

Digital influence:

Young people's exposure to the marketing of cigarettes, vapes, unhealthy food/drink, and alcohol



Reference

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Corresponding author: Aleks Saunders, aleks.saunders@cancer.org.uk

Authors

Cancer Research UK authors: Aleks Saunders, Katrina Brown, Kimberley Neve

University of Stirling author: Nathan Critchlow

Humankind Research authors: Sarah Brierley, George Webster, Jess Lister, Malaika Kambona-Masika

Contributions: This report is produced by Cancer Research UK. Cancer Research UK authors listed above provided input into the overall qualitative study design, developed the survey, conducted survey data analysis and drafted and revised the report.

Policy implications in the report were written by Ines Cropper de Andres, Kerry Pearson, Liv Cheek, Alizee Froguel and Malcolm Clark.

Humankind Research authors were commissioned to design and lead the qualitative self-ethnography and focus group study. They also produced a report, excerpts of which are incorporated into this report.

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About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world's leading cancer charity, dedicated to saving and improving lives through research, influence and information. In the last 50 years, the charity's pioneering work has helped double cancer survival in the UK. And today it's continuing to save lives, here and around the world.

Cancer Research UK's vision is a world where everybody lives longer, better lives, free from the fear of cancer. And step by step, day by day, researchers are making this vision a reality thanks to a dedicated community of supporters, partners, donors, fundraisers, volunteers and staff.

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Key terms

Cigarettes:	defined to research participants as, 'By cigarettes, we mean traditional cigarettes, 'roll your own' cigarettes, cigars or pipes, where the tobacco is lit with a flame and smoked. This does not include non-smoking forms of consuming tobacco (e.g. chewing or sniffing tobacco).
Vapes:	defined to research participants as, 'Vapes (sometimes also called vaping devices, e-cigarettes or e-shisha) puff a vapour that looks like smoke but, unlike normal cigarettes, you don't light them with a flame and they don't burn tobacco.
HFSS/unhealthy food:	defined to research participants as, 'By unhealthy food or drink we mean high fat, salt or sugary foods and drinks. Some examples include donuts, chocolate, crisps, takeaways, chips, sugary drinks and sweets.'
Alcohol:	defined to research participants as, 'By this we mean drinks like beer, cider, wine, and spirits (e.g. vodka, rum). This also includes drinks such as 'alcopops' which are made to be sweet like soft drinks. You can see if a drink contains alcohol by looking for a sign or percentage for 'abv' on the packaging, which tells you how much alcohol is in the drink.
Advertising (on social media):	a subset of social media marketing, where a brand pays for an advert to be shown on user's feed and it's labelled as such.
Business:	defined to research participants as, 'In a business, people make and sell products or services for other people to buy. You might see businesses promoting their products or services online for you or your family to buy, such as through social media shops or adverts that come up on your feed. Businesses include both the people who make the product (e.g. cigarettes) and the people/shops who sell them.'
Embedded marketing:	also known as product placement. This is a marketing strategy in which a brand's products or services are featured within a piece of content. On social media, this could be within a social media feed or as part of a video.
Engagement:	the actions taken by young people to interact with marketing and adverts online – for example, liking, commenting and sharing.
Entertainment:	social media content lacking more explicitly promotional indicators or messaging.

Exposure:	instances where young people encounter marketing and adverts on social media.
Influence:	something that a post on a social media app made a participant want to do after seeing it, such as buying an item or wanting to try a certain product.
Influencer:	defined to research participants as, 'Influencers may include celebrities, famous personalities, YouTubers, Instagram influencers, TikTokers, or anyone else who has a large following on social media that you don't know in real life.'
Meme:	an image, video, piece of text etc that's typically humorous in nature and is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations.
Mukbang:	a video, especially one that is live-streamed, that features a person eating a large quantity of food while interacting with the audience.
Self-ethnograph:	a research method that connects a participant's personal story, including broader cultural meanings and political and social understandings, with the participant's first-hand experiences through a process of self-reflection and writing
Self-regulatory guidelines:	voluntary rules and standards created and enforced by industry groups to govern the marketing and promotion of certain products. These guidelines are designed to ensure responsible advertising practices without the need for government intervention and are applied to vapes, alcohol and high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) products.
Social media app:	included in the survey and report are: Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter/X, Facebook, Twitch, Threads, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Reddit.
Social media marketing:	The promotion of products through various forms of social media content. This can include posts, stories, videos and other content that may not necessarily be explicitly paid for or promoted by a brand.

Abbreviations

HFSS: High fat, salt and sugar

IMD: Indices of multiple deprivation

ABV: Alcohol by volume

Executive summary

Introduction

In the UK, the number of new cancer cases diagnosed each year is projected to rise by around a fifth by 2040.

But making healthy behaviour changes can reduce the risk of over 20 types of cancer. Some of the biggest preventable causes of cancer are linked to unhealthy product use and consumption, including smoking, living with overweight and obesity, and consuming alcohol. While evidence hasn't linked vapes to cancer, there has been a sharp rise in youth uptake of vaping since 2016 despite being created as a smoking cessation tool, although this plateaued for young people aged 11 to 17 between 2020 and 2024. Legal vapes are far less harmful than smoking; however, the long-term effects are unknown, so vapes cannot be considered risk-free. They also often contain nicotine, which poses addiction risks, particularly for non-smokers and young people.

Marketing can influence the consumption of these unhealthy products among young people, making it a critical area of focus for cancer prevention and health efforts. And since social media plays a dominant role in young people's lives, with a significant number having profiles and spending large amounts of time online, there's growing evidence that exposure to digital marketing influences attitudes and consumption among young people. Digital marketing also has specific advantages over traditional marketing. The existing regulations on social media marketing for tobacco, vapes, high-fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) products and alcohol vary, with all except tobacco relying on self-regulatory guidelines that are, in some cases, ineffective and difficult to enforce.

Cancer Research UK has previously commissioned surveys to explore young people's use and perceptions of tobacco, HFSS products and alcohol, although these surveys were separate and didn't specifically consider social media. In 2024, Cancer Research UK commissioned a new survey to explore the unique aspects of social media marketing for age-restricted products and provide insights for targeted policy action. Following the survey, further research using self-ethnography and focus groups provided context to the results and a deeper dive into the key areas of interest: promotional content on social media for unhealthy products and young people's thoughts on policy options.

Aim

To explore young people's awareness of, and engagement with, marketing and content on social media related to age-restricted products (cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol), and what they think about related policy options.

Methodology

The study comprised a quantitative survey to explore the key questions (1) and a qualitative study involving self-ethnography and focus groups to explore the key results from the survey in more detail and provide more context (2).

Both studies recruited a sample reflecting UK regions, ethnicities, gender, age and indices of multiple deprivation (IMD). This report presents the findings of both studies together.

► 1. Quantitative survey

- An online survey of 4,049 participants aged 11 to 21 across the UK, facilitated by YouGov.
- Survey development was informed by expert roundtable meetings and a review of previous surveys.
- Topics included social media use, product consumption, marketing awareness and policy opinions.

► 2. Qualitative study

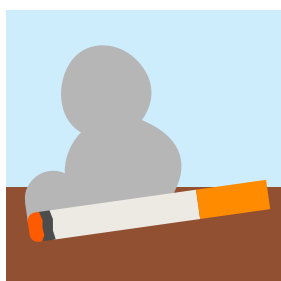
- Conducted by Humankind Research, the qualitative study involved self-ethnography with 46 participants and focus groups (individual, pairs or groups of three) with 43 participants aged 11 to 21.
- An expert advisory group refined the research approach.
- The online self-ethnography explored how cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol appeared on participants' social media and how this might influence their thoughts and behaviour.
- To build on the survey findings, the focus groups explored young people's perceptions of cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol, as well as marketing and policy opinions.

Key findings

Marketing exposure and engagement

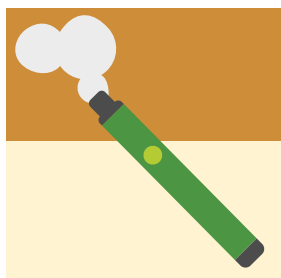
Both the survey and the qualitative study examined young people's awareness of, and engagement with, marketing for cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol on social media.

HFSS products and their marketing were the most recognised and engaged with, and the most positively perceived, with young people actively welcoming this content for both information and entertainment value. Cigarettes were the least familiar and most negatively perceived.



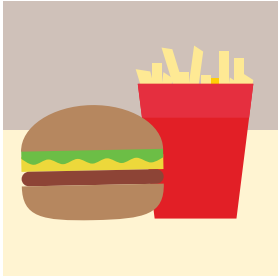
■ Cigarettes

In the survey, 1 in 5 young social media users reported seeing posts relating to cigarettes by businesses in the past month, and 1 in 4 saw posts by influencers. Participants in the qualitative study didn't report seeing any content relating to cigarettes, nor did they share any examples from their feeds. They expressed being either satisfied or indifferent about the perceived lack of cigarette-related content and attributed it to social media algorithms and marketing restrictions.



■ Vapes

In the survey, almost 1 in 3 young social media users reported seeing posts relating to vapes by businesses in the past month, and almost 4 in 10 saw posts by influencers, with higher exposure among people who had vaped before. Mandatory warnings on posts relating to vapes (i.e. 'This product contains nicotine') were often reported as not being seen by young people. The qualitative study revealed examples of social media content relating to vapes, including entertaining meme-style videos (**see key terms**). A minority of participants felt that this content might subtly increase the appeal of vaping, but the majority felt negatively towards vapes and believed them to be more harmful than they are.



■ HFSS products

In the survey, more than 1 in 2 young social media users reported seeing posts relating to HFSS products by both businesses and influencers in the past month. The qualitative study revealed that content relating to HFSS products was highly prevalent in young people's social media feeds, with examples including restaurant content, recipe videos and entertaining videos featuring HFSS products. Engagement with HFSS product posts was high, with young people enjoying this content, especially when it showcased new products for them to try.

HFSS products were highly visible across young people's social media feeds and were the most prevalent of all the products in both the survey and qualitative study. Even so, there were moments in the qualitative task where young people scrolled past HFSS posts and failed to notice or report them.

Many young people felt that marketing restrictions for these products weren't necessary, believing that HFSS products are OK in moderation and that individuals should take personal responsibility for their consumption.

However, many admitted that seeing HFSS content online made them feel hungry and tempted to order, highlighting a potential disconnect between perceived and actual influence.



■ Alcohol

In the survey, more than 1 in 3 young social media users reported seeing posts relating to alcohol by businesses in the past month, and almost 2 in 5 saw posts by influencers.

Exposure was higher among people who had drunk alcohol before. The qualitative study indicated that content containing alcohol was often humorous or casually mentioned, with some people over the age of 18 who already drunk alcohol reporting that it did have an influence on them wanting to drink.

Perceptions of marketing and its influence

The survey showed that the majority of young people believed their online activities influenced the adverts they saw on social media, and thought their online profile information, such as age and gender, played a role. A minority felt that offline activities influenced the adverts they saw, and some believed the adverts were shown randomly.

In the qualitative study, participants identified various types of marketing on social media, including direct business posts, campaign adverts and influencer-sponsored content. They found brand marketing easy to recognise due to clear product focus, labelling and the high quality of the content, while influencer-generated content was harder to identify as marketing. Young people distinguished between content creators, who focus on entertainment, and influencers, who have more commercial motivations. Influencer marketing was often less obvious to young people, with brands being less prominent in posts. In fact, when reviewing young people's social media feeds in the online tasks, some marketing content went unnoticed by the participant as they scrolled through.

Opinion of policy options

In the qualitative study, participants expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of current marketing regulations, noting that they still encounter marketing both online and offline despite existing rules. While many young people haven't considered regulation before, they showed support for stricter regulations on vapes and alcohol marketing, with less desire for restrictions on HFSS product marketing due to their entertainment value and perceived lower risk of harm. The statutory law on cigarette marketing was seen as effective, given the lack of reported cigarette content. And the participants emphasised the role of government, social media platforms, parents and influencers in regulating content, while also suggesting that social media users should take some responsibility themselves.

Conclusion

The survey and qualitative study together revealed that young people engage with marketing for cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol in various ways on social media.

Content relating to **HFSS products was the most prevalent and welcomed** for its entertainment value, while content relating to **cigarettes was the least seen and engaged with**. Content relating to **vapes and alcohol were less frequently seen**, with exposure often linked to age and self-reported usage.

There were doubts concerning the effectiveness of existing marketing regulations. Young people favoured restrictions based on entertainment value and perceived risk of harm, showing less support for restrictions on HFSS products compared to vapes and alcohol. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive online regulatory frameworks to protect young people from potentially harmful product marketing.

Introduction

Background and context

In the UK, the number of new cancer cases diagnosed each year is projected to rise by around a fifth by 2040.

But making healthy behaviour changes can reduce the risk of over 20 types of cancer [1]. Some of the biggest preventable causes of cancer are linked to unhealthy product use and consumption, including smoking, living with overweight and obesity, and consuming alcohol [2].

Although legal vapes are far less harmful than smoking and evidence hasn't linked them to cancer, the long-term effects are unknown, so vapes cannot be considered risk-free [3]. In the UK, there has been a sharp increase in youth uptake of vaping since 2016 [4], although this plateaued for young people aged 11 to 17 between 2020 and 2024 [5]. Vapes also often contain nicotine, which is a very addictive substance, so an increase in the use of vapes in people who have never smoked and young people under the age of 18 is concerning.

Marketing influence

The use and consumption of these products is associated with a variety of factors, including sociocultural influences [6] [7] and environment [8] [9]. Socioeconomic status can also have a large influence. More than 3 in 10 people living in the two most deprived areas in England smoke, compared to 1 in 10 people in the two least deprived areas [9]. Also, children from the most deprived groups consume 20% less fruit and vegetables than children in the least deprived groups and are nearly twice as likely to be living with obesity [10]. And people in the most socioeconomically deprived decile have more than double the rate of alcohol-specific mortality, and more than one and a half times the rate of alcohol-related mortality, compared to people in the least deprived decile, despite similar or lower average consumption [11].

This study focuses on marketing, due to its widespread reach and association with young people's consumption behaviour. For example, self-reported exposure to tobacco promotion at the point of sale is associated with increased odds of ever having tried

smoking in children and young people [12]. Also, higher exposure to food advertising in experimental manipulations increases food intake in children [13]. And awareness of alcohol marketing is associated with higher frequency of consumption and greater likelihood of self-reported higher-risk consumption in young people who currently drink [14].

Consequently, how these products are marketed is an important consideration for cancer prevention. This is particularly true for young people. A meta-analysis studying advertising and young people's critical reasoning abilities found that children and young people of all ages have difficulties understanding and identifying adverts, including digital formats, and that greater understanding does not necessarily protect young people from the effects of advertising [15].

Social media and young people


Social media plays a dominant role in young people's lives, drawing the attention of researchers, parents and policymakers. Marketing on social media has unique strengths over traditional marketing, including low cost and opportunities for tailored audience targeting and engagement [16]. Therefore it's been highlighted as an important platform for influence. Little difference on attitudes towards products has been found between digital and non-digital advertising, but young people find it more difficult to recognise digital marketing [15]. This difficulty may stem from its more seamless integration into platforms, its less overt nature and its capacity for personalisation and targeting.

Currently, 63% of 8 to 11-year-olds say they have at least one profile on a social media app, rising to 92% of 12 to 15-year-olds and






95% of 16 to 17 year-olds [17]. At least 11% of 11 to 17-year-olds say they have set their age to 18+ on their social media accounts [18], which may expose them to content that's intended for adults. What's more, 21% of adolescents say they spend five hours or more a day on social media [19], providing many opportunities for exposure to influencing content.

As social media continues to dominate the digital landscape, understanding its reach on young people, particularly with regard to the marketing of age-restricted and/or unhealthy products, remains a crucial focus.





