

How Exposure to Vaping Influencers Relates to Degrees of Use Among Youth

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Background

ENDS manufacturers use loopholes to skirt advertising bans on ENDS by paying influencers to promote ENDS products on personal social media pages.¹ While platforms like Facebook and Instagram have taken steps to ban the use of influencers in this way,² research has proved that influencer promotional posts about ENDS are still breaching the rules and reaching the eyes of many adolescent social media users.³

According to The Guardian, tobacco companies are also circumventing bans by establishing their own pages on social media sites.⁴ Efforts to track the degree adolescents view such promotional advertising have discovered that even minimal exposure to social media content promoting ENDS relates to greater intentions of using ENDS in the future.⁵

In this study, we first explore the degree to which adolescents are being exposed to ENDS promotions from influencers on social media, even on platforms with bans in place. We then test whether the frequency of exposure is positively associated with more ENDS use.

Regulating the promotion of ENDS online has been difficult due to the abundant promotional strategies companies adopt. One such strategy is the use of social media ENDS advocates (both paid and unpaid). This strategy has effectively led to a subculture of devoted ENDS users who have chosen to promote ENDS use as peer/social models.^{6,7}

Social media influencers have been defined as, “a new type of independent third-party endorser

who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media”.⁸

Previous studies have shown that exposure to ENDS marketing may predict adolescent intentions to initiate use of ENDS.^{5,9} Thus, we hypothesized that greater exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions across various social media platforms would be related to both a higher likelihood of susceptibility to initiate ENDS use among adolescents who had never used ENDS, and higher degrees of actual ENDS usage among adolescents who already use ENDS.

Methods

We used our [Vaping Attitudes Youth Perspectives Survey \(VAYPS\) data](#), to [categorize adolescent respondents into four profiles representing incremental intensities of ENDS use](#): never-users, with no to low likelihood of initiating ENDS use; susceptible-users, that have not vaped before, but are considered likely to initiate ENDS use; light-users that have already initiated ENDS use but do not use regularly, and regular-users that report using ENDS regularly.

Measures

Influencer exposure: Adolescent respondents were asked, “In the past 30 days, roughly how often did you see vapes in celebrities'/influencers' posts on social media?” Answer options included, “everyday,” “a few times a week,” “once a week,” “a few times,” “never,” “I don’t know,” and “prefer not respond.”

Social media accounts: Respondents were asked a series of yes or no questions pertaining to having an account on the following platforms: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Snapchat, and Other.

Weekly exposure: We created a dummy variable, where one represented a respondent who reported seeing ENDS related posts from influencers at least once a week, and zero represented a respondent who reported only ever having seen ENDS related posts from influencers a few times or never. Respondents that answered, “I don’t know” and “prefer not answer” were considered as missing and removed from analysis.

Only social media accounts with bans in place: We created a dummy variable, where one represented a respondent who reported only having accounts on Facebook and/or Instagram, and zero represented a respondent who reported having an account on any platform other than Facebook and Instagram, or not having any social media accounts.

Analyses: In these cross-sectional analyses, we conducted pairwise t-tests between each of these profiles to compare weekly exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions. We accounted for the number of comparisons made by using Bonferroni’s adjusted significance threshold. We also explored the frequency of overall exposure among respondents who reported only having Facebook and/or Instagram accounts, and among respondents who reported not having any social media accounts.

Findings

Participants: Nearly a quarter (24%) of all adolescent respondents reported at least weekly exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions on social media, while nearly half of the respondents reported being exposed at least a few times in the past 30 days. Among the 110 respondents who reported only having accounts on platforms with bans in place, 36% reported weekly exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions on social media within the past 30 days. Interestingly, among the 150 respondents who reported not having any accounts on any social media platforms, 17% still reported exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions.

Results

Pairwise t-test comparisons between profiles showed that susceptible-users, light-users, and regular-users were each significantly more likely to report weekly exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions compared to never-users, all with ($p < 0.001$).

Two comparisons were significant at the 0.05 level; yet did not meet Bonferroni’s adjusted threshold of significance ($p \leq 0.008$). Susceptible-users and light-users were less likely than regular-users to report weekly exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions, both with ($p = 0.01$).

Discussion

We found significant, positive associations between weekly exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions and the ENDS usage profiles. We confirmed our hypothesis that with greater exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions there was an overall trend of increased ENDS susceptibility and ENDS usage. While exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions likely inspires use among viewers, other mechanisms may be at play. For instance, more susceptible adolescents or those who already use ENDS may be more curious about ENDS products and thus seek out influencers who use or promote ENDS. Algorithms that select content based on viewers’ personal interests may unintentionally target youth who have previously engaged with ENDS related images or websites.

Our findings reveal how widely this ENDS marketing strategy is still reaching adolescent viewers, even on Instagram and Facebook where ban policies have been in place since 2019.¹⁰ This issue highlights the persisting need for less obscure, more accountable policies against influencers’ ENDS promotions.

Adolescents may be unaware that influencers may be getting paid for ENDS promotion and might trust influencers more than traditional advertising. Research has shown that conspicuously classifying such social media posts with the hashtag “#ad” may effectively reduce perceived credibility.¹¹

We encountered several limitations in this study. Self-reported recollections of frequency viewing influencers’ ENDS promotions may not be accurate. We were also unable to make causal inferences due to the cross-sectional nature of our VAYPS survey. Future research should longitudinally explore the extent that exposure to influencers’ ENDS promotions increases susceptibility to and actual usage of ENDS.

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