

E-cigarette content flooding social media

This policy brief is based on the findings of research conducted by the Tobacco Vape Research Collective, Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health, School of Population Health, Curtin University.

Jancey J, Leaver T, Wolf K, Freeman B, Chai K, Bialous S, Bromberg M, Adams P, Mcleod M, Carey R, McCausland K. Promotion of e-cigarettes on TikTok and regulatory considerations. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2023; 20(10):5761. [10.3390/ijerph20105761](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105761)

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The issue

In January 2023, more than 21 million Australians were active social media users, spending on average 124 minutes per day on social media, using these platforms for social interactions and entertainment, to seek information about products, and to purchase goods.¹ Use of social media is particularly high among Generation Z (born 1997-2012), with 85% of young people reporting using at least one social media platform and 64% reporting the use of five platforms.²

E-cigarette products are being promoted on social media through advertisements, social media influencers, and user-generated content.³⁻⁵ This messaging is predominantly positive, shaping e-cigarette-related culture and norms, contributing to the view that vaping is common and socially accepted,³ lowering perceptions of harm, and supporting use.⁶

Social media companies' voluntary policies to restrict the promotion of tobacco products, including e-cigarettes exist but are limited and not well enforced, as these platforms are still being used to market these products.⁷ Actions to control the promotion of e-cigarettes and other harmful content (which could also include tobacco, alcohol, and gambling) are needed.

Our research

Our research on TikTok and Instagram shows that:

- Most e-cigarette-related posts on TikTok (98%) and Instagram (100%) **portray e-cigarette use positively**.
- There is a **proliferation of links to other sites and social media accounts** containing e-cigarette content, including business pages and online retailers.
- One-quarter of e-cigarette-related posts on TikTok (26%) and 17% on Instagram **violate the social media company's content policy**.

Key messages

- E-cigarette promotion is common on social media platforms, contributing to the view that e-cigarette use is the socially accepted norm, thereby encouraging e-cigarette uptake.
- A substantial proportion of e-cigarette content on social media violates the platform's own content policy, indicating self-regulation of e-cigarette content is not effective and further action is needed.
- There is an evident need for government leadership and appropriate legislation to curb e-cigarette marketing, identification of an organisation with the power to monitor, enforce and penalise non-compliant companies, increased community awareness of harmful social media content (that could extend to tobacco, alcohol, and gambling), and improved community digital literacy.

Why does this matter?

Social media companies have established policies to restrict content that promotes e-cigarettes (and tobacco); however, they are hard to interpret and not legally binding. There are regular breaches of these policies, as evidenced by our research. Self-regulation of e-cigarette content by social media companies is not working and other actions are needed.

Key areas for action

We spoke with experts working in public health, social media, law, and tobacco control, and considered the Australian regulatory context, in particular the recently passed **Public Health (Tobacco and Other Products) Act**,⁸ which will prohibit e-cigarette advertising from April 1, 2024.

The following actions are recommended:

- **The Australian Government** should provide **leadership** and widely publicise its law reforms to ban e-cigarette advertising both online and on social media.
- The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing should be adequately resourced to ensure it has the capacity to undertake the necessary **monitoring, compliance, and enforcement** of the law. Other agencies that have roles in regulating e-cigarette advertising (e.g. Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, the eSafety Commissioner, Therapeutic Goods Administration) should also be adequately resourced.
- **State and Territory Governments** should adopt complementary law reforms, and all levels of government should ensure a strong focus on monitoring, compliance, and enforcement of the law.
- An independent **complaints mechanism** should be established, providing an easy avenue for community members to report possible contraventions of the law, if they see e-cigarette advertising online or on social media.
- **Raise community awareness** about e-cigarettes and increase digital literacy, so that all community members can contribute to supporting a safe online environment.



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