The digital landscape



Marketing advantages

-  **Low-cost** advertising
-  Can target **specific groups**
-  Brands and influencers can interact **directly** with users
-  Marketing looks like **regular content** and can be hard to identify
-  Marketing fits **easily** into social media feeds

Enforcement disadvantages

-  Often **unclear who's responsible** for making sure posts are age-appropriate
-  **Regulations move too slowly** to keep up with new marketing methods
-  Young people can **lie about their age** online
-  **Influencer content blurs the line** between personal and commercial content

Existing regulations on social media

There are online marketing regulations in place for key products with public health implications. Marketing for tobacco and vapes is restricted online by law, while marketing for HFSS products and alcohol is governed by voluntary rules created and enforced by industry groups. These are known as self-regulatory guidelines. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) acts as the UK’s independent regulator of advertising across media spaces, including online advertising. Trading Standards and Ofcom also play a role in ensuring compliance with these regulations, depending on the product.

Tobacco advertising and promotion is banned in all forms of media, including online. Under the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations (TRPR) [20], advertising of vapes is prohibited online, as well as on other channels, such as TV, radio and print, unless they’re licensed as medicines or targeted exclusively to the trade. However, factual claims about products on the marketer’s own website are

permitted. And a social media page might be considered comparable to a website – and therefore able to feature factual claims – provided it’s set to private and can only be found by people actively seeking it [21].

For HFSS products, new restrictions on advertising, including a UK-wide ban on paid-for HFSS product advertising on social media, are due to come into formal effect in January 2026, with voluntary adoption of these restrictions by some advertisers from October 2025 [22].

For alcohol advertising, the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing (CAP Code) Section 18 ensures that adverts don’t target underage audiences. This also applies to low/no alcohol drinks (0.5% to 1.2% ABV) and there are additional rules on the health claims that can be made.

See table 1 below for a breakdown of regulation variance.

Table 1: Differences in current regulations of products on social media in the UK

Product	Restriction type	Target age	Underpinned by	UK media rules (including social media)
Tobacco	Law	Under 18s	Trading Standards	All tobacco marketing is prohibited in UK media.
Vapes	Law (TRPR)	Under 18s	Trading Standards	The marketing of nicotine-containing vapes (not licensed as medicines) and their components is prohibited in online media; however, factual information about a product can be provided on an vape brand’s website or, in certain circumstances, in other non-paid-for space online under the marketer’s control. Social media accounts of vape businesses should be private and information should only be visible to people who specifically seek it out.
HFSS products	Self-regulatory	Under 16s	Ofcom	HFSS product marketing is prohibited to under 16s, as is using celebrities/influencers who are popular with under 16s.
Alcohol	Self-regulatory	Under 18s	Trading Standards	Alcohol marketing is prohibited to under 18s, as is using celebrities/influencers popular with under 18s. In alcohol adverts, anyone under the age of 25, or who looks under 25, is prohibited from playing a significant role or being shown drinking alcohol.

Despite these regulations, there are concerns that the restrictions are not sufficient and/or they're hard to enforce on social media platforms. Self-regulation can move too slowly to keep up with the speed and amount of digital marketing, and responsibility is often unclear [23]. For example, there have been reported violations across TikTok where the lines are blurred between influencers promoting vapes and reviewing them [24].

Also, while age restrictions apply on some social media platforms, such as Meta's change to place under 18s onto 'teen accounts' on Instagram [25], this relies on young people entering their correct date of birth when creating accounts and self-restricting to child-focused content.

Even where guidelines are in place, non-disclosure or inadequate disclosure of paid partnerships continue to blur the lines between personal and commercial interests, creating an environment where it's difficult to recognise marketing. For example, in August 2023, a social media video from an influencer's account prominently showcased a zero-calorie syrup company's product. Although the caption included '#ad', the ASA deemed the disclaimer inadequate as it was placed at the end of the caption, requiring consumers to engage with the post and expand the text to see it [26].



Social media marketing

There is increasingly consistent evidence that exposure to digital marketing is prominent in young people's lives and can influence their attitudes and consumption patterns. For example, research has shown that 41% of young people noticed vape marketing on social media between 2017 and 2019, compared to only 14% of adults in 2018 [27]. Also, focus groups with young people in Scotland aged 11 to 16 revealed that many are aware of influencer and celebrity endorsement for vapes online, and that social media portrays these influencers as 'fashionable' and can influence people to try these products [28].

For food marketing, a recent review found that viewing digital food marketing, including influencer marketing, is associated with increased food intake [29]. And for alcohol, awareness of adverts and promotions on social media varies by age and has been shown to be more prominent with older teens aged 16 to 18 [30]. This awareness is positively associated with increased alcohol consumption and binge or hazardous drinking behaviour in people who already drink [31].

Current research

Cancer Research UK has previously commissioned surveys to explore young people's use and perceptions of tobacco, HFSS products and alcohol, including the Youth Tobacco Policy Survey [32], Youth Obesity Policy Survey [33] and Youth Alcohol Policy Survey [34]. However, there remains a notable gap in research exploring the parallels across these products and how young people feel about them, particularly in the context of marketing that young people encounter on social media – a platform that plays a dominant role in their lives today. There is also a need to explore the unique aspects of social media marketing for age-restricted products to provide valuable insights for targeted policy action.

Research aims and objectives

Aim

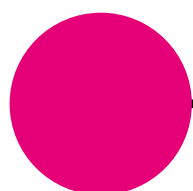
In 2024, Cancer Research UK commissioned a new survey to explore young people's self-reported exposure to, engagement with and perceived influencing by the marketing of cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol, specifically on social media.

Following the survey, further research using self-ethnography and focus groups provided context to the results and a deeper dive into the key areas of interest: promotional content on social media for unhealthy products and young people's thoughts on policy options for harmful product marketing on social media.

Key questions and timeline

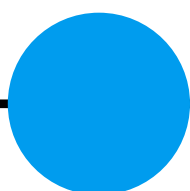
This study set out to answer the following questions:

- How much marketing for age-restricted products do young people think they see on social media?
- How do young people engage with marketing on social media for these products?
- Do they think the marketing influences whether they use these products, or what they think of them?
- Are young people in favour of more restrictions on how these products are marketed?



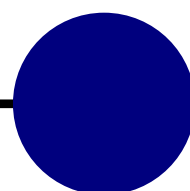
Survey and analysis

January to August 2024



Qualitative deep dive

March to November 2024



Reporting results

November 2024 to June 2025

Methods

The study comprised a quantitative survey to explore the key questions (1) and a qualitative study involving self-ethnography and focus groups to explore the key results from the survey in more detail and provide more context (2). This report presents the findings of both studies together.

1. Quantitative survey

The market and social research company YouGov facilitated an online survey of 4,049 participants aged 11 to 21 across the UK.

Survey development

The survey development was informed by a roundtable meeting with academic and third-sector experts working across tobacco, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol, as well as a review of previous surveys on similar topics to identify robust and validated measures. Fieldwork took place between 18 January and 8 February 2024 before the survey was launched online. Read more about the survey development in [appendix A](#).

Sampling and recruitment

The survey was sent to a range of 11 to 21-year-olds across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the final sample aimed to be as representative as possible by UK region, ethnicity, gender, age and indices of multiple deprivation (IMD).

YouGov recruited participants from their panel of approximately 2.5 million members. Panel members are emailed about new surveys and can take part in them without initially knowing about the topic. YouGov collect data on panel members relating to a vast range of demographics, including social grade, ethnicity, household size and housing tenure.

For panel members aged 11 to 15, their parents were given a detailed information sheet and asked for their consent. Once they had consented, they passed the survey

over to their child, who also received an information sheet and was asked for their consent before starting the survey. Panel members aged 16 to 21 were given a detailed information sheet and asked for their consent before starting the survey. On completing the survey, participants received reward points, which are redeemable to monetary value once certain thresholds are met.

Data collection

The survey was estimated to take around 20 minutes and all survey responses were collected on YouGov's online platform. Topics included:

- social media use
- use of cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol
- awareness of, and engagement with, marketing on social media for these products
- policy opinions for these products

Analysis

The researchers analysed the data using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25). Weighted frequencies (weighted by gender, age, ethnicity, IMD quintile and region) are reported.

2. Qualitative study

The research agency Humankind Research conducted the qualitative study, which involved self-ethnography with 46 participants and focus groups (individual, pairs or groups of three) with 43 participants aged 11 to 21. An expert advisory group of participants similar to the intended sample provided feedback to refine the method.

Read more in appendix B ([group creation](#)) and C ([discussion guide](#)).

Survey development

For the self-ethnography, focus groups and advisory group, the researchers recruited their sample using the following criteria:

- 11 to 21-year-old age range
- Including different ages, genders, socioeconomic statuses and locations
- Usage of a variety of social media platforms

Criteria, a field agency that specialises in recruiting young people, recruited 48 participants for the self-ethnography online tasks. The sample was made up of 16 groups – individuals, pairs or groups of three – across different ages. Participants aged 11 to 15 were recruited via the child's parent/caregiver. Of the 48 participants, 46 completed the self-ethnography, with two dropping out after recruitment. Of the 46 participants who completed the self-ethnography, 43 went on to complete the focus groups.

Participants received £30 in gift vouchers for completing the self-ethnography and £40 in gift vouchers for completing the focus group.

Read more about the recruitment process in [appendix D](#).

Data collection

Self-ethnography

The self-ethnography comprised online tasks, which took place on the mobile research platform Field Notes [35]. Over a week, participants downloaded the app and completed tasks to explore how cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol appeared on their social media feeds and how this might influence their thoughts and behaviour. Three researchers moderated the responses, leaving comments and questions on the participants' submissions.

The researchers asked five participants (two girls aged 18 and three boys aged 14) to 'pilot' the Field Notes tasks, allowing them to refine the task wording before launching the platform to the full group.

The tasks included:

- checking young people's recognition of, and associations with, key brands in each category by showing them logos and asking their opinions of the brands
- observing how often young people encounter and engage with marketing for cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol by asking them to screen-record their social media feeds as they scrolled for two minutes, narrating what they were seeing

In tasks where young people were sharing their screen, this was pre-recorded for the researcher and participants had the opportunity to delete their recording if friends or family posts came up that they didn't want to share.

Read more about the tasks in [appendix E](#).

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted for 30 to 60 minutes, depending on whether it was individual, in pairs or in groups of three. Each session was moderated by one researcher guiding the discussion. All sessions were conducted and recorded via Zoom.

The researchers interviewed five participants (two girls aged 18 and three boys aged 14) to determine whether any changes needed to be made to the discussion guide before speaking to the rest of the participants.

The focus group discussion guide topics included:

- how young people see and think about cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol
- definitions and understanding of marketed/ sponsored content on social media
- the types of marketing relating to these products seen on social media and young people's feelings about this, expanding on their answers from the online tasks
- the types of accounts young people follow on social media and the content they normally see from influencers and businesses
- awareness and understanding of policies and regulations on the marketing of these products
- young people's feelings towards potential policies further restricting the marketing of these products on social media

Read the full discussion guide in [appendix F](#).

Analysis

The researchers conducted thematic analysis using a deductive approach, with key codes derived from the research questions to determine themes. Once the focus groups were complete, all researchers reviewed the transcripts, coded using the list of key codes, and produced a short narrative summary covering points relevant to the research questions.

Following this, all researchers compared their analysis and shared individual interpretations of the themes they found. In later sessions, researchers discussed and agreed the most important themes overall. These sessions also offered an important opportunity to raise and discuss the additional dimension of non-verbal cues, tone and body language, which were documented as field notes and were a dedicated focus of each analysis session.

To combine the analytical capabilities of humans and artificial intelligence (AI), all participant data (from the Field Notes data and recordings from the focus groups) was then uploaded to CoLoop, a domain-specific AI analysis aid. Researchers had CoLoop generate AI-powered time-coded transcription and automatic summarisation of each research engagement. CoLoop was then instructed to code all the data using two sets of codes. One set was automatically identified from the discussion guides that the lead researcher uploaded with the participant data. The second set was from a list agreed and manually entered by the research team.

With all the data uploaded, researchers then created a master 'analysis grid' on CoLoop. This grid was a series of specific research questions to which automatically populated answers were given. Research questions were those used in manually created summary documents earlier in the process.

Answers featured detailed participant quotes and summaries, ordered by size (determined by how much it was mentioned). Answers from the AI analysis grid were cross-referenced with those from the human thematic analysis, with minimal disparities emerging. However, where they did emerge, researchers re-reviewed the data individually, before discussing and agreeing amendments collectively.

Findings

Participants' characteristics

YouGov invited 6,388 people to complete the online survey. Participants were removed if they started but didn't complete the survey (N = 2,169) or for having incomplete data crucial to calculating weighting (N = 170). This left 4,049 participants who completed the survey. See table 2 on the next page for a detailed breakdown of survey participant characteristics.

Of the participants, 95% had an account on at least one social media app. The most popular apps were YouTube (70%), Snapchat (62%), Instagram (62%) and TikTok (56%). Facebook was also popular with people aged 18 or over (67%), but not as much with under 18s (35%).

Of participants who were under the age of 18 and had a social media account, 68% had a restriction on at least one app. The most common restriction was parents having access to the social media accounts (34%), followed by time restrictions (33%) and parental locks (27%). When faced with a social media app that has a minimum age requirement they cannot meet, 40% reported that they would say they are older than they are and 29% would ask a parent, guardian or caregiver.

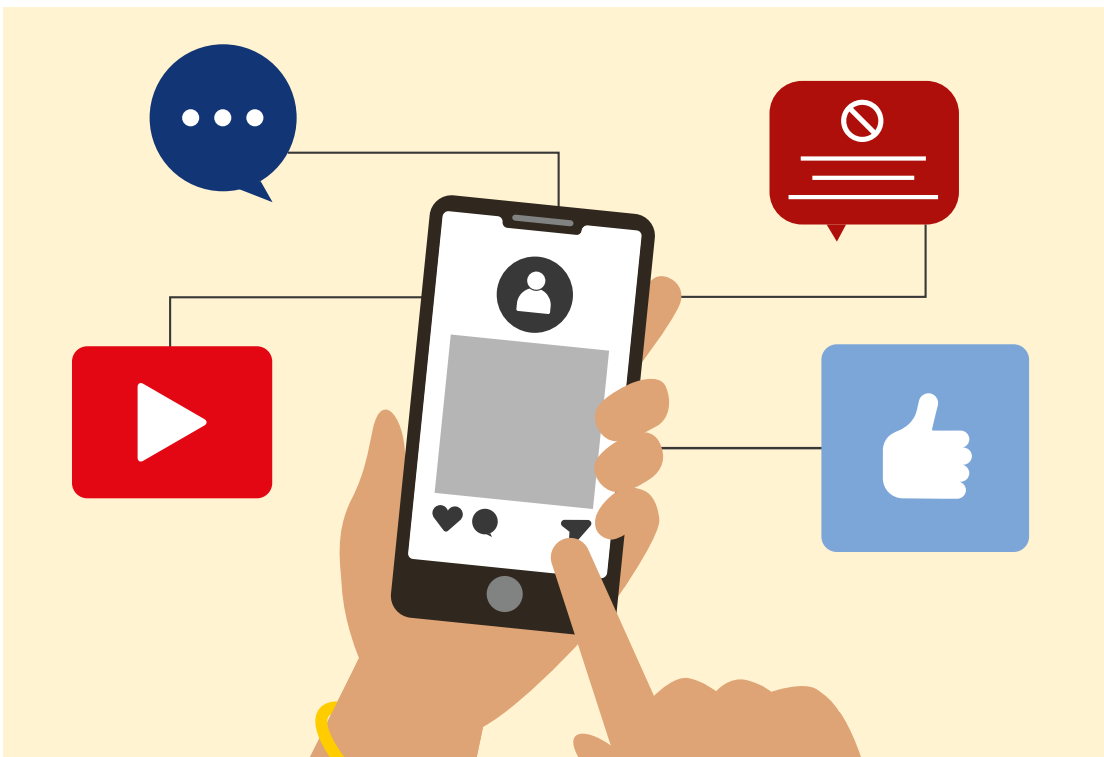


Table 2: Survey sample characteristics and engagement in behaviours

Variables	%	N (weighted)
Age		
11 to 13	28	1,148
14 to 17	33	1,351
18 to 21	38	1,540
Sex		
Male	51	2,072
Female	49	1,977
Ethnicity		
White	77	3,114
Net: ethnic minority	23	935
Nation		
England	82	3,319
Scotland	10	392
Wales	6	221
Northern Ireland	3	117
BMI		
Healthy weight	63	1,872
Underweight	13	379
Overweight	13	380
Obese	12	343
Not stated	–	1,075
IMD		
1 – most deprived	20	810
2	20	810
3	20	810
4	20	810
5 – least deprived	20	810

Variables	%	N (weighted)
Smoking status		
Ever smoked	20	796
Never smoked	79	3,204
Don't know	0.4	15
Prefer not to say	1	34
Vaping status		
Ever vaped	28	1,139
Never vaped	71	2,865
Don't know	0.4	17
Prefer not to say	1	27
Drinking status		
Ever drunk	47	1,902
Never drunk	51	2,059
Don't know	1	45
Prefer not to say	1	44
Social media use		
Use social media	95	3,851
Don't use social	5	198

Base = All participants (n=4,049)

For the qualitative study, researchers recruited 48 participants for the self-ethnography online tasks. The sample was made up of 18 groups – either individuals, pairs or groups of three friends – across different ages. Of the 48 participants, 46 completed the self-ethnography, with two dropping out after recruitment. Of the 46 participants who completed the self-ethnography, 43 went on to complete the focus group. See table 3 below for a breakdown of participant demographics.

