









THE #TOXIC SMOKING AESTHETIC 2026

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

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A Note on Terminology

Throughout this report, the term tobacco refers to commercial tobacco products manufactured and marketed by the tobacco industry. It does not refer to the traditional, ceremonial, medicinal, or sacred use of tobacco by many American Indian, Alaska Native, and Indigenous communities. Traditional tobacco use is culturally distinct from commercial tobacco use and is not the focus of this report.

A Note on Imagery

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN) strongly opposes the promotion and glamorization of tobacco use. This report includes images and social media content depicting cigarettes and smoking solely to document and expose how smoking is once again being portrayed as fashionable, appealing, and socially acceptable to young people, especially young women and girls.

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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.[22]

Today, members of Generation Z (Gen Z) are far less likely to smoke cigarettes than previous generations.[4] 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."[5] These shifting attitudes raise concerns that **cigarette imagery on social media is playing a role, particularly content focused on young women and girls.**[6]

> 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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1. How the Tobacco Industry Manufactured the #Toxic Smoking Aesthetic for Young Women

Rise of a Smoking Culture for Women

At the turn of the 20th century, few American women smoked. In 1923, women consumed just 5% of all cigarettes sold in the United States.[7] Recognizing the social norms that discouraged women from smoking, the tobacco industry spent decades reshaping these norms through advertising and public relations campaigns. **In less than 50 years, the tobacco industry altered that reality.**

By 1965, approximately 33.9% of adult women in the United States smoked cigarettes.[7] Dire health consequences followed. In 1980, the U.S. Surgeon General warned that "the first signs of an epidemic of smoking-related disease among women are now appearing."[8] In 1987, **lung cancer, once rare among women, surpassed breast cancer as the leading cause of cancer death.**[9] The **rise of a smoking culture for women in the U.S. was the direct result of a multibillion-dollar industry** deliberately targeting women and girls for profit. In the industry's own words, tobacco companies sought to create feelings of "belonging," instill "confidence," and cultivate a "sense of style."[10] By linking cigarettes to women's identities and aspirations, the industry helped to addict generations of women to a deadly product.

Selling a #Toxic Aesthetic

The tobacco industry's marketing has never been about selling cigarettes alone. Faced with promoting a product that kills over 480,000 Americans each year,[11] **it also sells an aesthetic, an identity, and an aspiration.** Since the advent of mass cigarette marketing, tobacco companies have studied how young women wanted to see themselves and how they aspired to be seen by others.[12]

Virginia Slims illustrates this strategy clearly. Philip Morris did not begin with a product and then market it to women. Rather, it identified thinness as an aspirational ideal and developed a cigarette specifically designed to fit that image.[13] Virginia Slims' marketing strategy evolved with women's aspirations around style, beauty, slimness, confidence, independence, and belonging. [10,13,14]

Figure 1. The Tobacco Industry in Its Own Words

> Create a presence in the bar....with brand image of **fun**, **fashion** and **male/female friction**[14]
>
> Virginia Slims Legends Bar Night Concepts, 1987.

> CAPRI Is The Uniquely Slim Cigarette For The Female Smoker...Express Her Aspirations For **Sophistication, Elegance, Style And Femininity**[15]
>
> Brown & Williamson, CAPRI marketing presentation [undated].

> Virginia Slims helps instill confidence....by creating a sense of **belonging**....and a sense of **style**[10]
>
> Leo Burnett/Philip Morris, Virginia Slims Advertising History & Key Programs, Jan. 24, 2000. [csts.ua.edu]

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Selling a #Toxic Aesthetic (continued)

This strategy extended beyond traditional advertising into social spaces where identity, status, and relationships were formed. A 1987 Virginia Slims marketing document called for creating ***"a presence in the bar that is consistent with the brand image of fun, fashion, and male/female friction."***[14] Through these promotions, the tobacco industry sought to embed its brands in nightlife culture.

Tobacco companies also used bar, music, and festival promotions to reach specific demographic groups. Industry documents instructed marketers to ***"target Black urban bars..."***[16] while Kool Nights Bar Promotions focused on inner-city Black neighborhoods ***"to reinforce Kool as the leading menthol brand."***[14] These efforts linked cigarette brands to particular identities, communities, and lifestyles, with the goal of making smoking a marker of social identity.

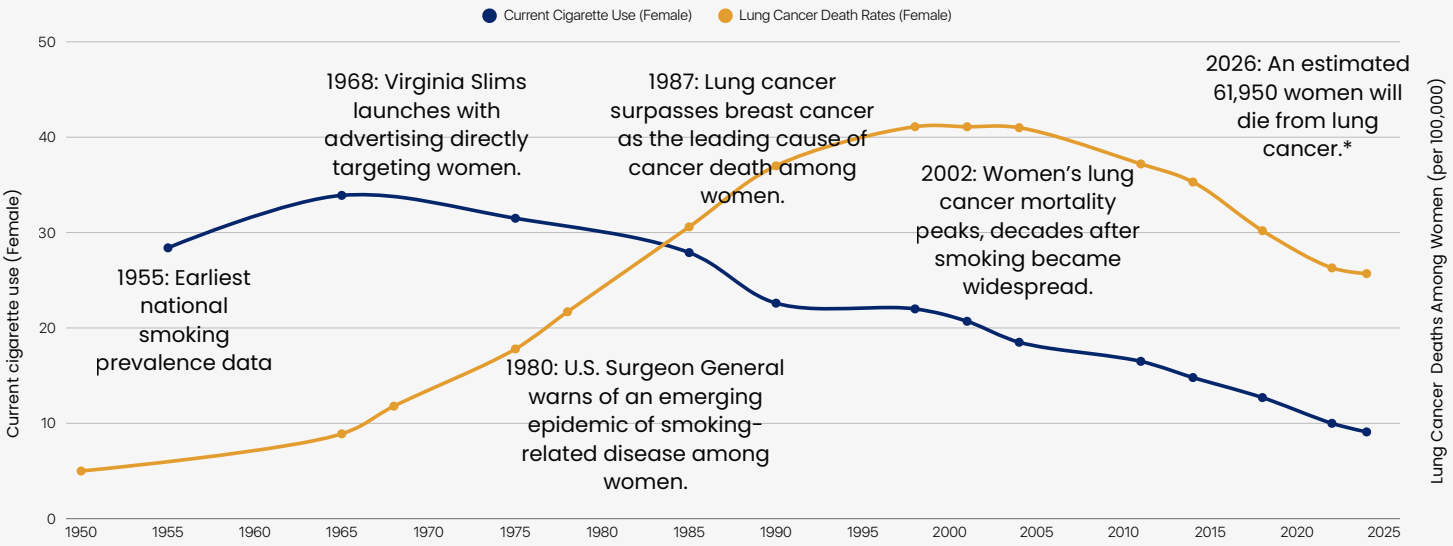
Today, as restrictions limit traditional marketing channels, the tobacco industry has adapted its playbook, and **social media platforms increasingly serve as a venue to weave smoking into popular culture.**

