

Thematic Analysis of Facebook Advertising Messages for Tobacco Products Before and After a Statewide Ban of Flavored Tobacco

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BACKGROUND

- Over the past few years vaping prevalence has increased in the U.S. as people either switch to electronic cigarettes from traditional cigarettes thinking they are safer or due to influence by tobacco companies' strategic marketing efforts (1).
- In addition to an increase of electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) the nicotine vapor industry itself has boomed with thousands of new "vape shops" that create a trusted community of vapers (2).
- Unfortunately, the rise of ENDS products has also attracted many young people because of the availability of flavors, even though its harms are well known (3).
- It has also been found that many consumers who use ENDS also use social media networks and follow ENDS brands (4).
- In order to protect the children from becoming the target of e-cigarette industries marketing efforts, the New York Governor issued a ban that took effect on May 18th, 2020 that prohibits the sale of all flavored tobacco (5).
- With the rise of vape shops and successful marketing strategies creating a trusted community of vapers, it is important to study observable social media strategies to better understand their impact on consumer behavior and addiction.

OBJECTIVES

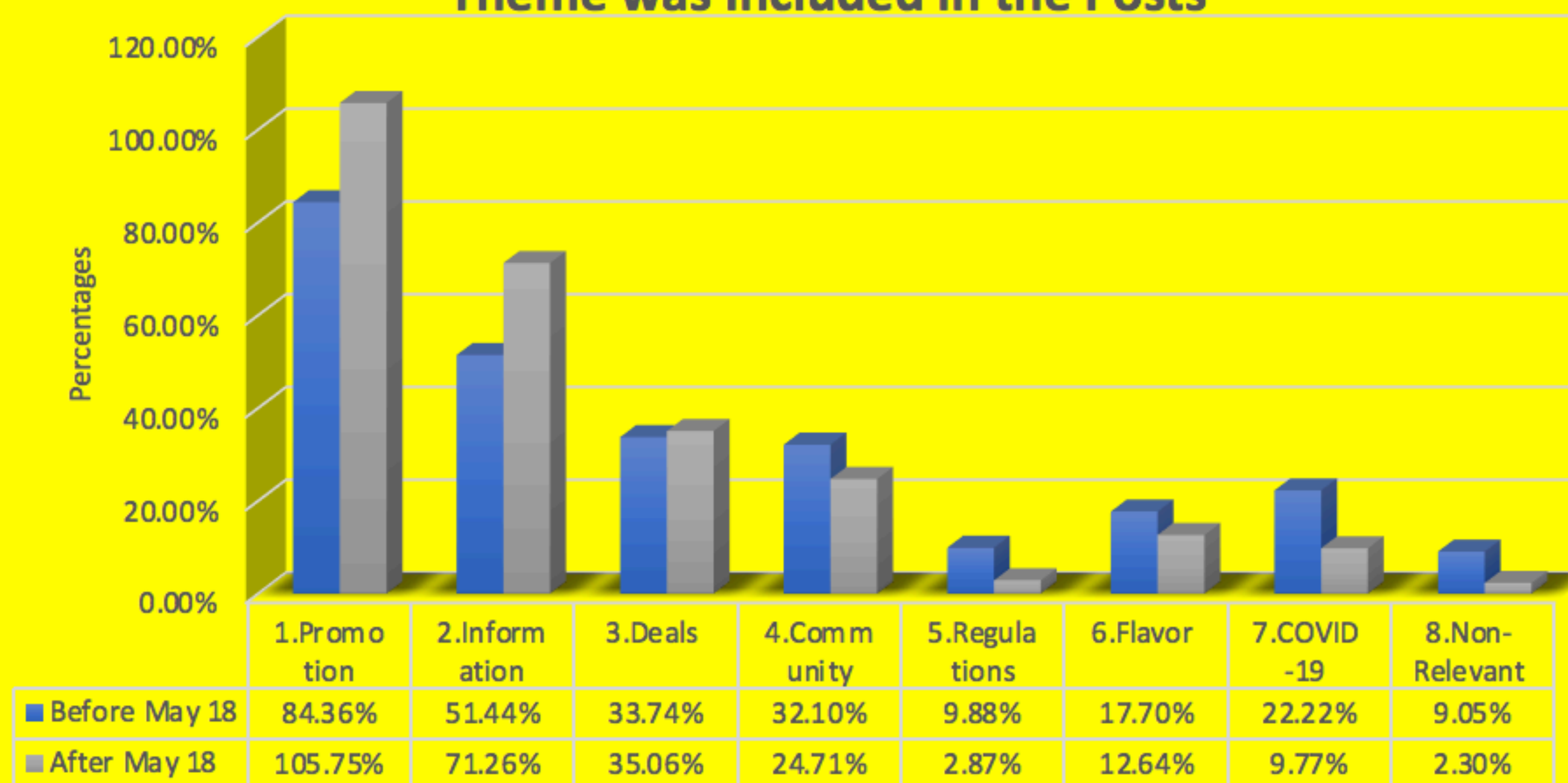
To determine and analyze vape shops' Facebook marketing strategies in the Rochester Metropolitan area before and after the May 18th, 2020 flavor ban via open coding thematic analysis.

METHODS

- For this study, Facebook posts from Rochester's 15 smoke-shops were analyzed during the period starting January 31st, 2020 until September 12th, 2020.
- After initial study of all the posts, 2 independent coders, with a supervision of a third one, thematically coded all posts into 8 themes with sub-themes.
- Later, the posts were divided into 2 groups by date- from January 31st until May 18th Flavor Ban, and from May 19th until September 12th, and were analyzed for differences.
- Figure 1 depicts the percentage differences of each theme before and after the ban. Figure 2 depicts the percentage differences of the sub-themes of the main themes Promotion, Information, Deals, Regulations, and Other.