Table 3: Qualitative study sample characteristics

Triad number	Country	Age	Gender	Number of participants who completed self-ethnography online tasks	Number who participated in focus groups
1	England	14	Male	3	3
2	England	18	Female	2	2
3	Northern Ireland	13, 13, 11	Male	3	3
4	Scotland	18, 18, 20	Male	3	3
5	Scotland	16	Female	3	3
6	Northern Ireland	11, 12, 13	Female	3	3
7	England	13, 14, 14	Female	3	3
8	England	17	Female	3	3
9	Wales	21	Male	3	3
10	England	17	Male	3	2
11	Wales	15, 15, 16	Female	3	3
12	England	11	Female	3	3
13	England	13	Female	1	1
14	England	16, 17, 17	2x male, 1x female	3	3
15	England	15	Male	3	1
16	England	15	Male	1	1
17	England	15	Male	1	1
18	England	15	Male	2	2
Total				46	43

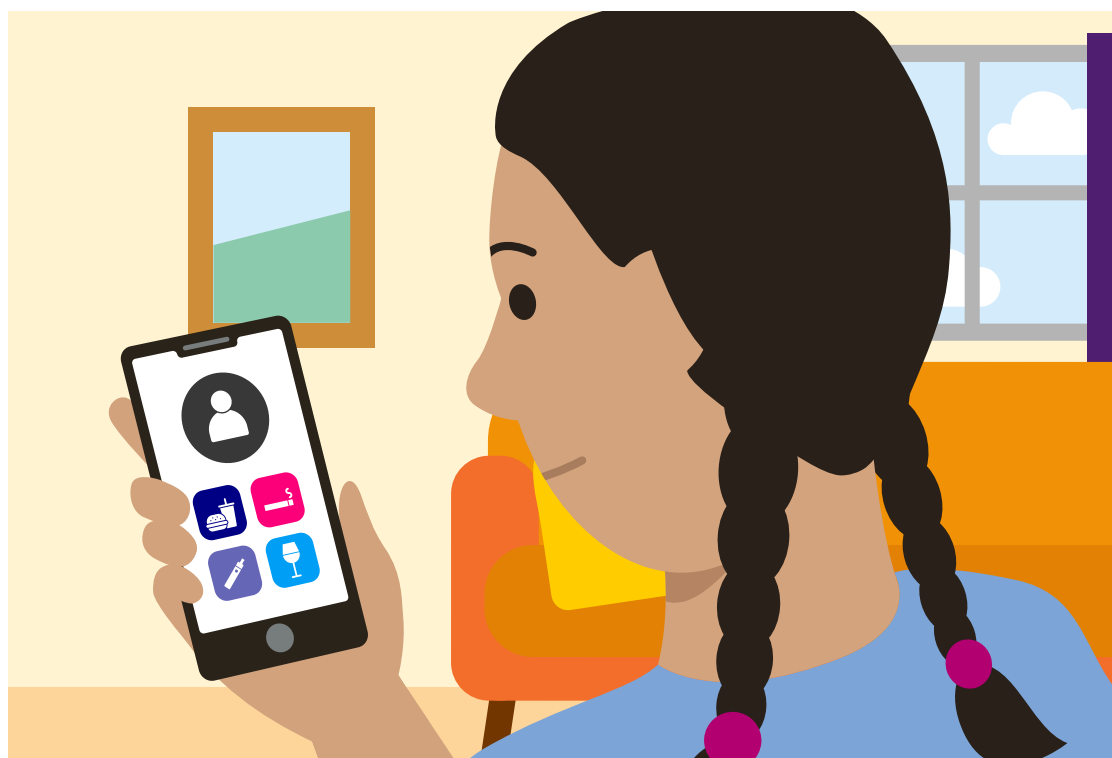
Marketing exposure and engagement

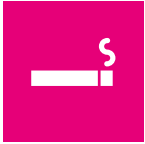
In the survey, participants were asked about their awareness of, and engagement with, marketing for cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol on social media.

The qualitative study asked participants to provide examples of this and to discuss their engagement further. See the table below for a breakdown of participants' exposure to, and engagement with, each product in the survey.

In the qualitative study, HFSS products and their marketing were the most seen and discussed, and the most positively perceived, with young people actively welcoming this content for both information and entertainment value. This was followed by alcohol. While vaping was very familiar to young people, there were strong mixed perceptions. Cigarettes were both the least familiar product category and the most negatively perceived.

See [**appendix G**](#) for a summary of results split by demographics.





Cigarettes

Exposure

In the survey, cigarette posts were seen by a minority of young social media users in the past month: 20% reported seeing posts from businesses and 25% from influencers. For both business and influencer posts, there was no difference in the proportion reporting seeing these posts by age. The proportion seeing these posts was significantly higher in people who had ever smoked compared to people who hadn't, and in people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to people who identified as White, and people in IMD 1-2 compared to IMD 3-5.

In the qualitative study, most young people didn't report seeing cigarette-related content online and expressed either satisfaction or indifference about not seeing these posts.

“

I feel good about not seeing them on social media.”

14, Female, Black,
Northern Ireland

They explained the absence of these posts by one or a combination of the following:

- the personal tailoring of social media algorithms – they're aware that content is filtered based on user behaviour
- the knowledge that cigarette advertising is banned or restricted on social media, contributing to its low visibility
- the belief that algorithms are actively protecting users, especially children, by filtering out inappropriate content like cigarettes where it does exist

“

So if you put in your real age... say I was like 14 and my friend that was... 16 sent me a TikTok... I wouldn't be able to see it because I was too young.”

18, Female, Black, England



Engagement

In the survey, among young social media users who had seen cigarette posts, 40% engaged with them. This proportion didn't differ by age or IMD. However, engagement was higher in people who had ever smoked compared to people who hadn't, and in people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to people who identified as White.

In the qualitative study, young people didn't talk about engaging with cigarette content online.



Vapes

Exposure

In the survey, vape posts were seen by a minority of young social media users in the past month: 29% reported seeing posts from businesses and 37% from influencers. For both business and influencer posts, there were no significant differences in the proportion reporting seeing these posts by age or ethnicity. The proportion seeing these posts was significantly higher in people who had

ever vaped compared to people who hadn't, and in people in IMD 1-2 compared to IMD 3-5.

On posts that are adverts for vapes, mandatory statements are required. Of survey respondents who saw businesses or influencers posting about vapes, these statements were only seen some of the time:

Table 4:

Question – In the last month, you said you have seen [influencers or businesses] posting about vapes on social media apps. When you saw these posts, how often, if at all, did you notice the following messages...

Message	% of participants who reported never seeing this message for business posts	% of participants who reported never seeing this message for influencer posts
Vapes are only for those aged 18 or over	25%	35%
Vapes are a tool to help people stop smoking	23%	30%
Vapes contain nicotine	22%	28%
Message stating the post was an advert	15%	32%

In the qualitative study, a small number of participants under the age of 18 reported seeing vape-related content on their social media, but the majority didn't.

For all age groups, when vape-related content was seen, it was considered entertaining and not explicitly promotional (i.e. user generated). For example, videos of vape tricks on TikTok or YouTube Shorts and parody-style memes that make light of vaping.



Engagement

In the survey, 22% of young social media users who reported seeing vape posts from businesses or influencers in the last month actively engaged with them, such as liking, commenting or sharing. Engagement was significantly higher among people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to people who identified as White, people who had smoked before compared to people who hadn't, and people in IMD 1-2 compared to IMD 3-5.

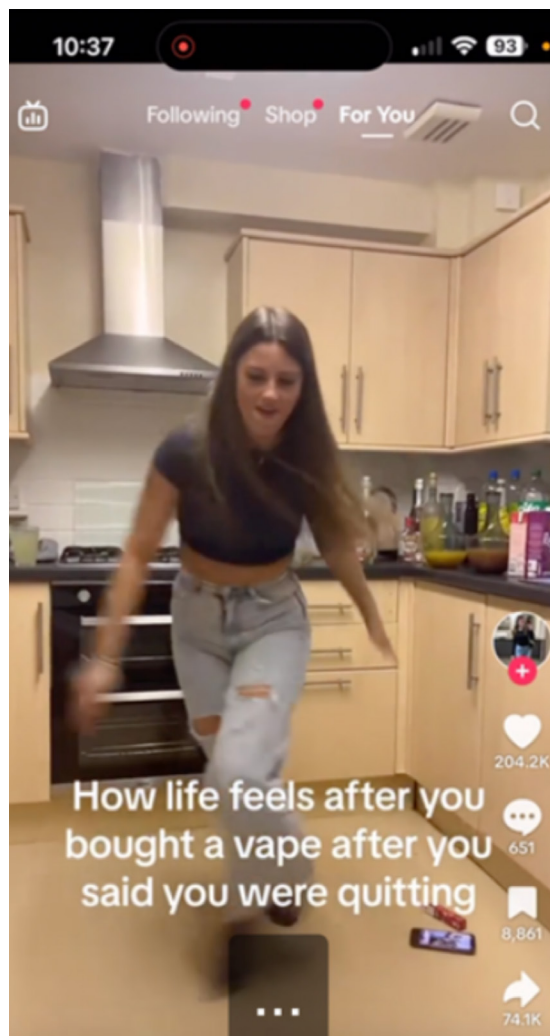
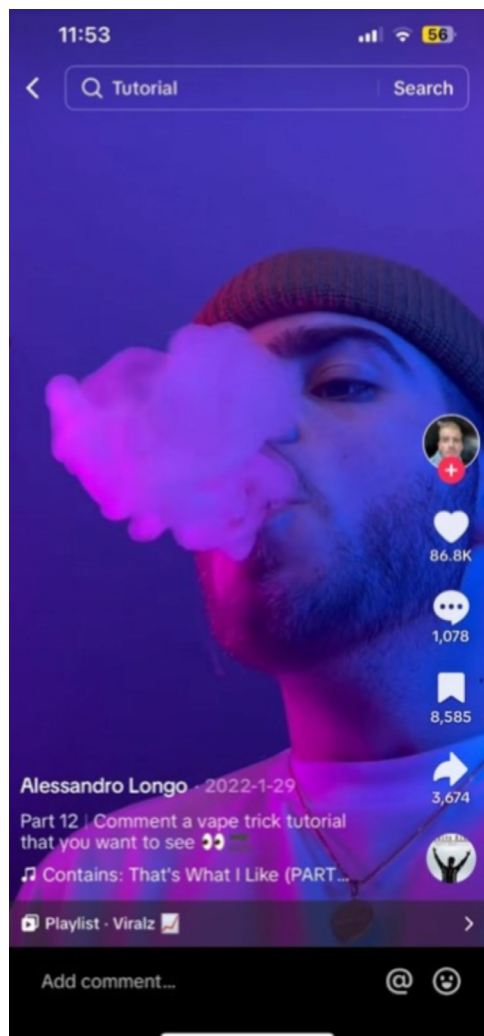
In the qualitative study, a minority of young people felt that this content might subtly increase the appeal of vaping for others.

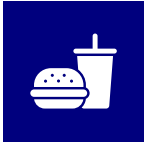
“

On TikTok, it's like, glamorised vaping. Like, people make jokes about it, like, 'oh, five minutes without my vape', and then put, like, a funny video next to someone, like, scrambling for something, something like that. Like, people do take, like, a joke about it, and then I don't know if that maybe influences people's, like, perception of it. Like, oh, it's funny or it's good.”

20, Male, White, Scotland

Posts about vaping seen in participants' social media feeds





HFSS products

Exposure

In the survey, HFSS posts were seen by the majority of young social media users in the past month: 52% reported seeing posts from both businesses and influencers. For both business and influencer posts, there were no significant differences in the proportion reporting seeing these posts by age or IMD. There were, however, statistical differences in exposure by ethnicity, with higher levels observed among people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to people who identified as White.

In the qualitative study, young people reported that HFSS products featured heavily in their online worlds, both passively (e.g. via algorithm generated 'for you' style feeds) and more actively (e.g. via the steady content stream from specifically subscribed-to creators, often including food-focused content creators).

“

I'd say at least every 2 mins that I'm on Instagram I'd see at least one food-related post.”

15, Male, White, England

“

There's always a new type of food spot that I'm seeing on TikTok or something.”

18, Female, Black, England

Examples of HFSS product content that participants cited seeing included:

- posts from restaurant brands or restaurant review videos from content creators
- recipe/cooking videos featuring HFSS products as ingredients
- mukbangs – live-streamed videos showing a person eating a large quantity of (often HFSS) food while addressing the viewer
- other entertaining videos that feature HFSS products, such as content creators taking on eating challenges

Eating competition from Beta Squad (YouTubers followed by a participant)



Engagement

In the survey, 39% of people who saw business or influencer posts about HFSS products in the last month actively engaged with them in at least one way. When this was split by content type, 33% actively engaged with a business post and 40% actively engaged with an influencer post.

For both business and influencer posts, there was no significant difference in the proportion reporting seeing these posts by age. However, there were statistical differences in engagement, with higher levels observed among people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to people who identified as White, and among people in IMD 1-2 compared to IMD 3-5. The qualitative study revealed that people welcome HFSS product content. If it's more obviously promotional, it's less likely to be sought out but still enjoyed, especially if it's showcasing new products to experience:

“

I think it's good because it gets to show different types of foods... any type of food, like, to different people and different cultures.”

14, Female, Black, England

Several participants reported feeling hungry or tempted after seeing HFSS products on social media:

“

It does actually make me very hungry... I see people eating food, like mukbang videos, stuff like that.”

13, Female, Mixed Ethnicity, England

“

This is a giant cookie bowl that also keeps showing up. When I see it I feel like ordering a dessert and I feel really hungry.”

11, Female, South Asian, England



“

I think I see these ads because Domino's want us to buy their pizza. The Domino's looked delicious, appetising, appealing and I felt hungry.”

11, Male, White, Northern Ireland

Not all HFSS-product content was seen as marketing, but much of it had a promotional quality. Table 5 below maps the content seen in the qualitative study on a spectrum from explicitly promotional (i.e. marketing) to implicitly promotional (i.e. entertainment). This mapping wasn't possible for the other product categories given the lower number of examples shared by participants.

Table 5: Mapping HFSS product content on a spectrum from marketing to entertainment

<div><div> Marketing Mostly 'promotional'</div><div>←————→</div><div>Entertainment Least 'promotional' </div></div>		
Explicitly promotional E.g. HFSS brand-led activity <ul style="list-style-type: none">Mainly McDonalds, Wingstop, Subway, but some local independents tooBig focus on new products (Subway's Footlong cookie) or appetising content in the context of social consumption (Wingstop 'everyone's here')	Still discernibly promotional E.g. Influencer/content-creator-fronted partnerships <ul style="list-style-type: none">Often promoting local independents restaurantsFronted by a friendly faceFeels more original vs. brand-madated, especially content creatorsStill seen as 'marketing'/ad	Still discernibly promotional E.g. Influencer/content-creator-fronted partnerships <ul style="list-style-type: none">Food-focused 'content' creator restaurant review videos'Mukbang'/ASMR' videos with HFSS products (often big brands)Food as lifestyle (peer content)Doesn't feel like marketing (created out of pasion), but if brands are present, can confuse – 'is this marketing?'



