



## ALLIANCE POUR LE CONTROLE DU TABAC EN AFRIQUE (ACTA)

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### For immediate release

Statement from Mrs. Kouami Kossiwa, Interim Executive Secretary of the African Tobacco Control Alliance (ATCA)

## "We Must Protect Children from Tobacco Industry Manipulation in the Metaverse: A Global Call to Action"

Lomé 25 July 2025

The African Tobacco Control Alliance expresses deep concern over recent revelations regarding tobacco industry activities in virtual environments, as highlighted by [The Guardian on 22 July 2025](#). The use of smoking avatars and branded content in the metaverse signals a dangerous evolution in tobacco marketing, one that directly targets young users in largely unregulated digital spaces.

Africa is experiencing a remarkable surge in digital innovation. The continent is embracing mobile connectivity, virtual platforms, and immersive technologies at unprecedented speed. [The African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy \(2020–2030\)](#) envisions a continent where digital tools empower inclusive growth, education, and entrepreneurship. So clearly, young people constitute an important base of the digital space.

As African youth become increasingly active in virtual spaces including gaming, social media, and immersive platforms, the tobacco industry is adapting its playbook to lure them into addiction. The recent Guardian report reveals how smoking avatars and branded content are infiltrating the metaverse, glamorizing tobacco use in environments where regulation is weak, and youth engagement is high.

This trend is especially dangerous in Africa, where 70% of the population is under 30<sup>1</sup>, internet penetration has doubled since 2015<sup>2</sup>, with mobile-first access dominating, and digital literacy is rising, but critical awareness of online manipulation remains low.

By targeting the metaverse, the tobacco industry aims to promote and normalize nicotine use among children and adolescents, exploiting regulatory grey areas to subvert existing advertising laws. This is not innovation; it is manipulation, and it must be confronted urgently with swift regulatory actions.

The tobacco industry's encroachment into the metaverse is not just a marketing shift. It is a calculated move to reshape social norms and recruit a new generation of users through digital

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/news/young-people%E2%80%99s-potential-key-africa%E2%80%99s-sustainable-development>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/topics/9813/internet-usage-in-africa/#topicOverview>

seduction. Africa's youth, empowered yet exposed by rising technological connectivity, are at heightened risk. It is our duty to act decisively.

We, as tobacco control actors, must rise to this moment of transformation with equal innovation and determination. We must not wait for regulation to catch up, we must lead the regulation process. The metaverse must not become a loophole in global health protection.

Considering the above, the African Tobacco Control Alliance (ATCA) calls on governments, civil society, tech companies and every other implicated stakeholder to:

- Implement digital regulations that prohibit tobacco promotion, especially in virtual environments frequented by young people.
- Engage with platform developers to integrate strict anti-tobacco content guidelines, age verification tools, and moderation mechanisms.
- Strengthen global surveillance of industry behaviour across digital ecosystems, with coordinated reporting and accountability.
- Invest in youth education and awareness, empowering families to navigate virtual worlds safely and resist harmful influences.
- Reaffirm commitment to the WHO FCTC, expanding its relevance to emerging technologies and cross-border marketing.

We call on governments, international bodies, civil society organizations, digital innovators, and youth networks to unite in the defence of public health in all spaces, physical or virtual. This fight transcends borders, industries, and platforms, and we cannot stand by as addiction is repackaged and disguised as entertainment.

As ATCA, we pledge to expose, confront, and dismantle these emerging threats. The future of our children, and the integrity of Africa's digital promise, depends on it.

Together, we must ensure that the metaverse becomes a space for imagination, not a breeding ground for tobacco addiction. We must act boldly, protect the next generation, and reaffirm our collective resolve against tobacco industry interference in all its forms.

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*The African Tobacco Control Alliance (ATCA) is a non-profit, non-political Pan-African network of civil society organizations headquartered in Lome, Togo. With membership in 39 countries, ATCA is dedicated to promoting public health and curbing the tobacco epidemic in the continent. The alliance is an Observer to WHO-FCTC Conference of Parties, and Meeting of the Parties (MOP) of the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products. It has a Special Consultative Status with the UN ECOSOC, it is certified with the equivalence of a US Public Charity organization, and it is accredited as a regional non-state actor with WHO AFRO.*