Figure 2. The Tobacco Industry's Shifting Marketing Playbook

1955: The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) curbs cigarette health claims.[16]	Cigarette marketing shifts to themes of taste, pleasure, and lifestyle.[20]
1971: The FTC bans cigarette advertising on radio and television.[17]	Cigarette advertisements in women's magazines dramatically increase.[21]
1998: The Master Settlement Agreement, a landmark legal ruling, bans tobacco billboards and other youth-focused advertising.[18]	The rise in bar, club, and brand promotions links smoking to lifestyle and social identity.[14]
2003: Philip Morris rebrands as Altria as lawsuits increase and regulation tightens, changing its image, by focusing on innovation and reduced-risk narratives.[19]	Tobacco imagery proliferates on social media, where user-generated and influencer content emphasizes aesthetics, nostalgia, identity, and community.

Figure 3. Cigarette Use and Lung Cancer Mortality Trends Among U.S. Women, 1950-2024[22,23]

The health consequences of the tobacco industry's marketing campaign to addict women and girls to its products are still being felt today – decades after cigarette use peaked among women.



*Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer and accounts for approximately 83.1% of lung cancer deaths among women.

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Spotlight: The Making of the #Toxic Smoking Aesthetic

For decades, the tobacco industry has exploited themes around beauty, glamour, independence, and empowerment imagery to make smoking appealing to women. This timeline traces how these themes evolved alongside the growing toll of tobacco-related cancers among women. Today, as cigarette imagery circulates on social media, these long-standing themes are resurfacing in a toxic smoking aesthetic that appeals to young women and girls.

1920



Even before major tobacco campaigns targeted women, cigarette advertising in the **1920s** began to associate ***smoking with beauty, sophistication, and social appeal.***[24]

1923: Women consumed about 5% of all cigarettes sold in the U.S.[7]



In the **1950s and 1960s**, tobacco advertising emphasized themes of ***glamour, seduction, independence, and lifestyle.***[25]

1955: Nearly 1 in 4 women smoked cigarettes.[9]



During the **1960s and 1970s**, cigarette ads increasingly featured Black women, linking smoking with ***style, independence, and fashion***, as seen in this 1968 Kent ad.[26]





In **1968**, Philip Morris launched Virginia Slims, the first major cigarette brand built around women, with themes of independence and empowerment and with the tagline ***"You've come a long way, baby."***[27]

Early 1970s: Lung cancer death rates among women were rising faster than among men.[28]

1970

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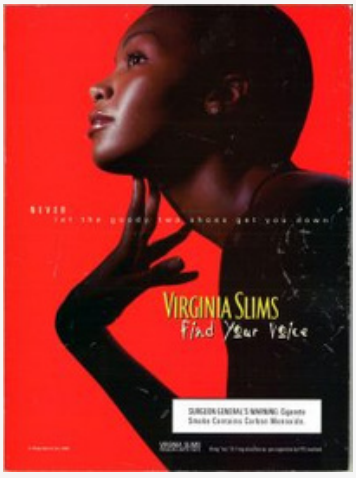
1987: Lung cancer surpassed breast cancer as the leading cause of cancer death among women.[9]

1980

In the **1980s and 1990s**, as lung cancer rates surged, cigarette advertising continued to link smoking with ***independence, confidence, and empowerment***.[29]



In **2000**, Virginia Slims launched its *Find Your Voice Campaign*, which moved away from its past collective "*feminist image"* to one that appealed to young women ***seeking their own identity.***[30]



Late 1990s: More than 178,000 women died each year from smoking-related diseases.[31]

2020: 1 in 3 women without a high school diploma smoked, compared with fewer than 1 in 5 women overall.[32]



In the early **2000s,** Camel's *Pleasure to Burn* campaign featured women in ***retro imagery to invoke feelings of nostalgia,*** a theme that would later become common in cigarette-related social media content.[33]

"Hot girls smoke cigarettes socially; I don't make the rules"

TikTok

In **2026**, cigarette imagery proliferates on TikTok and Instagram, where influencers link smoking with ***glamour, aesthetics, and social belonging*** among young women.

2026

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2. From "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" to #Toxic Smoking Aesthetic

At a time when smoking rates among women are at historic lows, **cigarette imagery is gaining traction on social media.** While the platforms are new, the aesthetic itself is not. What has changed is the scale and speed at which these messages are spread. Today, tobacco imagery is being **amplified by algorithms** that reach young women in ways traditional advertising never could. This trend raises concerns about potential impact. New research from the Truth Initiative suggests smoking is regaining social appeal among young people, with growing numbers describing smoking as "cool" and associating it with fitting in, echoing themes identified in our analysis of social media content.[5]

Methodology

Eleven volunteers from ACS CAN's Young Leaders Caucus (YLC) were recruited and trained to conduct systematic social media content collection. Six YLC volunteers were assigned to TikTok, and five were assigned to Instagram. They were assigned account profiles with varying demographic characteristics, including different ages, genders, and profile attributes. Using an exploratory, nonprobability sampling approach, the volunteers collected social media posts for qualitative analysis. The posts were reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes in how cigarette imagery was presented across the two platforms. Additional details on methodology can be found in Appendix A (page 28).

Box 1. It's a Vibe: Understanding Gen Z Aesthetics

For Gen Z, an "aesthetic" is more than a visual style. It can **signal identity, values, interests, and a sense of belonging**. Rather than sharing one defining aesthetic, Gen Z culture is shaped by countless micro-aesthetics, each centered around a particular look, mood, or lifestyle.[34]

Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram help these trends spread quickly, allowing users to find communities and build identities around specific aesthetics. In this context, **an aesthetic is not just about how something looks, but what it represents and who it connects people to.**

Findings

This study found the #toxic smoking aesthetic is expressed through five key themes: nostalgia, glamour, community, humor, and girlhood. Most concerningly, across themes, content obscured the realities of addiction, disease, and other health harms, emphasizing aesthetics, identity, and social connection instead. The posts frequently echoed themes the tobacco industry has long used to normalize and promote smoking. Although none of the posts analyzed disclosed tobacco industry sponsorship, the distinction between organic influencer content and tobacco marketing can be difficult to discern. (see Box 9 – page 21).

- Smoking was frequently portrayed through a **curated aesthetic** that framed cigarette use as **stylish, aspirational**, and **nostalgic.**
- Cigarette use was embedded within **narratives of girlhood and femininity,** with content frequently **created by and for young women.**
- **Themes of community, belonging, and shared identity** were used to normalize smoking as a social and culturally accepted behavior.
- **Humor and irony** were leveraged to make cigarette content appear **relatable, entertaining, and low risk.**

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Smoking as a #Toxic Aesthetic

The **#toxic smoking aesthetic transforms cigarette use into a curated expression of style, identity, and belonging.** By embedding cigarettes within a broader aesthetic, this content can make smoking feel culturally relevant and desirable, particularly to young women. This portrayal risks normalizing cigarette use and undermining decades of progress in reducing smoking and changing public attitudes toward tobacco.