Alcohol

Exposure

In the survey, 36% of young social media users reported seeing posts from businesses and 38% reported seeing posts from influencers in the last month. For both business and influencer posts, there was no significant difference in the proportion reporting seeing these posts by IMD. However, the proportion was significantly higher in people who had ever consumed alcohol compared to people who hadn't, people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to people who identified as White, and people under the age of 18 compared to age 18 and over.

Similar findings were reported in the study: people aged 16 to 18 reported higher exposure compared to people under the age of 16. Over 18s reported the highest level of exposure – mostly from people who already consumed alcohol regularly.

“

I don't really have any alcohol stuff on my TikTok page or my YouTube page because I don't really search up this stuff because I'm only 11.”

11, Female, South Asian, England

“

Alcohol appears on my feed rarely, because in general what I use Instagram for rarely aligns with alcohol. I mainly use Instagram for memes, photography and cute cats, so alcohol would only realistically come up as part of a meme.”

15, Male, White, England

“

I think when I do get alcohol I feel like alcohol is always in the background of videos... I think they try and show it to look cool.”

16, Female, Black, Scotland

Across all ages, the types of content seen were:

- humorous and light-hearted content, such as memes on TikTok or Instagram that depict the effects of alcohol in a humorous way or people having fun at parties and drinking in casual settings
- instances where alcohol is briefly mentioned or shown in the background of a post
- sponsored posts and brand collaborations

Posts seen in the Instagram feeds of an 18-year-old (left) and 15-year-old (right)

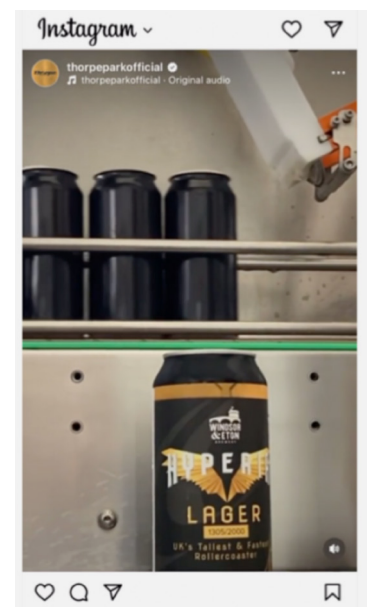


Image right: Throughout this screen recording alcohol is seen once on a Thorpe Park advertisement. It was advertising a new ride on a cider can. I don't often see this on my page and it wasn't a direct advert for any alcohol. It doesn't make me want to do anything and I was shocked to see it. 15, Female, White, Wales

Engagement

In the survey, of people who saw business or influencer posts about alcohol products in the last month, 33% actively engaged in at least one way. There were no statistically significant differences across age or ethnicity. However, there were differences in exposure by drinking status and IMD, with higher levels among people who had drunk before compared to people who hadn't, and people in IMD 1-2 compared to IMD 3-5.

When asked in the qualitative study, most young people reported that alcohol-related content doesn't motivate them to consume alcohol:

“

The adverts, I don't really have an opinion towards them... They don't really make me want to buy a drink more or try a drink.”

21, Male, White, Wales

However, three participants over the age of 18 who already regularly consume alcohol reported examples of seeing content that makes them want to drink:

“

I do see some things on my feed occasionally regarding alcohol. Sometimes it makes me crave a drink if the alcohol shown on screen is something I like, e.g. cocktails.”

20, Male, White, Scotland

“

The one alcohol post that I saw looked refreshing and genuinely appealing.”

18, Male, White, England

“

The adverts, I don't really have an opinion towards them... They don't really make me want to buy a drink more or try a drink.”

21, Male, White, Wales

Post seen in the Facebook feed of a 21-year-old



“

That just makes me wanna go out and have a pint with the boys.”

21, Male, Mixed Ethnicity, Wales

Perceptions of marketing and its influence

Explicit advertising on social media

In the survey, participants were asked if they thought there were any factors that influenced the adverts they saw on social media.

The majority (77%) thought their online activities influenced the adverts, while 62% believed their profile information played a role. Only 17% felt that offline activities had an impact and 7% thought adverts were shown randomly. Understanding of these factors was higher among older participants compared to younger ones. See table 6 below for a breakdown by age.

In the qualitative study, participants listed several different examples of types of marketing on social media, including:

- posts/adverts coming directly from a business or brand’s social media accounts on TikTok or Instagram
- campaign advertising – for example, preceding a YouTube video
- posts from influencers with a ‘sponsored’ or ‘ad’ label

Table 6: Understanding of factors that influence adverts on social media by age

Q: Which, if any, of the following do you think influences the adverts you see on social media apps?	% by age			
	11 to 13 years	14 to 17 years	18 to 21 years	P-value*
Things I have done online	65	78	83	.000
My profile information (e.g. age, location and gender)	44	63	74	.000
Things I have done offline	8	15	25	.000
None of these – the adverts are shown at random	11	7	5	.000

Base = All participants who have / have access to an account on at least one social media platform (n=3,889)

* P-values calculated by Chi Squared Test for independence, a non-parametric test to explore relationships between categorical variables

“

Static adverts that you'll see, like, when scrolling a feed. And then, like, in videos... just before the video starts, maybe mid-rolls in the middle of the video and some at the end. And then there's also, like, sponsorship deals.”

18, Male, Mixed Ethnicity, England

“

I see a lot of ads [on social media] and a lot of companies that have partnered, partnered up with other people on TikTok to talk about a specific product.”

20, Female, South Asian, England

“

Sometimes you see companies that are a bit smaller trying to get kind of semi-big influencers to promote their stuff. So just be, like, tagging their TikTok in the description and then just saying, like, you can get, like, 10% off with their code... So they're not paying for a full advertisement.”

11, Male, White, Northern Ireland

When asked, young people reported that marketing directly from a brand or product is easy to recognise due to factors including:

- a clear and explicit focus on the product – for example, via the presence of a prominent brand logo (in an advert and/or on social media account)
- ad labelling on the post
- visual cues and content style – i.e. high-quality production that's clean, bold and slick.

“

Now they have to say there's a little box that says ad in the bottom near the caption. So yeah that's how you know.”

15, Male, Black, England

Young people reported that brand marketing specifically on YouTube is clearly demarcated and easy to anticipate, making it easier to disengage from.

“

On YouTube? So let's say I'm in the middle of watching a video, it will come up and it says, like, 'ad' in the bottom of the screen, and you can kind of tell it's an advert because it will just say, 'skip ad' on the side.”

11, Female, South Asian, England

“

Advertisements, they come at the beginning of the videos, so you know where they are.”

17, Male, White, England

On TikTok and Instagram, although strong visual cues (e.g. ad label banners) are noticed, young people reported that brand marketing is embedded into the overall experience among other non-marketing content and is, therefore, more difficult to anticipate.

“

I find it easier to tell on YouTube because they have advert breaks. Not so much on TikTok.”

13, Female, Mixed Ethnicity, England

The examples above highlight instances where young people have been able to recall and discuss explicit adverts, rather than more subtle marketing techniques which they may not recognise as easily. In fact, during the screen recording exercise, **young people sometimes underreported more subtle content they were exposed to on social media, especially on TikTok and Instagram.** For example, one participant reported seeing food posts three times during a two-minute scroll, but when researchers watched the screen recording, six examples were evident.

Content creator/influencer-generated social media marketing

In contrast to explicit adverts, user-generated content and any associated or embedded marketing was seen differently.

In the qualitative study, young people defined both influencers and content creators as people with a large social media following who create compelling content that resonates with young people's interests, including fashion, sport and food.

However, many young people also distinguished between the two roles. Content creators are more likely to create content out of independent, artistic and creative expression, and focus more on entertaining rather than marketing to audiences. As such, their content is often associated with fewer explicit ties to brands. Influencers are felt to have more apparent commercial motivations because they often promote products in ways required by brands.

“

Influencers are there to influence you to buy new products but content creators is a much wider range... I'd say there's definitely a lot more effort put into creating content.”

20, Female, South Asian, England

“

I think influencers, they're more just like, focused on trying to maybe, like, sell a product or trying to get themselves more views or more likes than actually, like, creating content.”

16, Female, Black, Scotland

When marketing is delivered through a third party, such as an influencer, young people reported it as harder to identify. This can be because the brand is less prominent in the post and, since not all influencer content is marketing, the user may not realise when a post is sponsored.

“

If you scroll through TikTok, there's sometimes people who just post a video, just saying, I should buy this. But they don't say it's an ad. It's just a normal video.”

14, Male, White, England

Generally, there was a preference for influencers and content creators who present genuine, relatable personas, compared to brands or celebrities where corporate or overly polished images are expected.

“

I chose this photo because I enjoyed the honest, genuine smile that she has, and I think that a lot of brands have a very corporate advertising look, which doesn't appeal to people who want to see genuine people who are being honest and real.”

15, Male, White, England

Opinions on policy options

Views on specific policy measures for the marketing of vapes, HFSS products and alcohol on social media

Views on potential policy options for social media marketing varied significantly between the product groups

Favourable opinion on tougher regulation, such as business accounts being private, was highest for vapes and lowest for HFSS products. Views on where responsibility lies for regulation were similar across the product groups, with over half of participants agreeing that social media companies, product companies and governments should be responsible, and less than a quarter agreeing that social media users should be responsible.

See table 7 for a summary of participants' responses and link to Appendix H below for a statistical comparison of agreement for policies and thoughts on responsibility.

Table 7: Summary of participant's policy measure responses

Statement	(%)			
	Product	Agree	Disagree	Don't know /Neither
The social media accounts of businesses who make and sell [product] should be private (i.e. you need to follow them to see what they post).	Vapes	68	12	20
	HFSS products	43	27	30
	Alcohol	51	21	28
If accounts cannot be made private, then businesses who make and sell [product] should not be allowed to have an account on social media apps.	Vapes	63	14	23
	HFSS products	35	36	29
	Alcohol	45	26	29
It is okay for influencers (e.g. YouTubers, Tiktokers, Instagram influencers) to post content promoting [product].	Vapes	14	65	21
	HFSS products	36	34	29
	Alcohol	25	45	30

Base = all participants (n = 4,049)

Agree = 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree'. Disagree = 'Strongly Disagree' or 'Disagree'.
Don't know/Neither = 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Don't know', or 'Prefer not to say'.

See [Appendix H](#) for a statistical comparison of agreement of potential policies and responsibility across products

Vape policies

In the survey, the majority of young people supported making the social media accounts of vape businesses private, with only a small minority disagreeing. Many also felt that if accounts couldn't be made private, vape businesses shouldn't be allowed to have an account. The majority disagreed that it was OK for influencers to promote vapes on social media. And most young people believed that the responsibility for preventing vape promotions to people under the age of 18 lies with social media companies, vape companies and governments. Only a small portion felt that social media users were responsible.

Alcohol policies

In the survey, over half of young people supported making the social media accounts of alcohol business private and almost half felt that if accounts couldn't be made private, alcohol businesses shouldn't be allowed to have an account. Also, almost half of young people disagreed that it was OK for influencers to promote alcohol on social media. Most young people believed that the responsibility for preventing alcohol promotions to people under the age of 18 lies with social media companies, alcohol companies and governments. Only a small percentage felt that social media users were responsible.

HFSS product policies

In the survey, opinions were mixed on whether the social media accounts of HFSS businesses should be made private, whether businesses should be allowed to have accounts if they can't be made private and if it's ok for influencers to promote HFSS products on social media.



Views on wider social measures

During the qualitative study, few young people felt strongly about implementing stricter regulations, although it was clear that it was not a topic they had previously considered. Participants had the greatest concern for younger age groups, who are felt to be more easily influenced by marketing for unhealthy products.

In terms of potential policy, some suggested that stricter forms of age verification (e.g. ID checks) might be helpful for cigarette, vape and alcohol marketing, but there was little desire to tighten HFSS product regulation. This was partly because HFSS products are seen as less harmful in comparison to other products, but also because content featuring these products can be entertaining and relatable.

“

If you're going to advertise vaping, smoking or alcohol, I think there should be like a verification process to see that ad.”

15, Male, Black, England

“

If there was to be like a law for kids not to see certain stuff, it should be for vapes and alcohol.”

18, Female, Black, England

“

They're all bad things, but different levels of bad... I guess it's sort of like a tier system and sort of like, cigarettes are the worst, I think. And they've already been outlawed, I'm pretty sure. Then vapes, then alcohol, then fast food. So I think to say fast food should be banned. I think first we should discuss whether alcohol or vapes first, and then work our way down the priority.”

18, Male, White, England

Several participants expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of regulations, noting that they still encounter adverts despite current rules in place. This prompted doubt about whether more stringent measures would make any difference. For many, the impact rules can have was questioned because it was seen as easy to lie about your age on social media apps.

For vaping, HFSS products and alcohol, consumption was seen as normalised in the real world and participants found it hard to imagine online restrictions having a significant impact on behaviour. This was especially true for vaping, but also for HFSS products and alcohol, where marketing is encountered elsewhere, such as on billboards, TV and via point-of-sale.

“

I mean, it's a bit funny because obviously I still see that [HFSS foods/drinks marketing]. I feel like they have rules, but they don't really put them in place, to be honest.”

13, Female, Mixed Ethnicity, England

“

I don't see the point. Because, like, you actually drive down the road and there's, like, billboards with McDonald's and, like, fast food stuff. So what's the difference in seeing it on a billboard and seeing it on social media? There's absolutely no difference.”

20, Male, White, Scotland

Young people appeared to give influencers significant leniency regarding the promotion of HFSS products, citing the autonomy of young people to make choices about consuming in moderation, and the relatively lower risks associated with HFSS products compared to other products.

“

With unhealthy food, I think it's fine because there's nothing wrong with, like, promoting unhealthy food. It's just because the viewers will know if they eat too much. It's unhealthy, but in moderation, it'll all be fine.”

13, Male, White, Northern Ireland



Many also felt that businesses needed the space to promote their products and, for HFSS products in particular, people should be exposed to a variety of foods. Some articulated a strong sense of personal responsibility, where it was seen as down to the individual to control their own consumption. Many also believed they weren't influenced by any marketing that they did see.

“

I think for, like, vapes and alcohol, probably not. But, like, fast food, like, at the end of the day, it's still like a business. Like, you know, people... It's people's choices to eat it in moderation or eat it every day. They still need to promote it and make money.”

20, Male, White, Scotland

“

I think it is OK, because at the end of the day, a restaurant is going to promote its things. It's their business. I think it's more when it becomes unhealthy for someone if someone's having it all the time if that's someone else's choice to always have it. So I don't think it's a bad thing because at the end of the day, business is going to promote that business.”

20, Female, South Asian, England

“

Yeah I feel like you can't ban these [HFSS foods/drinks marketing]. I feel like you don't really have the right to just ban stuff like this from social media.”

16, Female, Black, Scotland

Views on enforcement of new measures

During the qualitative study, views on enforcement were explored in more detail and young people had a strong sense of who they think should be responsible for making sure content is regulated effectively.

Governments

Young people saw governments as the overarching source of authority which 'makes the rules'. They believed that having a law in place sends a clear message about whether something is right or wrong. Many believed governments should better enforce the regulations – for example, by mandating social media platforms to uphold age restrictions.

“

If the government says 'oh Instagram or so-and-so you need to stop showing or promoting et cetera' then yeah, they have to.”

15, Male, Black, England

Social media platforms

Young people believed social media platforms should be responsible for enforcing the rules, such as removing adverts for harmful products, as they control the content that appears in users' feeds. However, there was awareness that this doesn't always happen and algorithms on social media platforms don't always filter out content effectively.

“

Social media apps... They should make sure that promotional content they are putting out is suitable for the age group using it.”

