

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

Jancey J, Carey R, Freeman B, Leaver T, Wolf K, Bromberg M, Chai K, Bialous S, Adams P, Mcleod M, McCausland K. E-cigarettes on Instagram: Exploring vape content via an Australian vaping influencer. Tobacco Induced Diseases 2024; 22:19. 10.18332/tid/175619

Jancey J, Crawford G, Bowman E, Wolf K, Leaver T, Bialous S, McCausland K. Perceptions of social media harms and potential management strategies: Vaping case study. BMC Public Health 2024; 24:876. 10.1186/s12889-024-18362-8

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. 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 usergenerated 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.

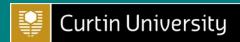
Our research

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.



www.tobacco-vape-research.org.au

Research team: Prof Jonine Jancey (Curtin University), Dr Kahlia McCausland (Curtin University), A/Prof Becky Freeman (University of Sydney), A/Prof Katharina Wolf (Curtin University), Prof Tama Leaver (Curtin University), Prof Stella Bialous (UCSF), Dr Kevin Chai (Curtin University) [Funded by Healthway].

References

- 1. We are Social. Digital 2023 Australia: 1 in 3 Australians use social networks for brand research. Special Reports. February 2023. Available online: https://wearesocial.com/au/blog/2023/02/digital-2023-australia-1-in-3-australians-use-social-networks-for-brand-research/ (accessed November 26, 2023).
- 2. Australian Communications and Media Authority. Communications and media in Australia: The digital lives of younger Australians. 2021. Commonwealth of Australia. Available online: https://www.acma.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-05/The%20digital%20lives%20of%20younger%20Australians.pdf (accessed January 20, 2024).
- 3. McCausland K, Maycock B, Leaver T, Jancey J. The messages presented in electronic cigarette-related social media promotions and discussion: Scoping review. J Med Internet Res 2019; 21:e11953.
- 4. McCausland K, Maycock B, Leaver T, Wolf K, Freeman B, Jancey J. E-cigarette advocates on Twitter: Content analysis of vaping-related tweets. JMIR Public Health Surveill 2020; 6:e17543.
- 5. Sun T, Lim CCW, Chung J, Cheng B, Davidson L, Tisdale C, et al. Vaping on TikTok: A systematic thematic analysis. Tob Control 2023; 32:251-254.
- 6. Vassey J, Galimov A, Kennedy CJ, Vogel EA, Unger JB. Frequency of social media use and exposure to tobacco or nicotine-related content in association with ecigarette use among youth: A cross-sectional and longitudinal survey analysis. Prev Med Reports 2022;30102055.
- 7. Kong G, Laestadius L, Vassey J, Majmundar A, Stroup AM, Meissner HI, et al. Tobacco promotion restriction policies on social media. Tob Control 2022; 0:1-6.
- 8. Public Health (Tobacco and Other Products) Act 2023 No. 118, 2023. Federal Register of Legislation. Australian Government. Available online: https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2023A00118/asmade/text (accessed January 20, 2024).