> *"Everything is put into an aesthetic category now, and one of those **popular aesthetics involves smoking a cigarette.** People think it looks cool."*
>
> *Young Leaders Caucus volunteer, SUNY*[35]

Box 2. Aesthetic Identity

Framed through lifestyle and identity markers, posts reinforce positive associations of smoking while obscuring smoking's serious health risks.



What young people are seeing on Instagram and TikTok in 2026.

Note: #Hashtags and quotes are drawn from social media posts identified in our analysis. Orginial imagery has been omitted to avoid further amplifying tobacco-related content.

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The Aesthetic of Nostalgia

Nostalgia was a recurring feature of the #toxic smoking aesthetic. In a digital age where efficiency is prioritized, innovation is constant, and the future can feel uncertain, **Gen Z is increasingly drawn to idealized visions of the past.**[36,37]

Vintage fashion, advertising, design, and music dominate algorithms. **Because cigarette use is deeply ingrained in the culture of earlier eras, cigarettes are often framed through a nostalgic lens**, leading younger generations to view cigarette use as a feature of a simpler time.

The manual nature of combustible cigarettes can make them distinctly attractive to Gen Z.[87,88] As a generation that came of age during the rise of e-cigarettes in the 2010s, some may be susceptible to graduating to the nostalgic appeal of combustible cigarettes. For some in Gen Z, combustible cigarettes offer a false narrative of a nostalgic analog escape in an increasingly digital world.

> *"For Gen Z, there's also **a kind of borrowed nostalgia**; we're attracted to the vintage, cinematic image of smoking."*
>
> *Liya, age 16*[38]

Box 3. Nostalgia

Callouts to past decades, particularly the 1990 and early 2000s, as well as vintage photos, were common in posts that gave cigarettes a nostalgic vibe – while erasing their deadly consequences.



What young people are seeing on Instagram and TikTok in 2026.

Note: #Hashtags and quotes are drawn from social media posts identified in our analysis. Orginial imagery has been omitted to avoid further amplifying tobacco-related content.

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The Aesthetic of Glamour

Across the analysis, posts glamorized cigarettes as symbols of status, wealth, beauty, and sophistication. The tobacco industry has long capitalized on the social positionality and aspirations of women, marketing cigarettes as a pathway to a desirable lifestyle.[12] Sustaining that appeal among young women has required the industry to adapt its messaging to reflect contemporary culture and social norms, masking the reality of addiciton and disease. [13,39]

Our analysis found that cigarette imagery on Instagram and TikTok was often associated with the ideals of thinness and celebrity culture. The messages are all too familiar. **Decades-old tobacco industry marketing tactics have resurfaced in digital culture**, with cigarettes appearing alongside Gen Z trends, contemporary celebrity culture, and references such as "Vintage Ozempic." Today, these posts are amplified on Instagram and TikTok, where they can garner millions of views from young women and are often encountered in spaces shaped by peers, influencers, and creators who feel familiar and trustworthy, increasing young women's susceptibility to tobacco use.[40]

67% of top-performing posts were posted by women.

The majority of posts with the most likes and accounts with the most followers were posted or run by women.

Box 4. Glamour and Celebrity

Cigarettes are getting the glamour treatment on social media, where fashion, beauty and celebrity culture reinforce the illusion of smoking as stylish, while masking its deadly consequences.



What young people are seeing on Instagram and TikTok in 2026.

Note: #Hashtags and quotes are drawn from social media posts identified in our analysis. Orginial imagery has been omitted to avoid further amplifying tobacco-related content.

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The Aesthetic of Community

Themes of **normalization, community, and acceptance** appeared in 44% of the sample posts. This is not happenstance. The tobacco industry is often quick to capitalize on emerging social and cultural trends.

Online spaces increasingly function as social hubs where Gen Z builds relationships, explores identities, and finds communities organized around shared interests and experiences.[41] As a result, Gen Z's collective desire to cultivate third spaces, and in the language of social media, "be a villager," now shapes many online trends. The cigarette imagery featured has tapped into this vibe, **positioning smoking not as an act of rebellion but as a way to slow down and connect with others, and participate in idealized forms of community.** Rebellion, a feature of many past tobacco marketing campaigns, was a less common theme, representing only 9% of posts.

> *"For Gen Z women, social media is **where we go to inspire and be inspired**, find community, and create and experience identity and culture."*
>
> *Eliana, age 21*[42]

Box 5. Community and Belonging

A community of addiction and disease? Smoking is recast as a social experience, with little mention of the addiction and disease that follow.



What young people are seeing on Instagram and TikTok in 2026.

Note: #Hashtags and quotes are drawn from social media posts identified in our analysis. Orginial imagery has been omitted to avoid further amplifying tobacco-related content.

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The Aesthetic of Humor

Humor was often used as a vehicle to carry out pro-cigarette messages through meme-based content. For Gen Z, memes are deeply rooted in internet culture and communicate messages in ways that feel native to social platforms and can achieve substantial organic reach.[43-45]

In the posts reviewed, humorous memes framed smoking as relatable – drawing on everyday experiences, girlhood humor, and self-deprecating jokes. Others relied on irony, absurdity, and dark humor, including jokes about the dangers of cigarettes and cancer, in pursuit of shock value and engagement. **By packaging smoking as entertainment, humorous posts downplayed the realities of addiction and disease,** encouraging audiences to view cigarette use as amusing, harmless, and socially acceptable.

> *"Aesthetic can quickly shift from **building community to normalizing harmful behaviors** like cigarettes."*
>
> *Claire, age 16*[46]

Box 6. Humor

Cigarette addiction as a punchline. Meme culture often uses dark humor to mask the realities of smoking and addiction, co-opting popular memes by embedding cigarette imagery and themes.



What young people are seeing on Instagram and TikTok in 2026.

Note: #Hashtags and quotes are drawn from social media posts identified in our analysis. Orginial imagery has been omitted to avoid further amplifying tobacco-related content.

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The Aesthetic of Girlhood

Girlhood emerged as a thread across all themes. This is not surprising, as the tobacco industry has long viewed young women as essential to sustaining future growth.[13] **Hashtags related to women and girls appeared more than 100 times in the sample of cigarette-related posts, the highest frequency among the primary themes.**

From girlhood to motherhood, smoking imagery was woven into themes of glamour, community, and identity, presenting smoking as a recognizable female experience, particularly for young women, all while obscuring the significant toll of smoking on women's health and well-being.[47]

> ***"Young women are** extremely valuable to **the tobacco industry**..."*
>
> *The Virginia Slims Identity Crisis*
> *Toll & Ling, 2025*[13]

Box 7:.Girlhood

From #justagirl to #girlproblems, cigarette imagery borrows the language of popular girlhood trends, twisting both the message and the messenger into extensions of tobacco industry marketing.