11, Female, South Asian, England

“

It's their app that is in control of what's popular and what's not... If they had restrictions or they'd ban certain keywords or whatever, that would change what is seen on or what is demonstrated to young people.”

15, Male, Black, England

Parents

Parents were believed to have a significant influence on young people's exposure to content. As the supposed gatekeeper to the content children see, it was felt that parents should be monitoring and restricting their children's social media usage to limit exposure to harmful content.

“

The parents should be responsible for it because if they don't want their child seeing things like that then they should make it so their child isn't able to.”

16, Female, Black, Scotland

“

Parents... like it's kind of self-explanatory... You should be monitoring what your child is doing on social media.”

14, Female, Black, England

Influencers and content creators

Young people were divided on the perceived role of influencers and content creators in ensuring young people don't see harmful content on social media. Some felt that influencers and content creators have a responsibility not to promote or encourage harmful products through their content. Others felt indifferently, often due to having limited exposure to these products and therefore not perceiving it as a problem, having a personal disinterest in the products or believing the responsibility lies elsewhere, such as with parents or social media platforms. Some participants had conditional acceptance based on age. For example, if influencers indicate the age of their target market before posting content, viewers can decide if it's suitable for them.

“

If it's an influencer that has content tailored to children, then all of a sudden, they get a brand deal for alcohol, they shouldn't promote that on their page, knowing that there's children that follow them.”

16, Female, Black, Scotland

Businesses and brands

Young people were generally pro-business and sympathised with their commercial goals. They were opposed to making business accounts private as this was seen to potentially hinder the ability of businesses to reach new audiences and promote their products effectively. It was felt to be particularly damaging for small businesses. Participants also felt that keeping business accounts set as 'public' was a benefit, as it allows users to see a variety of content rather than being restricted to familiar brands. In contrast, the feelings of the survey respondents were more mixed or in favour of private accounts.

“

I think if the ads aren't targeted at young people, people still see them, that's not really the brand's fault.”

17, Male, White, England

Individual users

Some young people emphasised individual accountability for the content they see and its impact on them. This was because they believed they can influence what they see by:

- sharing their date of birth with the social media platform on sign-up, making it less likely for them to be exposed to unsuitable content
- not engaging with the sort of content they don't want to see and reporting it (with the expectation that the algorithm will tailor their feed accordingly)
- ignoring any unwanted content that does slip through the net to avoid its influencing effect

“

It depends if you're searching it up – it's gonna come on your 'For you' page on your TikTok, like, more often. So it's kind of your fault for typing it up.”

14, Male, White, England

“

I think everyone's got a role to play... If I don't like a certain advert, like I'm trying to get healthy and I don't want to see fast food, I can press 'not interested' on it so it will stop showing me the kind of stuff.”

17, Male, White, England

“

I think you can press, like, report and, like, why this advert and stuff like this are, like, reasons why you don't want to see it.”

14, Male, White, England

However, young people also felt that it should not be entirely their responsibility.

“

It's not a 13-year-old's responsibility to know what to not see on social media.”

17, Female, White, England

Discussion

Exposure and engagement with marketing

This study found that young people have different ways of seeing and engaging with marketing and content related to cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol on social media.

Marketing relating to HFSS products was the most noticed and interacted with, while far fewer reported seeing, or engaging with, marketing relating to alcohol, vapes and cigarettes, with cigarettes being the least seen and engaged with. The focus group findings suggest that these differences in exposure and engagement between the products could be due to levels of personal interest and the wider role that these products play in people's lives.

This study also found that young people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background reported seeing more posts related to cigarettes, HFSS products and alcohol on social media compared to people who identified as White, and they engaged more with posts relating to vapes and HFSS products.

The increased exposure to posts relating to alcohol among people who identified as being from an ethnic minority background may relate to sociocultural contexts, where alcohol consumption and related discussions might be more or less normalised in certain communities [36] and therefore appear or be noticed more in a social media feed.

Similarly, young people in IMD 1-2 reported seeing more posts relating to cigarettes by businesses and influencers compared to IMD 3-5, but engagement by young people in IMD 1-2 was only reported higher for vapes, HFSS products and alcohol. With research suggesting that IMD is a contributing factor to engaging with all of these products [9] [10] [11], this points to a need for further research to explore the underlying factors contributing to these differences.

Cigarettes

The survey indicated that some young people reported seeing and engaging with posts relating to cigarettes by businesses or influencers. In the focus groups, participants said they rarely, if ever, saw or engaged with posts relating to cigarettes on social media and also had negative views of cigarettes, particularly because of the health risks. The deeper discussions in the focus groups about how young people define marketing, businesses and influencers likely led to more accurate responses, as young people may find it difficult to identify marketing versus incidental featuring of products. These discussions helped participants think more carefully and avoid mentioning content that didn't fit our survey definitions, especially given the tight regulations around cigarette marketing.

HFSS products

HFSS products received the most exposure and engagement among young people, with 52% of participants in the survey stating they had seen posts by businesses and influencers in the past month. Similarly, in the qualitative study all participants were able to recognise HFSS brands and discuss content they had previously seen online.

Entertainment-style content, such as eating challenges and recipe videos, formed a large part of the HFSS posts discussed. They were actively sought out and seen as enjoyable, and young people spoke positively of, and actively welcomed, marketing as a way to show them new products to try. This level of enthusiastic engagement and positive opinion was not seen for other products and suggests a level of normalisation and cultural approval that creates a unique connection with young people. Indeed, a previous Cancer Research UK survey showed that young people (aged 11 to 19) reacted positively when shown HFSS food adverts, including positive perceptions of the brand appeal and temptation to try the product [40].

It's clear from both the survey and qualitative study that HFSS products are enjoyed by many young people and the experience of them is often shared with friends and family. Many of the HFSS brands identified in this

Vapes

In the survey, more than 25% of young people reported seeing posts relating to vapes by businesses and influencers. This aligns with recent findings from the ASH Smokefree GB Youth Survey, which showed that 29% of young people aged 11 to 17 were aware of online vape promotions [37].

The qualitative study revealed some exposure and awareness, with participants sharing entertaining vaping content, such as meme-style videos, which were likely more user-generated content than explicit marketing. With regulations on vaping adverts expected to align more closely with regulations for cigarettes following the passing of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill [38], it's expected that awareness levels will not significantly grow.

research form part of young people's social lives, in terms of what they discuss with friends and their social activities. In some cases, for example with McDonald's and Wingstop, they also provide physical spaces (restaurants) for socialising. This may help explain why HFSS brand recognition is so high, but also suggests that HFSS product experiences, and the brands behind them, play an important part in young people's social relationships. In fact, 'brand love' has been adopted by numerous market research firms as the concept of consumers being more favourable towards brands that are meaningful to them, with key aspects including the ability to facilitate connections with other people [41].

New regulations banning paid-for promotions of HFSS products online are due to come into force in January 2026, although pure brand advertising no longer falls within the scope [42]. Therefore any changes in impact should be monitored.

Alcohol

In the survey and the study, there were higher reports of exposure to, and engagement with, posts relating to alcohol compared to cigarettes and vapes, with the most reported by people over the age of 18. This is similar to recent findings from New Zealand, which showed that 70% of young people aged 14 to 20 reported seeing alcohol marketing online and 41% of those people had engaged in at least one way, with older participants (18 to 20-years-old) being more likely to report and engage with posts [39].

In the study, content from participants' social media feeds showed that young people reported seeing branded content and sponsorships that were explicit forms of business marketing, which were not seen for cigarettes or vapes, alongside more entertaining and meme-style posts that may have been user-generated.

There were several mentions of promotional content relating to alcohol in the social media feeds of participants under the age of 18, but the alcohol featured tended to be secondary to the main business of the account – for

example, a food restaurant promoting its business through cocktails or a theme park promoting a beer brand. This would appear to be because the promoting account isn't subject to the same age restrictions, despite the content featuring a product that is age-restricted. And this suggests that social media regulations are not doing enough to ensure social media platforms take action to label or filter out age-inappropriate content where the promoting account is not primarily directed towards the sale of alcohol.

In the qualitative study, while most young people said posts relating to alcohol didn't motivate them to drink, some participants who reported regularly drinking alcohol did admit that seeing these posts made them want to drink.

Policy views

When discussing policy, several young people expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of regulations, noting that they still encounter marketing – both online and offline – regardless of current rules in place. This was despite many also stating that they believed the algorithms on social media platforms were there to keep young people safe from content they shouldn't see.

In the qualitative study, it was clear that many participants hadn't strongly considered the topic of regulation in relation to social media, but when prompted there was a clear pattern, with restrictions on marketing for HFSS products least favoured, despite being the most prevalent in terms of content. Many agreed with stronger regulations on marketing for alcohol and opinions were strongest for restricting marketing for vapes.

Despite assumptions that adolescents can resist and critically evaluate advertising, a recent meta-analysis suggests their critical reasoning abilities are not fully developed, making them vulnerable to advertising [11]. The meta-analysis also found that young people's understanding of advertising intent is lower for digital formats compared to non-digital ones, especially when children are more engaged – for example, advergames or online adverts. The qualitative study suggests that reducing exposure to advertising is more effective than improving understanding through disclosures or media literacy training, and policymakers should ensure regulations to restrict marketing of unhealthy products to protect adolescents as well as younger children.

Perceptions of harm

During the qualitative study, it appeared that young people's views on product regulations often stemmed from their perceptions of how harmful the product is, as well as the relatability and entertainment that the content can provide. For this reason, further restrictions on marketing for alcohol were seen as less necessary than for vapes, despite alcohol being an established cancer risk. Vapes were seen as more harmful than alcohol due to misperceptions of associated health risks and alcohol content being more entertaining. Although alcohol was known to be unhealthy, views from participants were not heavily negative despite the known harms. These findings are also reflected in a recent NHS survey where 49% of 15-year-olds and 35% of 14-year-olds thought it was OK for people their age to drink alcohol once a week [43].

In contrast, many more participants held strong negative views on smoking and vaping because they were both seen to be harmful and addictive. Indeed, research into young people's harm perceptions of vapes shows that 58% of people aged 11 to 17 in the UK wrongly believe that vaping is as harmful

or more harmful than smoking, including 46% of people who have tried vaping [3].

With young people strongly agreeing with restrictions on cigarettes and the lack of reported content relating to cigarettes seen during the qualitative study, it's likely that the statutory law restricting cigarette marketing is effective, which was reflected by participants' discussions. In contrast, the self-regulatory standards for vapes, HFSS products and alcohol are less effective, given the higher reporting of content relating to these products in the survey and study.

The perceived ineffectiveness of current regulations, alongside continuous pervasive marketing offline, leads to a lack of confidence from young people that the introduction of further self-regulatory restrictions on social media could make a difference. These findings highlight the need for further research into how different types of regulatory frameworks online could work in tandem with offline regulation, and their combined impact on young people's exposure to, and engagement with, harmful product marketing.

Study limitations

This study is not without its limitations. The reliance on self-reported data in both the survey and the qualitative study introduced the potential of recall bias, particularly when recalling marketing on social media.

These studies specifically focused on awareness – that is, recall of content and marketing that young people remember rather than exposure in general. It's possible that young people were served more marketing than they can recall, or less if their recall was inaccurate or they misidentified products – for example, by considering all food products regardless of whether they were HFSS or not.

In contrast, the qualitative study allowed participants to become more aware over time as tasks were spread across multiple days. This extended engagement may have enabled participants to better recall and discuss these topics during the focus groups. Indeed, the initial task of the qualitative study, which involved a young person screen recording their social media feeds, revealed marketing content that they didn't explicitly notice or report. However, during the focus groups, participants were able to draw on their experiences and thoughts from the online tasks to discuss their experiences more thoroughly.

What's more, the survey was unable to go into detail about the content young people were reporting and it's possible that some of it was user-generated rather than posted for marketing purposes. The qualitative study allowed young people to provide examples, and while many instances were examples of marketing, some content was user-generated that wouldn't fall into the scope of marketing restrictions. This distinction becomes difficult to decipher where influencer content can be seen as more similar to user-generated content than advertising, particularly where marketing intent is not overtly disclosed.

While the qualitative study is valuable, the insights provided are based on a sample of 43 participants. This limits the generalisability to the wider population and may not capture the full diversity of experiences and perspectives of young people in the UK. Also, the qualitative study wasn't conducted in tandem with the survey, resulting in a different

sample for each study. Being unable to compare the quantitative and the qualitative data on an individual level removes a level of insight that would otherwise be useful.

For ethical reasons, the researchers were only able to share examples of marketing in the focus groups for age-restricted products that were already present on young people's feeds. Therefore, the qualitative study might not have captured all the marketing content that participants are exposed to, possibly removing other relevant examples that could have generated discussion. It also wasn't possible for the research team to establish if the age-related information young people had entered when signing up to a social media platform was accurate and correct. This means the research team couldn't be certain that the media feeds were showing content appropriate for their actual age, rather than their sign-up age.



While participants in the qualitative study could speak about certain content or marketing online enticing them to, for example, order unhealthy food and drink, we can't establish causality from the quantitative results. For instance, people who have vaped before reported seeing more content relating to vapes online. However, it's unclear whether exposure to vaping content led to increased vaping behaviour, or if their vaping behaviour resulted in greater exposure to vape content online.

Finally, social media platforms are ever-evolving and change rapidly as new trends emerge. Content creators and influencers are a relatively new concept and marketing strategies online are constantly changing as algorithms become more powerful and

the engagement and attention patterns of users shift. The results in this qualitative study reflect the social media trends present at the time the data was collected, but continuous research is needed to monitor changes in marketing practices – especially as new laws and regulations come into place, such as the Tobacco and Vapes Bill [31].

For example, Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, stated in January 2025 that it will be removing automatic systems to scan for 'less severe' policy violations and relying instead on user reports before taking any actions [44]. As social media platforms continue to change, the impacts will need to be investigated.

Conclusion

Both the quantitative survey and qualitative study highlight the complex and varied ways that young people see and engage with marketing of cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol on social media. For most young people, content relating to HFSS products was the most prevalent in their online experiences and welcomed for its entertainment value, contrasting sharply to the negative perceptions and lower engagement with content relating to cigarettes. While content relating to vapes and alcohol featured in young people's social media feeds, there was far less content compared to content relating to HFSS products, and awareness of it, and engagement with it, was often related to age and personal consumption.

Young people's beliefs in the effectiveness of current and potential future regulations were mixed, with uncertainty about the impact of restrictions focusing solely on social media

given the amount of offline marketing they encounter for these products. Many young people prioritised restrictions based on perceived harm, showing less support for further HFSS food restrictions compared to other products, and less support for further restrictions on alcohol compared to vapes. These findings suggest the need for further research, monitoring and correcting of harm misperceptions, as well as robust online and offline regulatory frameworks to better protect young people from harmful product marketing. Future research should also continue to monitor the evolving landscape of social media marketing and its impact on young people as new rules come into effect, alongside direct causal effects of social media marketing on the consumption of unhealthy products.

Policy implications

Cancer Research UK believes that this report and its policy recommendations can be used by policymakers, including the UK Government, and enforcement agencies, such as the ASA and Ofcom, to understand where more enforcement and regulations are needed to help reduce online exposure to, and engagement with, age-restricted products, specifically cigarettes, vapes, HFSS products and alcohol.

To this end, Cancer Research UK has identified actions to support a whole-system approach to the regulation of online marketing for age-restricted products, alongside some additional product-specific recommendations. Given user-generated content cannot and should not be restricted, the considerations below apply to paid-for content only.



System-wide enforcement considerations

Cancer Research UK acknowledges that the enforcement of online regulation faces different and, in some respects, more difficult challenges to other media platforms. The nature of social media means that algorithms are constantly adapting, while young people can lie about their age online (without ID-verification needed) and can share content easily with multiple people.

However, ASA guidance on online marketing for age-restricted products makes it clear that “advertisers have the ultimate responsibility” for ensuring appropriate targeting and placement of adverts, and cautions use of online environments and ad-tech partners that don’t offer the appropriate provisions to support responsible age-based targeting [45]. This means that, ultimately, despite an ever-changing online landscape, the responsibility falls on the advertisers to prove they’ve taken

measures to ensure young people are not exposed to age-restricted product marketing.