Figure 1:

Percentage of Times the Sum of All Sub-themes for Each Theme was Included in the Posts

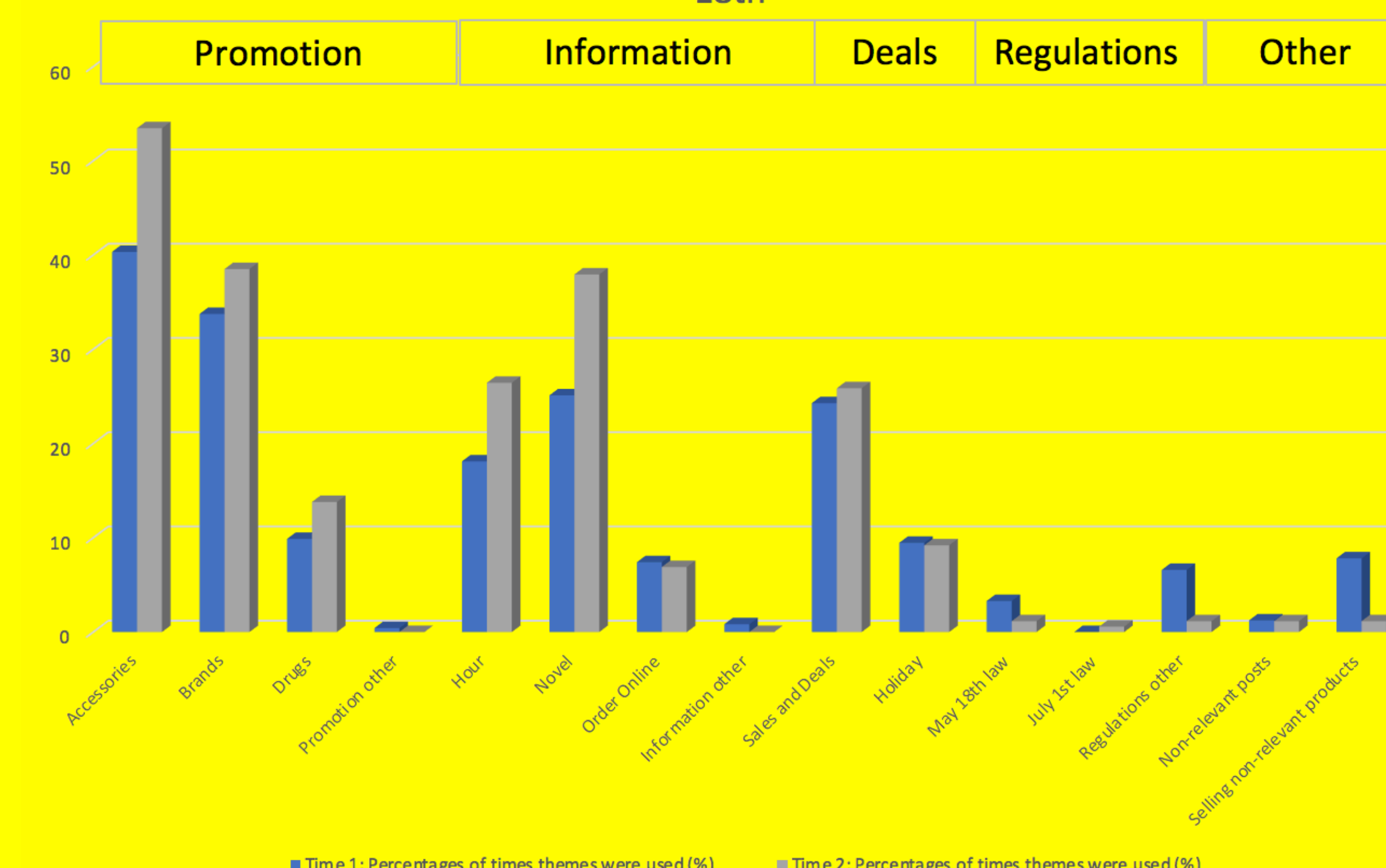


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Figure 2:

Percentages of Times the Sub-themes were Used Before and After May 18th



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- After the flavor ban, vape shops promoted, via "Promotion" posts on Facebook, their products 21.39% more than prior to the flavor ban (84.36% vs. 105.75%). Most of this increase is observed due to the increase in all sub-themes of "Promotion": "Accessories", "Brands" and "Drugs" as seen in Figure 2, which increased by 13.12%, 4.77%, 3.91% respectively.
- Similarly, the "Information" posts increased from 51.44% to 71.26% which is mostly due to the increase in the posts of the sub-theme of "Information" – "Shop Hours" and "Novel". This can be explained with eased Covid-19 restrictions at the end of Spring and beginning of Summer (6) - stores started re-opening and informing their costumers about their new hours and novel products.
- There was also a substantial decrease in posts about vaping "Flavors": from 17.70% to 12.64%. This is likely due to their inability to legally sell flavored nicotine products.
- Substantially fewer posts, post-ban, were observed in theme categories "Community" (decrease by 7.39%) and "Regulations" (decrease by 7.01%), which likely reflects a decreased need to challenge flavor regulations and a decreased need to ask their customer communities for support for such challenges.
- Interestingly, a decrease in the prevalence of COVID-19 related posts (22.22% vs. 9.77%) was observed over time, likely reflecting the various retail re-opening phases in New York State.
- In the future studies, we would like to further examine the misleading posts that target youth or promote vape products via false health claims.

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