What young people are seeing on Instagram and TikTok in 2026.

Note: #Hashtags and quotes are drawn from social media posts identified in our analysis. Orginial imagery has been omitted to avoid further amplifying tobacco-related content.

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Spotlight: Menthol – More Than a Flavor

Menthol and the Smoking Aesthetic

Analysis of menthol-related content on Instagram and TikTok revealed a recurring theme of temptation. Creators often joked about wanting a menthol cigarette after "one sip of alcohol," spotting "the slightest glimmer" of a pack, and not being able to resist when offered menthols.

These findings echo a broader pattern of tobacco industry marketing designed to keep cigarettes top of mind. Just as coupons and advertisements have historically promoted menthol cigarettes, social media content today brings these products into view and conversation.



Selling Community

Jaleisa Coleman was 15 when she started smoking. She initially turned to cigarettes because she believed they would help reduce stress during a difficult time in her life. At first, she hid her smoking from her friends. Later, in the military, smoking became a way to hang out and meet people. "Newport always had the ads where people were laughing and smoking and hanging around," Jaleisa reflected.

For Coleman, the impact of menthol marketing in Black communities was impossible to miss. **"White people smoked Camel. Black people smoked Newport."** By 2020, more than 80% of Black adults who smoked cigarettes used menthol, compared with 34% of White adults.[48] "The tobacco industry looks at the culture, looks at what's going on in the community, and adapts," she said.



The Menthol Trap

Even after deciding to quit, Coleman found that tobacco marketing continued to follow her. She avoided gas stations because cigarette promotions triggered cravings. Cigarette coupons arrived in the mail. Online, tobacco advertisements appeared alongside other content. **"I'm on Facebook, I'm seeing what my friend is doing and up pops a Camel ad. It's almost like a trap,"** she said.

Her experience reflects the industry's broader shift from direct cigarette advertising to retail promotions, discounts, and digital marketing – all designed to keep tobacco products affordable, visible, and profitable. *(See The Tobacco Industry Is Keeping Cigarettes Cheap, Visible, and Profitable, page 19.)*

The Social Injustice of Menthol

"To understand tobacco-related health disparities, we must start with the tobacco industry's decades-long campaign to addict generations of Black communities," stated Phillip Gardiner, DrPH, co-chair of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council (AATCLC). From 1980 to 2018, menthol cigarettes were estimated to have contributed to **157,000 premature deaths among Black Americans, accounting for 41% of all menthol attributable premature deaths.**[49]

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Spotlight: Menthol - More Than a Flavor (continued)

The Menthol Loophole

Prior to 2009, cigarette manufacturers aggressively marketed flavored cigarettes, including Twista Lime and Winter MochaMint, to young audiences. Recognizing the role flavors play in youth tobacco initiation, Congress banned flavored cigarettes in 2009.[54] However, one flavor was left out: menthol.

This exemption continues to have enormous consequences. Following the flavor ban, youth cigarette use declined overall, but those who continued to smoke were increasingly likely to use menthol.[55] Middle and High School students who smoke menthol cigarettes smoke more frequently, start younger, and are less likely to attempt to quit.[56] By leaving menthol on the market, policymakers allowed the tobacco industry's most effective tool for targeting specific communities, including youth, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income individuals, and other underserved populations, to remain in place.

Menthol by Design

Long before cigarette companies experimented with fruit, candy, and alcohol-inspired flavors, they were using menthol to attract and retain new audiences. **Menthol's popularity in Black communities did not emerge organically.** It was the result of decades of deliberate targeting.



"The tobacco industry was very clear on what they were doing," Gardiner said. Menthol cigarettes were intentionally marketed through Black media outlets, cultural institutions, and community networks, building menthol brands into the fabric of Black culture.[51]

"It's not just a flavor, it's an anesthetic," he said. "Menthol's cooling effect makes cigarettes easier to inhale and slows the body's metabolism of nicotine, allowing it to remain in the system longer," he said.

Communities Fight Back

"**We always fight on all levels. City, state, federal,"** said Gardiner. With federal action on menthol stalled, ACS CAN is partnering with the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council and other advocates to advance state and local policies ending the sale of menthol cigarettes and all other flavored tobacco products.

In 2020, Massachusetts became the first state to restrict the sale of all flavored tobacco products, including menthol. The policy reduced smoking prevalence and is projected to save over $200 million in smoking-related health costs over the next decade.[53]

Gardiner, Coleman, and many others, the fight over menthol is about more than a tobacco flavor. It is about confronting an industry that has targeted Black communities for generations and refusing to allow those tactics to continue. Their experiences offer an important lesson for the digital age: **The same themes of culture, identity, and community that tobacco companies use to market menthol cigarettes can now spread rapidly through social media networks**, reaching new audiences at an unprecedented scale. While the platforms have changed, the playbook remains the same.

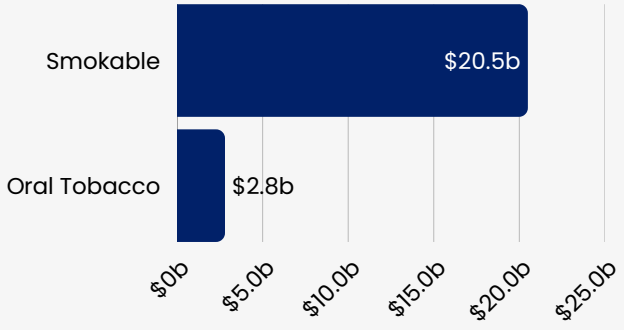
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3. The Industry Behind the Aesthetic

Cigarettes Drive Tobacco Industry Profits

As the tobacco industry floods the market with "next- generation" products, **cigarettes remain the industry's biggest moneymaker.**[3] This is particularly true for Altria, parent company of Philip Morris USA (PM USA), the largest cigarette manufacturer in the U.S. The company makes Marlboro, the nation's largest-selling cigarette brand, and Virginia Slims, a top-selling brand targeted to women.