The promise of proactive monitoring of social media by enforcement agencies, such as measures and commitments set out in ASA’s AI-Assisted Collective Ad Regulation 2024–2028 strategy, is a positive step towards reducing the online visibility of, and engagement with, age-restricted products [46]. Even with artificial intelligence increasing efficiency, monitoring and enforcement efforts must be accompanied by sufficient resource and capacity to ensure flagged cases are appropriately handled, and enforcement agencies must be transparent about how often proactive monitoring is used. Sanctions must also sufficiently disincentivise non-compliance, harnessing legal backstops, such as Trading Standards and Ofcom, to prevent repeat offenders.

Harm misperception considerations

Young people's engagement with age-restricted products isn't completely determined by the regulatory landscape, but also by their perception of the products. This report sheds light on such perceptions, including harm misperceptions surrounding products and regulations. Generally, young people hold accurate harm perceptions of tobacco, demonstrated by an unwillingness to engage with content relating to tobacco and support for regulations on tobacco marketing. Perceptions of alcohol were similar: while drinking alcohol in excess was (accurately) seen as unhealthy, there was some, though limited, engagement with content relating to alcohol.

However, other products, namely vapes, were more inaccurate. Young people viewed HFSS products as less harmful than the other

products included in the survey despite the health risks associated with overconsumption. Vaping is seen by young people to be riskier and more harmful than alcohol, which is not in line with current evidence, and they support tougher regulations on vaping products [47]. These findings indicate that more government action is needed to ensure accurate information is communicated about vaping products to help them make informed decisions about engagement with, and consumption of, these products. Also, any messaging delivered to young people may also reach their adult family members who may smoke, potentially deterring them from stopping smoking by using a vape.

Product-specific policy considerations

Tobacco

Regulatory context

Tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship have been banned in the UK since 2002, and the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control requires parties to implement and enforce a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising. The laws surrounding tobacco promotion and advertising prevent almost any visibility online. The laws surrounding tobacco promotion and advertising prevent almost any visibility online. They may also reach their adult family members who may smoke, potentially deterring them from stopping smoking by using a vape.

Areas of regulatory interest

This report suggests that the existing legislation has been relatively effective in reducing the

visibility of tobacco products online. However, around 20% of young people who used social media reported seeing a post by businesses about cigarettes on social media in the past month. Given that there were differences between the visibility of tobacco products in the survey and qualitative study, it's not completely clear whether they're seeing adverts or content that features smoking.

Policy considerations

Even though there are regulations in place, more stringent enforcement is required to prevent both young people and adults from seeing tobacco products online.

Vapes

Regulatory context

The Tobacco and Related Products Regulations (TRPR) sets rules on how vapes can be advertised and marketed in specific media channels. Subsequently, the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) Code sets out further advertising regulations in CAP Code Rule 22.

According to these regulations, marketing for nicotine-containing products, including vapes, is prohibited, unless they are licensed as medicines – which none currently are. This means the marketing of vaping products online is banned. Current ASA guidance also stipulates that the social media accounts of vape businesses should be private, with information only visible to people who specifically seek it out.

Areas of regulatory interest

This report suggests that some of these regulations, including the requirement for vape businesses to have private accounts, are not widely known and/or are not being followed by content creators and businesses. Although this report didn't ask participants whether they followed vape accounts (private or otherwise), the findings indicate that some young people (around 25%) are seeing posts from vape businesses and are engaging with this content.

There was strong support from young people that vaping policy should be more stringent – not just enforcing that vape businesses should have private accounts, but that if those accounts can't be made private, businesses shouldn't be allowed an account at all. There was also support for stricter age verification online.

The high level of support for these policy options may be partially explained by misperceptions held by young people about the relative risk of vaping compared to other products. The report quotes research that shows 58% of young people (aged 11 to 17) incorrectly believe that vaping is as or more harmful than smoking, which has concerning implications. If young people consider legal vapes to be as harmful or similarly harmful as tobacco, switching from a vape to a cigarette may seem like less of a risk, either

now or in the future. There is also a risk that they could communicate this misinformation to adult family members who smoke (and want to quit), potentially deterring them from stopping smoking by using a vape.

The ASA advises social media accounts to show accurate information relating to vapes for people who actively seek it. Findings within this qualitative study suggest that young people don't report seeing any messaging about the legal age of sale of vapes, or the fact they are a tobacco cessation tool, which suggests that even if companies are not necessarily posting misinformation, they're not telling the whole story with comprehensive, accurate information.

Policy considerations

At present, it appears ASA guidance is not clear enough and enforcement of the legislation isn't sufficient.

If it's implemented, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill will ban the advertising, sponsorship and promotion of vapes and remove any ambiguity around regulations. It would be an offence to publish an advert online, whether factual or not, and non-nicotine vaping products will be regulated in the same way as nicotine products. Tobacco products, nicotine products and non-nicotine vaping products will all be subject to the same regulations. Providing that the legislation is effectively enforced and that the new regulations are made clear to businesses, this could make advertising rules easier to understand for content creators and influencers, and easier to enforce for the ASA and Trading Standards.

Given misperceptions on the relative harms of vapes compared to tobacco, it's important to consider how to ensure young people have accurate information and perceptions of vaping products. It's crucial they understand that legal vapes are not risk-free, but that current evidence shows they are far less harmful than tobacco. This should include communication about the legal age of sale and the fact that vapes should not be used by young people or people who have never smoked.

HFSS products

Regulatory context

In 2017, the CAP Code was revised to prevent adverts for HFSS products from appearing in media directed at people under the age of 16, and also restrict advertising where more than 25% of the audience is under the age of 16.

Schedule 18 of the Health and Care Act 2022 amended the Communications Act 2003 to introduce additional restrictions on advertising for HFSS products. Coming into formal effect from 5 January 2026, and voluntarily adopted by some advertisers from October 2025, these restrictions will prohibit paid-for online adverts for HFSS products at any time.

There had been some debate over how much the ASA would take into account the wider context of an advert – such as public perceptions of the brand – when evaluating complaints under the new HFSS advertising rules. However, the UK Government has since clarified that assessment should focus on the specific ‘identifiable’ products within the advert.

Areas of regulatory interest

Given that the majority of social media platforms are not child-specific (although some have versions for children), and so are not in scope of existing restrictions, it’s unsurprising that over 50% of young people reported seeing posts relating to HFSS products from both businesses and influencers in the past month. This emphasises the need for the stronger, incoming regulations.

While young people showed a preference for stricter regulations on marketing for vapes and alcohol, they expressed mixed opinions towards further enforcement of restrictions for HFSS products. In part, this was because young people enjoyed engaging with content relating to HFSS products. However, the report also suggests that young people have misperceptions about the impacts of HFSS products, viewing them as less harmful than the other products included in the survey despite the health risks associated with overconsumption, and therefore a lower priority product to restrict.

Policy considerations

The responses appear to reflect an individualised understanding of choice-making, with young people being lenient towards HFSS product marketing due to the belief that consumption is governed by individual self-control and personal responsibility. Not only could these opinions perpetuate stigmatising beliefs around overweight and obesity, but they also imply limited knowledge about the commercial and wider determinants of health that could leave young people more susceptible to marketing.

Ensuring health risks are adequately communicated and addressing the misperceptions around wider determinants of health is therefore crucial for ensuring young people can make more informed decisions about the content they consume online and their subsequent offline behaviour.

Furthermore, the disconnect between the online and offline regulatory landscape limits the perceived effectiveness of restrictions on online advertising. The report highlights how young people express scepticism around the effectiveness of further online advertising restrictions due to their continued encounter with HFSS marketing offline in their daily life, such as on billboards. Measures to tackle offline marketing, such as introducing the promised restrictions on price promotions, and exploring options to restrict outdoor advertising, would lead to greater regulatory alignment across digital and real-world marketing and ensure stronger protections against the influence of promotions and advertising.

| Alcohol

Regulatory context

Under CAP Code 18, adverts for alcoholic drinks must not be targeted at people under the age of 18; condone excessive, irresponsible or anti-social behaviour; or feature people drinking who could be perceived to be under the age of 25. Where advertisers interact with user-generated content, such as by resharing photos from an event, CAP Code 18 is also in effect.

Low/no alcohol drinks (0.5% to 1.2% ABV) were not addressed in this report, but it's worth noting that alcohol alternatives have slightly different guidelines, meaning there are instances where these products can be advertised while alcohol products can't, leading to potential alibi marketing given some low/no alcohol products can look very similar to their alcohol counterparts.

Areas of regulatory interest

Despite existing restrictions, young people continue to be exposed to marketing content relating to alcohol. In the survey, over 30% of young people reported seeing posts relating to alcohol by businesses and influencers in the past month. Both exposure and engagement were higher for people who had drunk previously and people who were over the age of 18, but alcohol content was visible to young people of all ages, suggesting existing restrictions are not being sufficiently enforced. Specific regulatory compliance challenges were identified in this report, such as collaborations between alcohol and non-alcohol brands where algorithms don't identify an alcohol advert correctly, leading to these adverts being visible to people under the age of 18.

Policy considerations

Young people were broadly supportive of measures to restrict alcohol marketing, including influencer marketing, and showed better awareness of alcohol health harms compared to other products. However, as young people continue to be exposed to the content, sustained proactive monitoring of social media sites is required. It's also important that alcohol health risks are accurately communicated to address remaining misperceptions and ensure young people are informed.

Similarly to HFSS products, the report also highlighted how the prevalence of alcohol marketing offline reduced the perceived effectiveness of online regulations. This is particularly challenging given the complex regulatory landscape for alcohol, where the fragmentation between online and offline regulatory bodies means that no single regulator sees the complete picture.

Appendices

Appendix A

Survey development details

First, the research team held a roundtable meeting with academic and third-sector experts working across tobacco, vapes, HFSS products (known as 'unhealthy food and drink' in the survey) and alcohol. Alongside this, the team reviewed questions previously used in surveys commissioned by Cancer Research UK, including the Youth Tobacco Policy Survey, Youth Alcohol Policy Survey and Youth Obesity Policy Survey, which related to consumption and purchasing. These were included within the current survey as validated measures for these constructs.

The final draft of the survey underwent cognitive testing interviews with 11 to 15-year-olds ($n = 4$) and 16 to 21-year-olds ($n = 6$). This involved asking respondents to complete 10 questions in the survey chosen by the research team while on the phone or a video call with a qualitative interviewer. The questions chosen were novel (not used

in previous surveys) and covered the different topic areas of the survey. Respondents talked through the questions and answer options, explaining what they thought they were being asked. The interviewer also probed participants on their understanding and comfort, including thoughts on the language used, question length, comprehension and overall experience.

Following the cognitive testing, the survey underwent a pilot test whereby the full survey was completed by 11 to 15-year-olds ($n = 59$) and 16 to 21-year-olds ($n = 58$). The pilot provided data related to the time taken to complete the survey, successful survey routing, rates of non-responses (e.g. 'Don't know' or 'Other') and distribution of responses across all questions.

Following final changes based on the pilot and cognitive interview data, the survey was launched online in January 2024 and recruited for one month.

Appendix B

Expert by experience advisory group

For the qualitative study, the research team formed an expert advisory group to provide feedback on the research approach and help refine the language and tasks used. They recruited six participants, divided into two groups of three friends. The groups included boys aged 12 to 14 and girls aged 18 to 19.

They held two online group conversations using Zoom. Each session lasted 60 minutes and was facilitated by two researchers: a lead moderator guiding the discussion and a co-moderator taking notes and providing support.

The discussions aimed to gather feedback from young people on the research approach. Before the sessions, participants were given shorter versions of the online tasks and discussion guides to review in advance.

For completing the expert advisory group tasks, participants received £50.

Appendix C

Expert advisory group discussion guide

Summary of flow

1. Introductions (10 minutes)
2. Feedback on overall approach (10 minutes)
3. Feedback on the research materials (30 minutes)
4. Principles for researching with young people (5 minutes)
5. Final thoughts (5 minutes)

1. Introductions (10 minutes)

Objective of this section: Set ground rules, establish rapport, recap on purpose of session

About the research:

- We are Humankind Research – an impartial research agency that works with lots of different organisations on a whole range of topics.
- We are working with Cancer Research UK on the research study you have been invited to take part in! The research is about the marketing you see on social media and food delivery apps and how you feel about it.
- Social media marketing is when companies use social media platforms (like Instagram and TikTok) to promote products and services. This may be an advert aimed at selling a product (advertisement), but could also be less obvious like having influencers use and review products, products being part of a competition, or products being in the background of other content (marketing)
- We will be speaking to 48 young people, aged 11-21, from across the UK to explore this. We'll be looking at things like:
 - What types of marketing or advertising do young people see on social media for tobacco, e-cigarettes, unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol?
 - How does this affect young people and what they think about these products?

- What do young people think about the advertising and marketing of these products on social media, and do they think anything should be done about it?

- The information we gather will then be shared with our colleagues at Cancer Research UK, and they will use it to help inform government policy on what sort of social media advertising and marketing is allowed for young people

Their role today:

- We've invited you here today to help us make sure we speak to young people in the right way – to make sure that the research is easy to understand, interesting and enjoyable
- We're going to look at our plan for the research (which we've already shared with you) and some of the questions we'll be asking. We'd like to hear your thoughts on all of this and any improvements you think we can make
- We will use your advice to shape our final approach and research materials

Ground rules:

- All just opinion and ideas – everything you can contribute is of value
- No pressure: just contribute what you're comfortable with

- You can stop taking part at any time; either for a break, or leaving the session – it won't affect your payment for taking part
- Feel free to turn your camera off or to change or hide names on Zoom

Questions and consent:

- Do you have any questions?
- Are you happy to continue with the process based on everything I have just explained?
- All use of what you have to say will be strictly anonymous, and only shared between us and Cancer Research UK, never further
- Recording: are you happy for us to record? The recording will be: stored securely, shared only with the project team, used only for the purposes of this project and its wider learnings, and deleted after 6 months.

Participant intros:

- Please introduce yourselves one by one – name, age, your pronouns, how you spend your free time, a highlight from the last week (Moderator to add these points to the chat for reference)
- How do you all know each other?
- Tell us one fun fact about one of your friends here today!

2. Feedback on overall approach (10 minutes)

Objective of this section: Understand how the overall approach feels and identify any areas of confusion or concern

Explaining the approach:

- We've planned two parts to the research
- In the first part, we'd ask our 48 participants (16 groups of 3 friends) to use a mobile app called Field Notes for 5 days, including over the weekend
- All participants will be sent a link to the Field Notes app to use on their smartphones.

Each day we will set them a few tasks which will take 15-20 minutes to complete

- In the second part, we will invite the same young people to 1hr group discussions, with 3 friends in each group (just like you!). These can be over Zoom or in person – whichever they prefer
- In the group discussions, we'll explore the topics we've covered on Field Notes in more detail
- Those aged 16 and over will participate by themselves; under 16s may have their parents on hand to help them

Questions on the approach:

- How clear is the process?
- Does it make sense?
- How would you feel about taking part in a process like this?
- What questions would you have?
- Would you have any concerns?
- What could we do to make it the best possible experience for you?
- Probe on:
 - Length of time for interview
 - Using the Field Notes app
 - Zoom vs phone vs in person
- How might people a little younger than you feel?
- How might people a little older than you feel?

3. Feedback on the research materials (30 minutes)

Objective of this section: Understand how the research materials feel, identify any areas of confusion, concern, and any improvements

Here we will run through a shortened version of (i) the Field Notes tasks (self-ethnographies) – **20m** and (ii) the group discussion guide – **10m**, giving a sense of overall structure, topic flow and key questions in each section to give

a feel for the types of questions we will ask and how we will ask them. If practical, we can screenshare so they can see the questions written out; or can just talk them through it and read questions out.

