

Internet, social media expose youth to tobacco

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In a survey of 15,000 children, more than one in 10 under age 18 reported receiving tobacco promotions on their Facebook or MySpace pages, or in text messages on their mobile phones.

(Medical Xpress)—Tobacco companies are barred by law from advertising their products to children, but researchers at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis have found that many teens and pre-teens are getting tobacco advertisements and promotions through

social media outlets or text messaging on mobile phones.

More than one in 10 [children](#) under 18 reported receiving [tobacco](#) coupons or [promotions](#) on their Facebook or MySpace pages, or in text messages on their mobile phones. But it's unclear whether the tobacco-related messages were meant for those kids or had been sought by Internet "friends" of those children and then passed along through [social media](#).

The researchers also has found that many high-schoolers use the Internet to search for information about cigars and [smokeless tobacco](#). Their findings are reported in two studies published online in *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* and in *Tobacco Control*.

"Even kids who never have used tobacco are being exposed to promotions and advertisements," said first author Patricia A. Cavazos-Rehg, PhD. "Those children are more likely to believe that smoking makes you look cool or that smokers have more friends than nonsmokers."

In the first study, the researchers found that when children were asked whether they would smoke a cigarette if it were offered, those who had received tobacco advertisements and promotions were more likely to say yes than other kids.

In the second study, the research team used Google Trends to track Internet searches for cigars and smokeless tobacco. Comparing the Google Trends data with information collected in a more traditional study, they verified that in states where young people searched the Internet more frequently for this information, the rates of young people using cigars and smokeless tobacco were higher. The study demonstrates that at least for these tobacco products, findings obtained through tracking Internet searches closely resembles those from more traditional

research methods.

Cavazos-Rehg believes an advantage to monitoring Internet activity is that scientists can predict trends more quickly. Often, she said, it may be a year or two before data from large studies are available to investigators. Google Trends, on the other hand, provides results in real time.

"Many studies have a lag time of one or two years," she explained. "We would like faster surveillance tools to monitor changes as they occur. The Internet and social media platforms seemingly change daily, and it would be useful to have research tools that can keep up."

The first study tracked exposure to tobacco promotions and advertisements by analyzing data gathered from more than 15,000 students, ages 11 to 18, who were asked whether they had received tobacco ads or coupons through social media. Some 11 percent reported recently having received ads or promotions from tobacco companies via Facebook or MySpace. The results were similar for text messages. Ads or coupons were sent to almost 15 percent of youth who reported previously using tobacco, but they also were sent to just over 9 percent of kids who never had used tobacco products.

"Not only are children being exposed to these promotions, they are being sent to some children as young as 12 or 13," said co-investigator Melissa J. Krauss. "Children, even very young children, are receiving pro-tobacco messages from social networking sites."

The investigators suspect part of the reason may be that some children search for tobacco information—their study of Google Trends data suggests that—but even young people with no interest in [tobacco products](#) can get pro-tobacco messages through their "friends" on social networking sites.

"If your 'friend' clicks that they 'like' a tobacco product, then it can show up on your account as something that a friend liked," said Krauss.

"Or it may be that [young people](#) are sharing a computer or [mobile phone](#) with an adult in the household," explained Cavazos-Rehg. "Once a computer or a phone has been tagged as belonging to a potential customer, it's more likely to receive coupons or other promotional materials. It may be that an adult is seeking the content, but it still results in exposing a child to pro-tobacco messages."

The researchers said parents may be able to fight some exposure to tobacco messages by installing anti-SPAM or anti-phishing software on their computers. However, they believe social media sites are unlikely to take steps to block tobacco promotions even if some of the messages are reaching children.

"Social media sites want to promote and encourage people to express themselves freely, and removing content could be seen as interfering with freedom of expression," Cavazos-Rehg said. "People are free to share all kinds of ideas through social media, and that's the challenge. We need to find a balance between allowing that freedom and protecting children from things that can harm them."

More information: Cavazos-Rehg PA, Krauss MJ, Spitznagel EL, Grucza RA, Bierut LJ. "The hazards of new media: Youth's exposure to tobacco ads/promotions." *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, Advance Access. ntr.oxfordjournals.org/content/.../0/24/ntr.ntt168.long

Cavazos-Rehg PA, Krauss MJ, Spitznagel EL, Grucza RA, Chaloupka FJ, Bierut LJ. "Monitoring of non-cigarette tobacco use using Google Trends." *Tobacco Control*, published online February 2014. tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/.../3-051276.short?rss=1

Provided by Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis

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