Figure 4. Altria's Revenue Reality: Smokable Versus Oral Tobacco Products, 2025[57]



Far from "*moving beyond smoking*" as its 2025 annual report declared, Altria generated $20.5 billion in revenue from smokable products last year, compared with $2.8 billion from oral tobacco products.[58] Smokable products also generated nearly $11 billion in operating income in 2025, more than six times the $1.8 billion generated by oral tobacco products, which are tobacco products used in the mouth rather than smoked or inhaled.[57]

The Tobacco Industry Is Keeping Cigarettes Cheap, Visible, and Profitable

Despite declining cigarette smoking rates, tobacco companies continue spending billions of dollars each year to keep cigarettes affordable, visible, and profitable. Although cigarette sales fell from 2020 to 2021, cigarette marketing expenditures increased by $220 million – from $7.84 billion to $8.06 billion.[3] More than 86% of these expenditures went to retailer and wholesaler price discounts, reinforcing the retail environment's point of sale as the industry's primary marketing channel.[59] Research has shown that tobacco product sales can increase by up to 30% when products are displayed and featured with a price discount.[5]

Figure 5. From Advertising to Discounting: Cigarette Marketing Expenditures 1975-2021[59]



Advertising Era

In 1975, magazine ads accounted for the largest share of cigarette marketing expenditures at 26.6%, followed closely by newspapers and outdoor billboards.



Promotion Era

By 1991, promotional allowances and coupons dominated cigarette marketing expenditures, while sports sponsorships emerged as a key strategy.



Discount Era

By 2006, price discounts accounted for more than 73% of cigarette marketing expenses, reflecting the industry's shift from traditional advertising to price-discounting.



Retailer Era

By 2021, more than 86% of cigarette marketing expenses were devoted to retailer and wholesaler price discounts, underscoring the retail environment as a primary marketing channel.

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Impact of Tobacco Imagery in the Social Media Era

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) first collected data on tobacco company expenditures in social media marketing for 2009. Since then, tobacco companies have consistently reported no expenditures in that category. However, that does not mean tobacco companies have no presence on social media as they have reported other online marketing activities.[59] As a result, **official marketing expenditure data may not fully capture the visibility of tobacco products and branding in digital spaces.**

Figure 6. Social Media's Extensive Reach Among Girls[61]

67% of girls ages 13-17 use Instagram.



70% of girls ages 13-17 use TikTok.

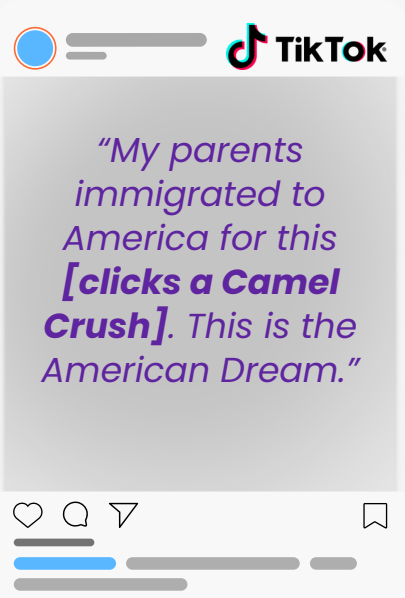


The Industry's billions of dollars in marketing expenses help to keep cigarettes cheap, and **social media content helps keep cigarettes visible**. Platforms such as **Instagram and TikTok reach a majority of girls and young women,** and algorithms, influencers, and user-generated content can amplify smoking-related imagery to large female audiences.[60] Research increasingly links **exposure to tobacco-related content on social media with susceptibility to tobacco use**. A meta-analysis of nearly 140,000 participants found that people exposed to tobacco content on social media had almost twice the odds of tobacco use and susceptibility to future tobacco use compared with those who were not exposed.[40] Tobacco-branded merchandise also appears on social media, including in content created by influencers.[61]

Box 8. Camel Crush: A Toy to Attract Youth

Camel Crush is a R.J. Reynolds (RJR) cigarette containing a menthol capsule in the filter. When crushed, the capsule releases menthol flavoring. When designing Camel Crush in the mid-2000s, RJR had millennials, then between the ages of 9 and 24, in mind.[62] In addition to the mint flavoring, Camel Crush has the added allure of being an interactive, consumer-controlled product. RJR also targeted young Hispanic Americans through Spanish-language promotions and Hispanic influencers to cultivate a localized grassroots brand image.[62] In 2010, two years after Camel Crush's release, Camel gained over 20% more market share among 12- to 17-year-olds, and 60% among 18- to 24-year-olds.[63]

Today, Camel Crush frequently appears on TikTok and Instagram, with young women crushing capsules on camera. The same novelty and interactivity built into the product now translates easily to social media.[64]



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Social Media Narratives of Top Cigarette Brands

As part of the study, researchers conducted targeted searches of key tobacco industry brands, including Camel Crush, Capri, Marlboro Reds, Virginia Slims, and Vogue, to better understand the social media narratives surrounding these products. Overt advertising was rare, and none of the posts analyzed disclosed a paid relationship with a tobacco company. (see Box 9, below.) Still, **cigarette brand names appeared repeatedly in captions, hashtags, and smoking-related imagery.** These references were associated with themes consistent with long-standing brand identities. Capri, Virginia Slims, and Vogue were often tied to glamour and nostalgia; Marlboro Reds to community and humor; and Camel Crush to humor and rebellious identity. These themes reflect enduring brand identities adapted to contemporary online trends and digital culture.[13,15,65]

Figure 7. Examples of Quotes and Hashtags Associated With Selected Cigarette Brands in the Study

CAMEL CRUSH	CAPRI	MARLBORO REDS	VIRGINIA SLIMS	VOGUE
Humor, Rebellion	Glamour, Nostalgia	Normalization, Community, Humor	Glamour, Nostalgia	Glamour, Fashion
• "toxic era" • "a Camel Crush in a world full of vapes" • "wonder what a pack of Camel Crush cigarettes is doing rn"	• "skinny cig" • "Capri ultra skinny" • "hot girl" • #justagirl • "only worried about my next outfit"	• "winter cigs don't count" • "Marlboro Red kids" • "Love me a ciggy" • "we need some cigarettes"	• "dirty martinis, Virginia Slims" • "Virginia Slims in the rain" • "leave a baddie smokin a cig alone"	• "skinny Vogue cig" • "hot girl euro adventures" • "fashion" • "girl dinner"

Box 9. Behind the Post: Influencers, Tobacco, and Hidden Marketing

On social media, the line between tobacco marketing and seemingly authentic content can be difficult to discern. Federal Trade Commission guidelines require influencers to clearly disclose material relationships with brands,[66] yet research suggests compliance is inconsistent.[67,68]

"The absence of a direct link does not mean that influencers are not sponsored," said Dr. Julia Vassey, assistant professor of clinical population and public health sciences at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California. **"Influencers may omit disclosures so content is perceived as more authentic and therefore more persuasive compared to direct traditional brand advertising."**[69]

In this analysis, none of the posts disclosed a paid relationship with a tobacco company or included a tobacco warning label. Most cigarette-related content came from creators who primarily posted about other topics. **Of the 15 highest-reach influencer accounts, 10 were women-focused accounts showcasing beauty, lifestyle, comedy, or music content. Together, these accounts reached more than 19 million followers.**

Federal regulators have previously taken action when influencer marketing failed to meet disclosure requirements. In 2019, the FTC and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) took action against four e-cigarette companies over influencer promotions that lacked required nicotine warnings and adequate disclosures.[70]

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Spotlight: LGBTQIA+ Communities, Tobacco Marketing, and the Need for Action

Smoking as a Symbol of Identity

Several of the highest-reach creators in our sample were LGBTQIA+ creators, whose content focused on lifestyle, relationships, music, and self-expression, not tobacco. Cigarette imagery appeared in their content, embedding smoking in identity-driven online spaces. Cigarettes appeared less as products and more as symbols of belonging, rebellion, and personal expression.

