The #Toxic Smoking Aesthetic 2026

How Public Health Can Counter Big Tobacco's Playbook for the Digital Age

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cigarettes are being toxically recast as symbols of beauty, nostalgia, community, humor, and feminine identity on social media through creators, influencers, peer networks, and algorithm-driven feeds, blurring the lines between marketing and everyday social content. Alarmingly, a growing body of research suggests that exposure to tobacco-related content on social media increases susceptibility to future tobacco use.[1]

Each year, the tobacco industry spends billions of dollars to keep tobacco products cheap, visible, and profitable.[2] This report focuses on combustible cigarettes for a simple reason: **Cigarettes remain the industry's most profitable product[3] and the deadliest**, continuing to drive the majority of tobacco-related cancer deaths, even after decades of declining cigarette use.[4]

Today, members of Generation Z (Gen Z) are far less likely to smoke cigarettes than previous generations.[5] Yet, new research from the Truth Initiative suggests smoking is regaining social appeal among young people, with growing numbers associating smoking with fitting in, social acceptance, and looking "cool."[6] These shifting attitudes raise concerns that **cigarette imagery on social media is playing a role, particularly content focused on young women and girls.**[7]

> A new #toxic smoking aesthetic is taking shape on social media aimed at young women and girls.

Drawing on ACS CAN's analysis of hundreds of cigarette-related posts collected from Instagram and TikTok from July 13-27, 2026, this report found that cigarettes were presented not simply as a product, but as part of a curated identity and cultural aesthetic. **Cigarettes were framed as markers of beauty and personal style**, symbols of **nostalgia for a romanticized past**, tools for **belonging and social connection**, and subjects of **dark humor and irony** – and all within content centered on feminine identity and girlhood.

> The tobacco industry no longer needs billboards to sell an image. Social media is doing the selling for them.

As tobacco-related content spreads across social media platforms, the public health infrastructure designed to detect and respond to it is being weakened. The elimination of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office on Smoking and Health (OSH) and continued underinvestment in state tobacco control programs threaten the research, surveillance, prevention, and counter-marketing capacity. **Progress is not permanent.** Protecting the next generation will require a public health response built for today's digital environments. ACS CAN recommends **sustained investments** in federal and state tobacco prevention programs, alongside **comprehensive smoke-free laws** and **higher tobacco taxes**, targeted **surveillance and research**, stronger **oversight of tobacco-related marketing on social media**, and youth-driven **counter-marketing campaigns.**



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