes and rainbows! This tastes like blueberry cupcakes with white chocolate frosting and a raspberry on top!"¹⁰

In the creative minds of e-juice purveyors, these creatures have become victim of 'unicorn killers' (smooth blend of strawberry and vanilla custard) and 'unicorn slayers' (dark rainbow candy cream) and as vindictive dispensers of 'unicorn revenge' (multiple layers of chocolate and sunken strawberry flavours; figure 3). Juice Man's 'unicorn porn' (explosive strawberry inhale with a soft creamy and milky exhale) variety might seem inexplicable, until you realise that the unicorn's singular horn has long been considered a phallic symbol.¹¹ Continuing the erotic theme, Good as Gold Liquid's 'unicorn jizz' is supposedly made from:

Table 1 Unicorn-flavoured e-juice on the market in 2016

Flavour	Company
Unicorn milk	Cuttwood Vapors, Ace Vapes
Unicorn cream	Vital Vapors, Vapor Palace
Unicorn juice	White Wolf Vapors
Unicorn magic	Slim's eJuice
Unicorn blood	Fuzion Vapor, Oplus, Vapez, Eco, NickNack
Unicorn poop	Vapor Chef, Dripstar
Unicorn piss	Slipstream Vaporz
Unicorn tears	CJ Vapors, Vape Shack 808, Vaporkick
Unicorn puke	Exhale Vapors, Lost Art Liquids
Unicorn vomit	Flavour West, Smokeless, Ace Vapes
Unicorn spew	Dominant Vapor
Unicorn breath	Boss Vapes
Unicorn jizz	Good as Gold Liquid
Unicorn porn	Juice Man
Unicorn sprinkles	Dirt Cheap e-Juice, Basic e-Juice
Unicorn dust	Vape Pro
Unicorn cake	White Lightening Liquids
Unicorn horn	Nirvana Vapor
Unicorn slayer	Exalted Vapors
Unicorn killer	Exhale Vapors, Vapor eLiquid
Unicorn revenge	The eJuice Captain
Unicorn roar	Par Vape Institute
Unicorn clouds	Juicy eJuice



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Figure 1 Unicorn emissions of various kinds come in a variety of e-juices. Unicorn vomit, puke and spew are typically described as mixtures of sweet, fruity and creamy flavours.

'fresh unicorn sperm' (tropical fruits with splashes of various creams).¹²

Themes of magical and mystical power are frequent. Special powers are attributed to Slim's eJuice's 'unicorn magic' and also to Boss Vapes' 'unicorn breath' e-juice, which is promoted as an 'immortality supplement' under the slogan 'Kiss my breath and never die'.¹³ Fusion Vapor's 'unicorn blood' is said to: "Tastes exactly like rainbows. Unicorns are the single most magical being that ever existed. Their blood is rumored to have magical powers and butterfly kisses. So, what does Unicorn Blood taste like exactly? It tastes just like Unicorn Blood should taste...fruity, sweet rainbow goodness that would make even the Nyan Cat jealous. Unless you hate cute kitties, snuggly blankets and baby's

yawning...you'll love this mystical ejuice."¹⁴ The Nyan Cat refers to a hugely popular YouTube video (over 134 million views as of May 2016) of an animated cartoon cat flying through the air on a Pop-Tart trailed by a rainbow. Fusion Vapor website also contains the admonition: 'Please note, we have heard on occasion that this juice will crack or cloud plastic tanks, please be aware'.¹⁴ One cannot help but wonder whether or not it would have a similar effect on teenage lungs over time.

DISCUSSION

Unicorn-themed e-cigarette advertisements are prime examples of the type of youth appealing marketing which are contributing to the rapid rise in teen use.¹⁵ Potential grounds for regulating

Figure 2 Unicorn milk-flavoured e-juices appears to be the most prevalent type of the genre.



Figure 3 Violence against hapless unicorn victims inspire various e-juice flavours. Examples include unicorn blood, unicorn killer and unicorn tears.



Figure 4 Unicorn excretions in e-juice flavours include unicorn poop, piss and jizz (sperm). The unicorn porn variety reflects the traditional lore of the one-horned animal as a phallic symbol.

unicorn-themed e-cigarette advertising include both their use of youth-oriented flavours and use of cartoons. The 2009 Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act banned any artificial or natural characterising flavour additive, other than tobacco or menthol, from traditional combustible cigarettes.¹ While the 2016 FDA deeming regulations do not place limits on e-cigarette flavours, in the deeming document the agency indicated that it seeks additional scientific data concerning the roles flavours play in adult cessation of combustible cigarettes and youth initiation to nicotine addiction.² It is clear that the FDA is considering invoking the type of flavour ban presently in place for traditional cigarettes.

The appeal of whimsical cartoon characters to youthful consumers, typified by Joe Camel, is widely acknowledged. In 1998, as part of the Master Settlement Agreement the tobacco industry agreed to discontinue use of cartoon characters in tobacco marketing based on their attractiveness to youth.¹⁶ Since 1976, commercial speech has been subject to first amendment protection from government regulation.¹⁷ This clearly complicates governmental regulation of advertising text and imagery, raising the possibility that new regulations placed on e-cigarette advertising could be ruled non-constitutional. It is hard to conceive of a set of circumstances analogous to those which motivated the tobacco industry's voluntary agreement in 1998, during which they were

taken to task for decades of deceiving the public about the health risks of smoking, which may compel the e-cigarette industry to agree with a cartoon ban. Given these limitations, regulatory attention to flavour additives may be the more realistic approach to reigning in this genre of advertising. Few teen starter smokers are likely to be attracted by tobacco-flavoured unicorn-themed e-cigarettes. Of note, cartoon figures have also been used in anti-smoking campaigns to good effect. Turning the marketers' tool kit around, in 2015 the American Legacy Foundation's Truth Campaign included a 'puking unicorn' in their video to warn youth about the dangers of smoking.¹⁸

Many youth-targeted e-cigarette marketing practices which have yet to be addressed by the FDA are presently under consideration. Examples of existing regulations which apply to traditional combustible cigarettes, but not yet e-cigarettes, include bans on youth-oriented flavours, television and radio advertising, sponsorships (such as sporting events, concerts), and celebrity endorsements. The proliferation of sweet and creamy unicorn-themed e-juice is but one of many youth appealing practices employed by e-cigarette companies in the absence of regulatory boundaries. Were the e-cigarette industry to be subject to regulations constraining youth marketing, unicorns in the e-cigarette world would once again become as rare as unicorns are supposed to be.

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