The highest-reaching lifestyle-focused queer creator in the sample had more than 5.5 million TikTok followers. One of their cigarette-themed posts drew substantial engagement, illustrating how smoking imagery can travel through mainstream creator culture and appear alongside content focused on identity, self-expression, and relationships.



Smoking as a Symbol of Identity

As a creator, artist, educator, and LGBTQIA+ advocate, Rio Antone brings both personal and professional insight into conversations around tobacco use, community health, and social media. They describe social media as an important space for creativity and self-expression. "Using social media really geared me towards the ability to start to express myself creatively." Antone says smoking on social media is often used as shorthand for coolness, power, rebellion, and belonging. These associations can be especially potent for young people exploring identity.



"The hardest part is when you don't know you are being targeted, it is easy to blame yourself...People see the outcome but they don't see the years of marketing, messaging, and cultural influence that helped create it."

Rio Antone, creator, artist, and educator[76]

Research has documented **tobacco industry efforts to position tobacco products alongside messages of identity, acceptance, and belonging.**[71,72] Tobacco companies deliberately cultivate LGBTQIA+ consumers through advertising in queer media, sponsorship of Pride events, giveaways, discounts, and other community-specific marketing strategies.[73,74]

Antone remembers cigarettes functioning as a symbol of power in movies and television. Today, they see smoking imagery in popular culture trying to communicate feminine power, confidence, and independence. For communities that continue to face exclusion, discrimination, or invisibility, messages around power can carry particular resonance. **Social media can amplify these associations, allowing smoking imagery to circulate as an identity-driven cultural symbol.** LGBTQIA+ communities continue to experience disproportionately high tobacco use and cancer risk. Among transgender adults, tobacco use is roughly twice the rate among cisgender adults, and they may be more likely to be diagnosed with advanced-stage lung cancer.[75]

These findings reinforce ACS CAN's call for **increased investment in tobacco prevention, cessation, surveillance, and research** that addresses the needs of populations historically targeted by the tobacco industry, including LGBTQIA+ communities.

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4. Rebuilding a Public Health Response for the Social Media Era

A Public Health Success Story

The tobacco industry's campaign to addict generations of young people has not gone unchallenged. **Tobacco control efforts,** including public education campaigns, smoke-free laws, tobacco taxes, cessation programs, and restrictions on tobacco marketing and sales, **represent one of the most successful public health achievements of the modern era.**[77] Tobacco use has declined to historic lows, and millions of smoking-related deaths have been prevented.

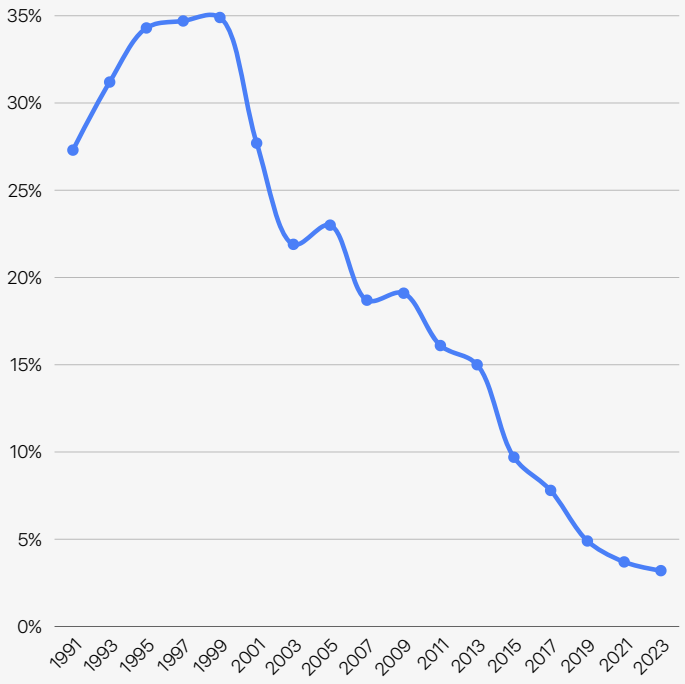
This success was only made possible by a broad coalition of scientists and researchers, policymakers and public health authorities, advocates, and community leaders. This coalition **fundamentally reshaped social norms around tobacco use and reduced the social acceptability of smoking.** However, these hard-fought **public health gains are not self-sustaining, and progress in reducing tobacco use remains uneven**.

Using the latest available data, in 2023, the overall smoking rate among female high school students was 3.2%, but substantially higher smoking rates persisted among some groups. Among female American Indian or Alaska Native high school students, the cigarette smoking rate was 5.0%. Cigarette smoking rates were even higher among female students identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (7.4%) and among students identifying as transgender (10.6%).[78]

Significant geographic disparities also persist. For example, in 2021 the cigarette smoking rate of female high school students in West Virginia (6.1%) was nearly three times the rate of female high school students in Connecticut (2.1%).[78] **The uneven burden underscores the need for continued investment in proven tobacco prevention and cessation programs across the country.**

Figure 8. Current Cigarette Smoking Among High School Girls, 1991-2023[78]

After peaking in 1999, current cigarette smoking among high school girls has dramatically declined to historic lows.



*"The antismoking campaign is a **major public health success**... accomplished **despite the addictive nature of tobacco** and the **powerful economic forces promoting its use.**"* [79]

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024

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The Infrastructure Behind Tobacco Control's Success

Decades of progress in reducing tobacco use rest on a coordinated infrastructure that identifies trends, builds the scientific evidence base, implements comprehensive programs, and counters tobacco industry messaging.

An Early Warning System: Surveillance and Monitoring

Effective tobacco control and prevention depend on robust surveillance systems that provide early warnings of emerging trends in tobacco use, identify disparities, and help public health officials and advocates respond to new threats. Surveys such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) and the National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS) provide critical insights that inform public health action.