Throughout we will be exploring their feelings on:

- The topics explored
- The language used
- The style of questions and how they prefer to be asked things (e.g. direct/closed vs open)
- How easy would they find these questions to answer
- The format of the stimulus, and how helpful it is
- Any aspects that they are less comfortable with or would change
- Any other ways that they can think of to ask these questions or to prompt discussion
- How engaging / enjoyable they would find the tasks / questions
- Any areas where they might lose interest or motivation
- How easy would it be for them to be completely honest about the things we're asking them? Any ways to encourage deeper honesty

4. Principles for researching with young people (5 minutes)

Objective of this section: Identify key principles for successful research with young people

We've gathered so much useful feedback from you on how we conduct this research. It would be great to summarise the main things we've learnt from everything we've talked about.

- What do you think are the most important lessons we can take from today – your DO's and DON'Ts for making the research process a positive experience?

DO's...

DON'Ts...

Probe if necessary, e.g. DO use clear and simple language; DON'T talk down to us

5. Final thoughts (5 minutes)

- How well do you think this process will work overall?
- What do you think the challenges might be?
- How have you found today's session?
- Any final questions or comments you'd like to add?

Thank and close.

Appendix D

Focus groups sampling and recruitment

For the self-ethnography and focus group study, the sample was recruited with the following criteria:

- 11 to 21-year-old age range
- as representative as possible of age, gender, socioeconomic status and all four UK nations
- usage of a variety of social media platforms and food delivery apps

Participants were recruited to the qualitative study by Criteria, a field agency that specialises in recruiting young people. Participants aged 11 to 15 were recruited via the child's parent/caregiver. For people aged 16 and over, while parental/caregiver consent is not required, recruitment was done on a per-case basis by the participant as to whether they preferred parent/caregiver involvement or consent as well as themselves.

Participants for this qualitative study were first identified through light 'pre-screening', using short surveys to filter participants down to people who were eligible based on the criteria outlined. Full screening was conducted via telephone, allowing recruiters to probe fully to ensure full understanding.

All potential participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form notice which outlined details of the research, including what participation would entail and that participation was entirely voluntary and any published findings would not include identifiable information about the participants.

Researchers recruited 48 participants for the first stage of the research (online self-ethnographies). The sample comprised 16 groups of three friends spread across age. Of the 48 participants, 46 completed this stage, with two dropping out after recruitment. Breakdowns of the sample characteristics and quotas achieved are given in tables 8 below.

Of the 46 participants who completed the self-ethnographies, 43 went on to complete the focus groups. Three participants dropped out of the process during this phase and did not complete the project.

Table 8: Breakdown of qualitative quotas achieved

Characteristic	Quota expected	Quota achieved
Gender	As representative as possible	56% female, 44% male
Ethnicity	Minimum 25% ethnic minority With 2 of each background (Mixed; Black or African or Caribbean or Black British; Asian or Asian British; Other non-White)	50% ethnic minority
Nation	As representative as possible	14% Northern Ireland, 14% Wales, 14% Scotland, 58% England
Socioeconomic status*	As representative as possible	39% AB, 47% C1, 14% C2DE

*Measured using the standardised description provided by the Market Research Society Social Grade. Available from: <https://www.mrs.org.uk/resources/social-grade>

Appendix E

Online tasks (self-ethnography)

Task overview

Day	Task
1	Welcome message A. Getting to know you B. Your social media
2	A. Logos you know B. Likes / Faves / Follows / Comments
3	A. Food delivery B. Pros and cons
4	A. Cigarettes, vapes and alcohol B. Recently bought...
5	A. Food and drink B. Recently bought... C. Wrap up

Day 1: Welcome!

Internal-facing objective: welcome message explaining what we'd like them to do for the next 5 days.

Hello! Thank you so much for taking part in this research, we really appreciate your time and thoughts.

We are Humankind Research – an impartial research agency that works with lots of different organisations on a whole range of topics. We are working with **Cancer Research UK** on the research study you have been invited to take part in! The research is about the marketing you see on social media and food delivery apps and how you feel about it.

Over the next 5 days, we will be asking you some questions that will help us to get to know you a little bit before the conversations we have with you and your friends over Zoom.

As a young person, you are the expert! We're really interested in what you

have to say, so please do enjoy and immerse yourselves in the tasks.

Thank you again for your time. If you have any questions about this research or need any help with the Field Notes App, please contact [email address].

[For participants under 16, if and where you do need help, you can ask your parent(s)/caregiver(s)/guardian(s), but please make sure you answer honestly and truthfully]

You will all have seen the information sheet, but please see a reminder of the helpful information before you begin the tasks:

- **How to answer tasks:** Some tasks tell you how we would prefer you to answer them, e.g. via video, writing, voice recording or images.
- **Keeping up with tasks:** Please do your best to keep up with the daily tasks. We have designed the tasks so that they should take no longer than 20 minutes per day.

- **Confidentiality:** What you share with us will only be used for this research so please tell us how you really think and feel. Please be as open and honest as you would like. Remember, we would only ever share something with an adult who you are close to (e.g. a parent/guardian/caregiver) if what you share suggests to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm. That is unlikely to be the case with the questions we're asking in this research. As an example of what we mean by significant and/or immediate harm, people on other projects have explained to us that they are homeless, so we had to let the relevant social services know.
- **Anonymity:** Humankind Research will share the anonymised responses with the research team at Cancer Research UK. This means that Humankind Research will not share your name or identities with Cancer Research UK. To protect people's privacy, please don't share any posts where your friends can be seen or identified.
- **No wrong or right answers:** This is not a test and there are absolutely no wrong or right answers! Please share anything you think is relevant in each of the tasks and again, be as honest and as detailed as possible in your answers. We may get back to you with a follow-up question to make sure we've fully understood what you've said.
- **When recording a video, please bear this in mind:**
 - Please always film in landscape (sideways / horizontally)
 - Make sure we can see you clearly (good lighting, face clearly in the video)
 - Make sure we can hear you clearly (filming somewhere quiet, not too much background noise)

Day 1a: Getting to know you

Internal-facing objective: warming them up, understanding who they are, what they're into and how they spend their time.

Please record a 2–3-minute video telling us about yourself! (And a little reminder to film all of your videos horizontally/sideways!)

This is only for us so we can get to know you – we won't share this with anyone else.

We would love to know:

- Your name, age, and pronouns you use for yourself (e.g. he/him, she/her, they/them), where you live and who you live with
- What you're up to in life
– e.g. school / college / work
- How you like to spend your free time and what your interests are

Day 1b: Your social media

Internal-facing objective: to observe what types of posts/accounts are most engaging; and to observe if and how any products from the categories of interest (tobacco, e-cigarettes, alcohol, HFSS foods) are cutting through into their overall social media lives.

Reminder: to protect people's privacy, please don't share any posts where your friends can be seen or identified.

We're keen to get to know what catches your attention on social media (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube etc), especially anything that you might interact with.

When we say, 'interact with', we mean anything you might do in relation to it. For example, you might give it a 'like', share it, repost it, find out more about it, go into the comments section, or click-through to buy it; or something else entirely!

Please upload screenshots/images/links (links for TikTok/YouTube) from your social media of 4 or 5 things that catch your attention, and that you think you'd be likely to 'interact with'.

And for each upload, tell us in 50 words or more via text:

- What is it and why does it stand out to you?
- How do you think you would 'interact with' it, and why do you think you would do that thing? (Remember, what we mean by 'interact with' is just above!)

Day 2a: Logos you know/don't know

Internal-facing objective: checking recognition of key brands in the tobacco, e-cigarettes, HFSS food/drink and alcohol categories to ascertain awareness and appeal.

First off, please look at these logos [we'll post a selection of logos from all the relevant product categories listed below – see PowerPoint slides]

Alcohol: Stella Artois, Smirnoff, Gordons

E-cigarettes: Elf, SKR, Elux, Lost Mary

Cigarettes: Benson & Hedges (plain packaging), Nordic Spirit, IQOS HFS: Greggs, Burger King, Pizza hut, Subway, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Pepsi Max, KFC

Now, this isn't a test, we're just really interested in which logos you're familiar with, so please don't try to look them up!

Please tell us in a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute) or text entry (minimum 50 words):

- Which logos do you know, what is the product, and who is the company/brand/organisation?
- For the company/brand/organisation logos you do know, what words/associations/thoughts come into your head when you think about that brand/company/organisation?
- For the company/brand/organisation logos you do not know, what words/associations/thoughts come into your head when you think about that brand/company/organisation?

Day 2b: Likes/faves/follows/comments

Internal-facing objective: understanding how much they see and interact with brands/products in the relevant categories on social media.

Reminder: to protect people's privacy, please don't share any posts where your friends can be seen or identified.

Look at your social media accounts and have a look through to see if you've liked / favourited / followed / commented on anything related to **food/drink, cigarettes, vapes or alcohol**.

By 'anything', we mean 'anything' that features these kinds of products. For example, it could be a post from someone you've come across on your feed with one of these things in the image or video, or a post from a company showing a new product they've got, or some food/drink.

Just think of anything where that thing is featured!

To find content you've liked/favourited/followed/commented on:

- Instagram, go to your profile > settings and activity > your activity > likes
- For TikTok, go to your profile, tap the icon with a heart
- For YouTube, go to your profile, tap your history tab

Please be as open and honest as you would like. We would only ever share something with an adult who you are close to (e.g. a parent/guardian/caregiver) if what you share suggests to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm. Just as an example of what we mean, people on other projects have explained to us that they are homeless, so we had to let the relevant social services know.

But this rarely happens, sharing examples of things you've liked/favourited/followed/commented on that include food/drink, cigarettes, vapes or alcohol is highly unlikely to indicate to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm!

If you **have**, please upload screenshots of 3 examples, AND for each of them, please tell us in a video (one minute or more), voice-note (one minute or more) or text (50 words or more):

- What it is – who posted and what it's about
- Why did you like/favourite/follow/comment on it – what do you think made you do this?
- What emotion(s) you felt when you saw it, and why do you think you felt like that?

If you **haven't**, please answer the below questions in a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute) or text (minimum 50 words):

- Do you ever come across unhealthy food/drink, cigarettes, vapes or alcohol?
- If not, why do you think you haven't ever come across it?
- If you have come across it, do you think there's a reason you haven't ever liked/favourited/retweeted/commented posts that feature this kind of thing?

DAY 3: Food Delivery Apps were not a focus of this report and are therefore not reported.

Day 4a: Cigarettes, vapes, and alcohol

Internal-facing objective: gain an understanding of how often they are being exposed to marketing of cigarettes and vapes and their responses to this.

Today, we're starting with two tasks using our SCREEN RECORDING function – it's a great tool that allows you to record what you see automatically!

It might sound a bit strange, but it helps us get a sense of what you're coming across online, and of course, it's all strictly confidential – it is stored on a secure server, and is deleted 6 months after the end of the project – as with the rest of the research findings from this project.¹ This means that everything you show us stays between us (the research team) and Cancer Research UK. Your friends/family will not see anything you share with us.

A reminder that we would **only** ever share something with an adult who you are close to (e.g. a parent/guardian/caregiver) if what you share suggests to us that **you** are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm. Just as an example of what we mean, people on other projects have explained to us that they are homeless, so we had to let the relevant social services know.

But this rarely happens, sharing examples of things you've liked/favourited/retweeted/commented on that include food/drink, cigarettes, vapes or alcohol is highly unlikely to indicate to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm!

All you need to do now is follow the instructions, but if you have any questions, please contact [email address].

- Please screen record your phone as you scroll through the social media feeds (including YouTube) where you spend most of your time, for 2-4 minutes, and talk us through the times you see either cigarettes / shisha / any other tobacco product OR vapes / e-cigarettes come up – this could be in ads, in posts from influencers or celebrities, in your friends' posts, in posts from brands, etc – or anything else!

If it's easier for you to focus on one product at a time e.g. thinking about cigarettes, then alcohol, then vapes, as you scroll, please do so, and just upload a video for each time you scroll.

If you use Instagram, TikTok, YouTube please keep recording as you show us your feeds across the 2 or 3 of them.

Each time **cigarettes / shisha / any other tobacco product OR vapes / e-cigarettes** comes up, tell us:

- How does seeing what you see make you feel?
- Does it make you want to do anything? How does it make you feel about **cigarettes / shisha / any other tobacco product OR vapes / e-cigarettes**?
- How often do you see this sort of thing?
- What do you think about the fact you're seeing this on your social media?

If cigarettes / shisha / any other tobacco product OR vapes / e-cigarettes don't come up in the 2 minutes, please share a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute), or text response (minimum 50 words) telling us:

- Have you ever seen **cigarettes / shisha / any other tobacco product OR vapes / e-cigarettes** appear on your feeds?
- Why do you think this might be?
- How do you feel about the fact you don't see this?

- B. Now, please screen record your phone as you scroll through the social media feeds (including YouTube) you spend most of your time, for **2–4** minutes, and talk us through the times you see **alcohol** come up – this could be in ads, in posts from influencers or celebrities, in your friends' posts, in posts from brands, etc – or anything else!

Remember: we would only ever share something with an adult who you are close to (e.g. a parent/guardian/caregiver) if what you share suggests to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm. Just as an example of what we mean, people on other projects have explained to us that they are homeless, so we had to let the relevant social services know.

But this rarely happens, sharing examples of things you've liked/favourited/followed/commented on that include food/drink, cigarettes, vapes or alcohol is highly unlikely to indicate to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm!

If you use Instagram, TikTok, YouTube please keep recording as you show us your feeds across the 2 or 3 of them.

Each time **alcohol** comes up, tell us:

- How does seeing what you see make you feel?
- Does it make you want to do anything? How does it make you feel about alcohol?
- How often do you see this sort of thing?
- What do you think about the fact you're seeing this on your social media?

If **alcohol** doesn't come up in the 2 minutes, please share a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute), or text response (minimum 50 words) telling us:

- Have you ever seen alcohol appear on your feeds?
- Why do you think this might be?
- How do you feel about the fact you don't see this?

Day 4b: Recently bought...

Internal-facing objective: exploring what drives purchase decisions of cigarettes and vapes.

Now we're interested in learning about things you or your friends might have bought, to understand how they are sold to you.

Once again, everything you show us remains confidential, meaning it will stay between us, the research team and Cancer Research UK. Your friends/family will not see anything you share with us!

We would only ever share something with an adult who you are close to (e.g. a parent/guardian/caregiver) if what you share suggests to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm. Just as an example of what we mean, people on other projects have explained to us that they are homeless, so we had to let the relevant social services know.

But this rarely happens, sharing examples of things you've liked/favourited/followed/commented on that include food/drink, cigarettes, vapes or alcohol is highly unlikely to indicate to us that you are at risk of significant and/or immediate harm!

- A. Think of the last time either you, your friend or someone you know – maybe someone you know at school, college/university, or just from around! – bought a vape or some cigarettes.

Maybe you bought one of these things yourself, you might have asked someone to buy it for you, or maybe you know about a friend or some other person who bought a vape or cigarettes recently. Please share a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute), or text response (minimum 50 words) telling us:

- What you/your friend bought and why
- Where did you/they buy it from?
- How/why did you/your friend choose that particular thing?

- B. Think of the last time either you, your friend or someone you know – maybe someone you know at school, college/university, or just from around! – bought alcohol.

Maybe you bought it for yourself, or you might have asked someone to buy it for you, or maybe you know about a friend or some other person who bought alcohol recently. Please share a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute), or text response (minimum 50 words) telling us:

- What you/your friend bought and why
- Where did you/they buy it from?
- How/why did you/your friend choose that particular thing?

Day 5a: Food and drink

Internal-facing objective: gain an understanding of how young people are seeing unhealthy food and drink on their feed (e.g. is it mostly through recipes and influencers, people their age or other?) and how it may impact their susceptibility to eat.

Welcome back to the final day of tasks!

Thank you for your contributions. We're already very excited to meet you for our conversations with you!

Please screen record your phone as you scroll through the social media feeds (including YouTube) where you spend most of your time, for **2-4 minutes**, and talk us through the times you see **food or drink** – this could be in ads, in posts from influencers or celebrities, in your friends' posts, in posts from brands, etc – or anything else!

Each time this happens, tell us:

- How does it make you feel when you see it?
- Does it change your appetite at all? For example, do you feel more or less hungry, snacky or something else?
- How often do you see this sort of thing?
- What do you think about these showing up on your social media?