> *"With **tobacco marketing spreading** with the help of the social media algorithms, **public health's capacity to effectively respond is at risk."***
>
> *Katie McMahon*
> *Director, Policy - Prevention, ACS CAN*

The success of surveillance depends not only on collecting data, but also on maintaining the scientific expertise necessary to interpret it. The dismantling of the CDC's Office of Smoking and Health (OSH) in 2025, which provided national leadership, scientific expertise, and coordination for tobacco control and prevention efforts across states, has weakened the infrastructure supporting tobacco surveillance systems, including the NYTS and the YRBS. As social media enables cigarette imagery to spread at a speed and scale unprecedented in traditional advertising, robust surveillance and the scientific capacity to translate findings into effective public health action are more important than ever.

Building the Evidence Base: Research and Scientific Leadership

Tobacco control's public health achievements were built on a foundation of scientific research and leadership. In 1964, U.S. Surgeon General Luther L. Terry released the landmark Smoking and Health report, which drew upon more than 7,000 articles establishing a scientific framework for tobacco control, including the landmark American Cancer Society studies that helped establish smoking as a cause of lung cancer and other diseases.[79]

Since then, 34 additional Surgeon General reports have examined tobacco use, secondhand smoke exposure, nicotine addiction, youth tobacco use, e-cigarettes, and tobacco-related health disparities.[79] Tobacco control research has also demonstrated the effectiveness of policy interventions in reducing tobacco use and addiction, protecting people from secondhand smoke, and informing effective counter-marketing campaigns.[80]

It is critical that **tobacco control research continues to meet the moment.** As tobacco companies adapt their marketing strategies to the digital age, **more research is needed to understand the effects of tobacco content on young people who have grown up immersed in social media**. A growing body of evidence suggests that exposure to tobacco and nicotine-related content on social media can shape perceptions of risk, glamorize and normalize tobacco use, and increase the likelihood that young people with no prior history of tobacco use will start using tobacco.[61,81]

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Challenging the Tobacco Industry Narrative: Mass Communication Campaigns

Mass communication campaigns remain a highly effective component of comprehensive tobacco control programs, particularly among youth. Successful youth-driven campaigns, such as the Truth Initiative's **truth® campaign ads** and the FDA's **The Real Cost**, challenge the narratives promoted by the tobacco industry, exposing the industry's deceptive practices and reframing tobacco products as addictive and deadly and exposing efforts to recruit the next generation of users.

The **truth® campaign** grew out of Florida's groundbreaking tobacco control program, which pioneered youth-driven counter-marketing that exposed tobacco industry manipulation. More recently, **truth®** launched a campaign focused on vaping and mental health, a top concern for Gen Z. Greater campaign awareness was associated with lower intentions to use e-cigarettes and lower rates of current e-cigarette use.[82]

The Real Cost youth tobacco prevention campaign combines behavioral science, audience research, creative strategy, and rigorous evaluation to deliver evidence-based messaging at scale.[87] **The Real Cost** is estimated to have prevented more than 587,000 young people ages 11 to 19 from starting to smoke cigarettes between February 2014 and November 2016, sparing them from a path toward addiction and tobacco-related disease.[83]

Box 10. Challenging Industry Narratives



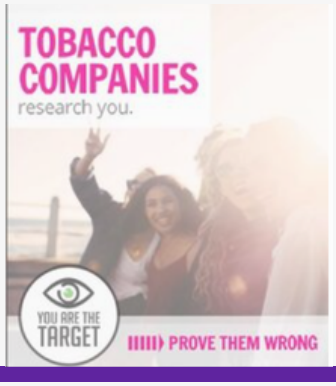
Addiction Awareness Messaging (The Real Cost)

Ads such as **"Cigarettes are Bullies"** countered portrayals of smoking as freedom by showing addiction as a force that controls a young person's choices and behavior.



Appearance-based Messaging (The Real Cost)

Ads such as **"Smoking Accelerates Skin Aging"** countered associations between smoking, glamour, and beauty by highlighting the harmful effects of smoking on physical appearance and health.



Anti-industry Messaging (You Are The Target)

"**You Are the Target"** challenged the narrative that tobacco use is a matter of personal choice by exposing how tobacco companies market flavored and emerging nicotine products to young people, urging youth "Don't be a replacement."

Influencer Counter-marketing: The truth® campaign's ***Unpaid Tobacco Spokesperson*** video countered the perception that tobacco imagery in celebrity and influencer content is organic and independent.



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Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs: Translating Evidence Into Action

Comprehensive evidence-based tobacco control programs are a core component of the **public health infrastructure that has driven decades of progress in reducing tobacco use and tobacco-related disease.** Sustained investments in these programs have been consistently shown to reduce smoking rates, prevent youth initiation, encourage cessation, protect people from secondhand smoke exposure, and save lives.

The CDC's Best Practices for Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs identify five interconnected components of an effective statewide tobacco control program. (See Figure 9, below.) Together, **these components provide the foundation for translating scientific evidence into coordinated public health action**. Research shows that states that dedicate greater resources to comprehensive tobacco control programs achieve larger declines in tobacco use, while sustained funding helps accelerate and strengthen those gains over time.[84]

Growing Imbalance: Tobacco Marketing Expands While Public Health Capacity Erodes

As tobacco companies increasingly use social media platforms, influencers, and other digital marketing strategies to reach young people, the **public health infrastructure designed to monitor and counter the industry is being dismantled** at the federal level and underfunded at the state level.

For decades, the CDC's Office on Smoking and Health (OSH) served as the nation's leading public health authority on tobacco prevention and control. **In 2025, the OSH was eliminated, taking with it decades of specialized expertise, institutional knowledge, and programmatic capacity.**[85]

At the state level, investment in tobacco control programming has been steadily declining, with states spending only 3.4% of their tobacco revenues on prevention and cessation programs. In 2026, states will spend a combined $728.6 million on these programs, down $36.2 million from last year and far short of the $3.3 billion recommended by the CDC.[86]

The result is an ongoing and significant imbalance; tobacco companies are rapidly evolving and expanding their marketing strategies, while the public health infrastructure built to counter industry influence is being weakened and significantly underfunded. With less federal capacity, diminished national coordination, and persistent underinvestment, public health is increasingly undermined in its ability to respond.

Figure 9. Components of Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs[84]



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5. ACS CAN Policy Recommendations: Addressing Big Tobacco's Tactics

Findings from this report show that the tobacco industry's ability to reach and influence young people continues to evolve, as a new #toxic smoking aesthetic gains visibility on Instagram and TikTok. While the tactics are familiar, the scale and speed at which tobacco content can spread are not. Addressing these challenges requires rebuilding a robust public health infrastructure that includes:

- **Funding and strengthening federal tobacco control infrastructure,** including ensuring expert-driven, highly qualified staff at the CDC's Office on Smoking and Health. Strong federal leadership is essential to support state tobacco control programs, monitor emerging tobacco industry marketing practices, conduct surveillance and scientific research, and reduce the burden of tobacco-related disease.

- **Increasing funding for state tobacco prevention and control programs** that are proven to reduce youth initiation and adult smoking, alongside comprehensive smoke-free laws and higher tobacco taxes that discourage tobacco use and help shift social norms around smoking

- **Strengthening regulatory oversight of tobacco marketing on social media and digital platforms**, including tighter restrictions on influencer marketing, greater transparency around sponsorship disclosures, and stronger platform policies designed to reduce youth exposure to tobacco promotion

- **Investing in evidence-based counter-marketing campaigns** tailored to young people, particularly young women and girls, that challenge the normalization of smoking, expose tobacco industry marketing tactics, and address tobacco content embedded in contemporary aesthetics, identity, and online culture

- **Investing in surveillance and research on the reach, impact, and evolution of tobacco marketing across social media**, including emerging marketing practices, with a particular focus on populations historically targeted by the tobacco industry, including young women and girls, LGBTQIA+ people, and Black, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities

- **Ending the sale of menthol cigarettes and all other flavored tobacco products**, which continue to be marketed to young people through digital and social media channels

- **Supporting strong, evidence-based FDA regulation of tobacco products** and emerging marketing practices

- **Expanding access to evidence-based tobacco cessation treatments and services**, while integrating cessation messaging into digital tobacco prevention and counter-marketing efforts

A tobacco-free generation is within reach, but that progress is not guaranteed. As pro-tobacco content spreads across social media and Big Tobacco continues to invest billions in keeping their products visible and profitable, policymakers cannot afford to retreat from proven tobacco control strategies. Rebuilding and strengthening federal and state tobacco control infrastructure is essential to protecting young people from nicotine addiction and tobacco-related disease including cancer.

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Appendix A: Research Methodology and Data Collection Protocol

Study Purpose: To examine the re-emergence of smoking imagery and aesthetics on TikTok and Instagram and document how combustible cigarette-related content is embedded within lifestyle and aesthetic narratives. The study also examines how these portrayals echo historical tobacco industry approaches to normalizing and glamorizing smoking among young women and girls.

Platform Selection: Instagram and TikTok were selected based on their visual orientation, popularity among youth, algorithmic amplification of trends, and prevalence of lifestyle and aesthetic content. These platforms are widely used by adolescent girls, with 72% reporting TikTok use (61% daily)[61] and 67% reporting Instagram use (55% daily),[61] making them relevant for examining exposure to smoking-related imagery and narratives.

Researcher Accounts and Assigned Account Characteristics: Research was conducted by 11 ACS CAN volunteer social media researchers, each of whom was provided either an Instagram or TikTok account with a predetermined age and gender designation.

Table A1. Research Account Characteristics

Characteristic	TikTok	Instagram
Researchers	6	5
Assigned Account Gender		
Women	3	1
Men	2	3
Prefer not to say	1	1
Assigned Account Age Group		
17–19	2	1
20–21	1	1
22–23	1	2
24–25	2	2

Sampling and Data Collection: Data were collected from July 13 through July 27, 2026, using a keyword- and hashtag-based sampling approach. Researchers searched TikTok and Instagram using assigned cigarette-related terms and documented posts that met the study criteria. The sample included 337 documented posts, representing 299 unique posts after duplicates were removed: 148 from TikTok and 151 from Instagram.

The study used an exploratory, nonprobability sampling approach and was designed to characterize observed content rather than estimate the prevalence of cigarette-related content across either platform. The sampling was intended to capture a range of cigarette-related content, including both direct references to smoking and posts incorporating cigarettes into broader cultural, aesthetic, and lifestyle narratives. Researchers were assigned three core cigarette-related search terms. Using their assigned terms, researchers identified and documented cigarette-related posts and applied thematic codes. Codes were not mutually exclusive, allowing individual posts to be assigned multiple themes.

Table A2. Cigarette-related Search Terms

Camel Crush	**Menthols**
Capri Cig	**Smoke Break**
Cigarettegirl	**Smoking**
Cigarette	**Selfcare**
Ciggy	**Virginia Slims**
Marlboro	**Vogue**
Marlboro Red	

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Information Recorded for Each Post: Researchers recorded a standardized set of variables for each post, including the platform, search term used, discovery method, post URL, available engagement metrics (e.g., views, likes, comments, and reposts), hashtags, screenshots or notes, and a brief description of the content. Each post was then coded according to the thematic categories identified in Table A3.

Table A3. Coded Themes and Definitions

Code	Definition
Cigarette Presence Visible	A combustible cigarette is clearly visible.
Cigarette Presence Implied	A combustible cigarette is implied but not clearly visible.
Aestheticization	A cigarette or smoking is integrated into a specific visual style, aesthetic, or vibe.
Glamorization	A cigarette or smoking is portrayed as attractive, high-status, or desirable.
Normalization	A cigarette or smoking is presented as routine, casual, or socially acceptable.
Lifestyle	A cigarette or smoking is embedded within an aspirational identity or lifestyle.
Humor	A cigarette or smoking is framed through humor, irony, memes, or sarcasm.
Rebellion	A cigarette or smoking is associated with defiance, rule-breaking, or nonconformity.
Nostalgia	A cigarette or smoking is linked to a romanticized past era or cultural moment.

Data Analysis: Quantitative analyses were conducted to examine the prevalence of thematic categories and available engagement metrics. Microsoft Copilot, a large language model (LLM) tool, was used to assist in the analysis of the coded dataset, including the identification of patterns and relationships across themes. Analyses and interpretations generated with Copilot were reviewed and verified by the research team prior to inclusion in the report. Qualitative analyses applied the thematic codebook to identify recurring narratives and portrayals of smoking. Keyword and hashtag co-occurrence analysis was used to identify patterns linking cigarette-related content with lifestyle, aesthetic, and identity-based themes.

Quality Control and Coding Consistency: To promote consistency in data collection and coding, a training and coding manual was developed prior to data collection. A secondary review was conducted on submitted datasets for completeness, coding consistency, and adherence to study protocols. Coding questions were resolved through discussion and review of the coding framework.

Limitations: This study has several limitations. Platform API and data-access restrictions may have limited researchers' ability to identify all relevant content. Findings may also have been influenced by platform algorithms, which shape the content shown to users and may introduce recommendation bias. Because content was identified using a predefined set of cigarette-related keywords, posts using alternative terminology, emerging slang, or other coded language may not have been captured. The keyword strategy may also have favored content that aligned more closely with themes and language commonly used in posts targeting women and girls. Private, hidden, or deleted content was also inaccessible. The study represents a snapshot in time, and the transient nature of social media may have affected content availability during data collection. Given the volume of cigarette-related content available across platforms, the sample should not be interpreted as representative of all cigarette-related content on TikTok and Instagram. Researchers were unable to independently verify sponsorship agreements or commercial relationships associated with individual posts. Finally, platform-specific differences in visibility and engagement metrics may limit direct comparisons across platforms.

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