If **food and drink** don't come up in the first 2 minutes, please share a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute), or text response (minimum 50 words) telling us:

- Have you ever seen food and drink appear on your feeds?

- Is it something you usually see a lot of?
- Do you have any favourite types of food/drink content?

Day 5b: Recently bought...

Internal-facing objective: exploring what drives purchase decisions of unhealthy foods and drink.

Think of the last time you bought some food or drink that you think isn't that healthy – maybe you bought it yourself, or you might have asked someone to buy it for you. Please share a video (minimum 1 minute), voice-note (minimum 1 minute), or text response (minimum 50 words) telling us:

- What you bought and why you bought it
- Where and when did you buy it? Were you with anyone?
- How/why did you choose that thing in particular?
- Have you ever craved this product, or something similar?
- If so, do you remember what made you want it in the first place?

Day 5c: Wrap up

Internal-facing objective: make sure participants know how valuable their insight is to this project and gather final thoughts/ideas.

We'd like to thank you for everything you've shared with us! It has been so interesting to hear your thoughts and feelings.

Please consider all you've shared with us over the last week and tell us in a video, voice-note or text response:

- How did you find the tasks?
- What themes did you notice?
- Have you learnt anything new or different about yourself?

And that brings us to the end of the tasks!

Thank you – we truly appreciate all your time, effort and thoughts, and we look forward to seeing you and your friends in the group conversations soon.

Appendix F

Focus group discussion guide

Structure and timings (1 hour)

1. Introductions & warm-up (10 minutes)
2. Exploration of product categories (15 minutes)
Optional break (5 minutes)
3. Social media and promotional content (15 minutes)
4. Policy options (15 minutes)
5. Wrap up (5 minutes)

1. Introductions and warm up (10 minutes)

- Thank you again for your answers on Field Notes and thank you for joining today's conversation.
- My name is [xxx] and I work at Humankind Research, a company that works with lots of different companies talking to people like you about things you experience in your life.
- As you know, this chat is part of research we're doing for **Cancer Research UK** and it's all about some particular things you see on social media, and how you feel about seeing those things.
- Today, we'll chat 60 minutes about those things. Some of it will be covering stuff you answered questions about in the Field Notes.
- Obviously, Zoom is kind of like a normal chat but it's also not! So let's try and make it feel as normal as possible. To help with that:
 - You don't have to have your **camera on** but we'd love to see your faces if you are happy to.
 - If two or more people try to talk at the same time, I'll step in so we can go **one by one**.
 - Please keep your **microphone on** unless there's any background noise that might distract from the main conversation!
- I'm really looking forward to getting into the conversation, but to make sure we all have an enjoyable experience, a handful of things worth sharing before we begin:
 - It's not a test – no right or wrong answers, so say whatever comes to mind
 - Be honest, be open, and remember that we would **only** share something from this conversation if what you say suggests you're at risk of significant or immediate harm. As an example, on another project, someone told us they were homeless so we had to let social services know.
 - But this rarely happens and what we're talking about is unlikely to cover that kind of ground
 - It's super important that we respect each other! Let your mates finish what they're saying and bear in mind their opinion is important to me, even if it's different to yours.
- And finally, most importantly, the hour is going to fly by if you all get stuck in and really contribute to the chat, and it'll also make my life easier
- Before we start, can I just confirm that you're happy for me to record this conversation?

The recording will be stored on what we call a secure digital system, and no one will see it apart from me and my team. All recordings will be deleted a minimum of 6 months after the project is completed – can I just check that you are all happy for me to RECORD the session?

If anyone does not want to be recorded, we won't record. That is no problem at all, my colleague will make notes.

- **Press record**

Participant Introductions

- So, to get going, let's do some intros!
- I'll explain how I want this to work in a second, but before that, let me tell you a bit about me! **Moderator INTRO (name, location, fun fact!)**

Over to you! How this'll work is with each of you introducing one another: **[participant xxxx]** please introduce **[xxxx]** by telling me their name, age, how you became mates and a fun fact about them

Now **[participant xxxx]** please introduce **[xxxx]**; and **[participant xxxx]** please introduce **[xxxx]**

Once all participants introduced, crack on!

2. Exploration of product categories (15 minutes)

1. Unhealthy food & drink
2. Vapes/E-cigarettes (do)
3. Food delivery apps
4. Alcohol (drink)
5. Cigarettes/shisha/other tobacco products (do)

[Moderator to go briefly through each category, deprioritising unhealthy food & drink if necessary – chatty group!]

Okay, let's get into it!

I want to start by talking about what some people call [insert category starting with 1, through to 4] ...

- Tell me what first comes to mind when I say [insert category]?

[Moderator to reference brands cited from Field Notes if struggling]

What do you/your friends think of [insert category]?

- What do you like about it?
- What do you not like about it?
- What you've just said about what you think of [insert category] – what/who do you think helped you arrive at that idea/opinion? [Moderator to reference parent, friends, social media etc.]

Repeat for as many of the remaining 3, as is time

- **[If participant has indicated use of FOOD DELIVERY APPS]** You mentioned on the Field Notes you used some Food Delivery Apps [cite by name if possible].
 - Tell us a bit more about the things you see from them on social media?
 - Some people have mentioned being more likely to want to eat something, or buy something from a food delivery app when they've seen stuff that's come from the food delivery app. What do you think?
- Some people in the research mentioned they know people who use vapes / drink alcohol / smoke, do you know many people your age that do?
 - Why do you think they do it?
 - Do you feel like people your age are likely to do this more or less in the next year? Why/Why not?
 - Do you know people your age who order any of these things from food delivery apps?

Thinking about the 'topics' we've discussed: (1: unhealthy foods & drink, 2: vapes/e-cigarettes, 3: alcohol and 4: cigarettes/shisha/tobacco products...

- Overall, which gets the most attention / is talked about most?
- Where do you think there's most attention on [insert topic, starting with unhealthy food and drink]?

- In school
- In chats with your mates
- With your family
- The things you come across on your social media
- In stuff you watch online or in the cinema e.g. YouTube, Netflix, Films
- In the news
- How does it get talked about? In a positive way, or in a negative way?
- **Repeat for vapes; then alcohol, cigarettes if time and if relevant (in that order)**

Break (but only if participants tiring)

Should be task-focused to re-energise participants i.e. you have 2 minutes to find something, anything, that you'd mean a lot to you, and you'd hate to lose (OR similar exercise!)

3. Social media and promotional content (10 minutes)

Favourite accounts

- [Refer to notes from Field Notes; if not, ask] Tell me about your **favourite** accounts/people on social media? [if participants have provided names, refer to them]
- What is it you like about their content / this kind of content?
 - What kinds of things do they post?
 - What platforms do you mainly view their content on?
- Do they ever post content related to or that features things like [insert topic, starting with unhealthy food and drink]?
- Can you show us?
- Why do you think they show this kind of thing?
- How would you describe these kinds of posts?
- What's the purpose of them?

- Is it **promotional/marketing/advertising**? What tells you this?
- How did you feel seeing it (only explore 1-2 things max)?
- What would you normally do after seeing a post like this? [Moderator to listen out for actions such as like, share, repost, follow the tags/links on the post, buy anything]
- Do these kinds of posts ever prompt/encourage you to think/do anything else?
- Do they set an example for any behaviours that you/your friends/others might follow?

If no relevant post, show content

Show examples of influencer and business posts including e-cigarettes and warnings (see if warnings are noticed by young people)

Then repeat with Vapes; Cigarettes, Alcohol

Screen-sharing via links but in accordance with age regulations (as participants will be shown content they have not necessarily encountered themselves)

- Olivia Rodrigo (scroll along) (+18)
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C6q9rsqN24a/?igsh=eTcxNGJqanZqYTVk>
- Cissy Jones au vodka (+18)
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeW6vRG1/>
- Wingstop (+16)
https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9AoB1zldY6/?igsh=MWVrNjV_yemltdm5lcw==
- Jackie Aina (+18)
https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8Hj_z0ps50/?igsh=MTM3YjBxdmhxeGt6bg==
- Vape/ghosting (+18)
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeW6Cs6E/>

Influence

- The term 'influencer' is really interesting to us. What do you think of when I say 'influencer'?
- What would you say makes someone an 'influencer'? Other people have

mentioned 'content creators', are they different to 'influencers'?

Business

- What first comes to mind when I mention the word **business**?

[If struggling, provide participant with definition] and ask: how is this different to what you had/might have had in mind?

Definition of business: In ****business****, people make and sell products or services for other people to buy. You might see businesses promoting their products or services online for you or your family to buy, such as through social media shops or adverts that come up on your feed. Businesses include both the people who make [product, e.g. cigarettes and vapes], and the people/shops who sell them.

- I've heard other people use different words to describe businesses – such as brands, companies, organisations
 - What do these words mean to you?
 - Are they all the same? If not, how do they feel different to you? Probe for examples
- Which are you more likely to engage with the content of on social media?
 - Is an influencer a business?
- [Skip if businesses are mentioned as 'favourite accounts' above] Are there any brands/companies/organisations that you see regularly on your social media?

Tell us about them [moderator to listen out for and probe on to unhealthy food and drinks / Vapes / Cigarettes / Alcohol]

- What platform/app are you normally seeing them on?
- Do you follow/subscribe to any?
- What kinds of things do they post?
- Do you ever buy anything after seeing this?
- What types of '**marketing**' do you see on social media? Moderator to explore 'promoted content', 'advertising' as

alternatives, if 'marketing' doesn't resonate

- Is this something you pay attention to?
- Have you ever thought about this before?
- How does it make you feel when you see something like this?
- You use [insert relevant platform used from below list, going one by one], how can you tell if something is marketing/promoted content/advertising etc. on:
 - TikTok
 - YouTube
 - Instagram
 - Other if relevant
- Is it easier to notice this kind of content on one platform vs another? If so, why? What tells you it is this kind of content?
- Of Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, which would you expect to see more marketing of [insert below, going one by one]:
 - Unhealthy food & drink
 - Vapes / E-cigarettes
 - Alcohol
 - Cigarettes / shisha / other tobacco products

4. Policy options (15 minutes)

1. Unhealthy food & drink

2. Vapes/E-cigarettes

3. Alcohol

4. Cigarettes/shisha/other tobacco products

Lots of young people **say they have seen marketing** for [insert category from above] on social media...

- Is it **ever okay** for ads or promotions like this to be on social media? [Moderator to listen out for and explore any contradictions that arise]
- Do you **know if there are any rules** intended to **stop** you seeing this type of thing?

Unhealthy food and drink

If under 16

- Under 16s aren't 'meant' to see ads for unhealthy foods and drink on social media...

But what do you think? Do you agree or disagree? Why/why not? (if participant appears to unthinkingly agree, ask is it ever ok for under 16s to see them?)

Vapes/alcohol

- For e-cigarettes/vapes and alcohol, the rules are a bit different – under 18s aren't meant to see them...

But what do you think? Do you agree or disagree? Why/why not? (if participant appears to unthinkingly agree, ask is it ever ok for under 18s to see them?)

Moderator to 'share screen' showing slide with who should be responsible for...

- Government
- Parents
- Social media apps e.g. IG, TikTok
- Business/brand/organisation selling the product
- People who use social media e.g. you, me
- Influencers/Content Creators
- Right now, do you know who is responsible for making sure young people aren't seeing this? (No problem if you don't know!)
- From this list, rank who you think should be responsible for making sure young people aren't seeing this? Why?

Continuing to 'share screen' showing 'quant statements' one-by-one/slide-by-slide

Now I'd like to show you some things that other people have said, and I would like to hear your thoughts

- The social media accounts of businesses/ brands/organisations who make unhealthy foods and drink, cigarettes, vapes and alcohol products should be private (i.e. you need to follow them to see what they post)

- If accounts cannot be made private, then businesses who make and sell products/ things should not be allowed to have an account on social media apps
- It is ok for 'influencers' (e.g. YouTubers, TikTokers, Instagram influencers) to post content showing/selling unhealthy foods and drink, cigarettes, vapes and alcohol
- It is okay for people under 16 to see posts showing/selling or talking about unhealthy foods and drinks.
- Many young people stated they thought their intake of unhealthy food and drink would decrease next year.

[For each statement, moderator to explore:]

- What do you think about this?
- Do agree/disagree / feel the same way? Why/Why not?
- (if relevant) Do you think this makes a difference? Would it stop people your age from seeing unhealthy products on their social media?

5. Wrap up (5 minutes)

"Thank you so much for talking to me today, it's been a fascinating conversation! We're near the end now, I just have a few closing questions".

- Of all the things you've said, what's the most important thing you want me and Cancer Research UK to remember from this conversation?
- Is there anything you want to know more about?
- Any final thoughts/reflections?
- Brilliant, thank you all!

So you know, Cancer Research UK are very grateful for what you've shared! If you have any final questions, please contact [email address] [share in chat]. Finally, you should all receive payment for your contributions for this conversation and the Field Notes participation.

Thank and close.

Appendix G

Table 9: Percentage of participants reporting product exposure and engagement

	%											
	Saw a business(es) posting about [product] in the past month				Saw an influencer(s) posting about [product] in the past month				Engaged with business or influencer posts about [product] in the past month			
	Cigarettes	Vapes	HFSS	Alcohol	Cigarettes	Vapes	HFSS	Alcohol	Cigarettes	Vapes	HFSS	Alcohol
All participants	20	29	52	36	25	37	52	38	40	22	39	33
Never used [product]	18	25	N/A	32	23	31	N/A	34	31	14	N/A	28
Ever used [product]	25	40	N/A	39	32	49	N/A	43	63	34	N/A	37
P-value (Ever vs Never used [product])	.000	.000	N/A	.000	.000	.000	N/A	.000	.000	.000	N/A	.000
Under 18 (Under 16 for HFSS)	20	29	52	32	26	35	53	35	41	24	40	32
18+	19	31	52	41	24	38	52	43	38	19	39	35
P-value (Under 18 vs 18+ / Under 16 vs 16+)	.245	.185	.735	.000	.098	.065	.788	.000	.383	.004	.826	.109
White ethnic group	17	29	50	34	22	36	50	37	38	19	37	33
Non-white ethnic group	29	30	59	42	37	38	61	45	45	35	49	37
P-Value (White vs Non-white)	.000	.879	.000	.000	.000	.421	.000	.000	.069	.000	.000	.121
IMD 1-2	23	31	53	37	28	38	53	38	44	27	45	32
IMD 3-5	18	29	52	35	23	36	52	37	37	18	36	36
P-Value (IMD 1-2 vs 3-5)	.000	.088	.247	.004	.001	.213	.532	.064	.073	.000	.000	.039

Base = All participants who have / have access to an account on at least one social media platform (n=3,889)

P-values calculated by Chi Squared Test for Independence, a non-parametric test to explore relationships between categorical variables.

Appendix H

Table 10: Statistical comparison of agreement of potential policies and responsibility across products

Statement	% agreeing for each product			P-value for comparison between products*
	Vapes	HFSS products	Alcohol	
The social media accounts of businesses who make and sell [product] should be private (i.e. you need to follow them to see what they post).	68	43	51	.000
If accounts cannot be made private, then businesses who make and sell [product] should not be allowed to have an account on social media apps.	63	35	45	.000
It is okay for influencers (e.g. YouTubers, Tiktokers, Instagram influencers) to post content promoting [product].	14	36	25	.000
It is the responsibility of the companies who own social media apps to make sure businesses do not promote [product] to under-18s/16s**	58	53	55	.000
It is the responsibility of the businesses who make [product] to make sure they do not promote [product] to under-18s/16s**	60	50	57	.000
It is the responsibility of the Government, who decide how promotion and social media is controlled, to make sure businesses do not promote [product] to under-18s/16s**	56	46	53	.000
It is the responsibility of the people who use social media to make sure businesses do not promote [product] to under-18s/16s**	22	22	23	.000

Base = all participants (n = 4,049)

*P-value calculated by Cochran's Q Test, a non-parametric test to determine differences between dichotomous variables between three or more related groups. Variables were grouped as 'strongly agree / agree' = 1, else = 0.

** Under 16s in relation to HFSS products

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