

How stores use TikTok to sell e-cigarettes to children

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A [new paper](#) in *Nicotine and Tobacco Research* shows that advertising and sales of vaping products is common on TikTok, the video sharing platform popular among teenagers. Users pushing these items often use hashtags like #puffbundles to disguise vaping products by including things like lip gloss and candy in the packages for sale.

Despite smoking rates reaching an all-time low in the United States, public health professionals are concerned about adolescent use of electronic cigarettes. In 2023, some 4.7 million (17%) [middle school](#) and [high school students](#) reported using e-cigarettes.

Public health advocates are concerned that adolescents are at risk of becoming addicted to nicotine through these products and may transition to combustible cigarettes. Although several countries have raised the minimum legal sales age of e-cigarettes to 21, rates of youth and young adult e-cigarette use remain high worldwide, creating speculation about how [young adults](#) manage to purchase [vaping](#) products.

Social media may play a key component. In 2023, 63% of people between 13 and 17 reported using TikTok, the popular short-form video hosting service. This study sought to examine TikTok content regarding the sale and distribution of e-cigarettes.

In September 2023, researchers scraped 475 English language TikTok videos posted between July 1, 2022 and August 31, 2023 using a TikTok application programming interface. The investigators identified popular hashtags related to e-cigarettes, including #puffbarss, #geekbar, #elfbar. They then narrowed the hashtags to those specific to online sales of e-cigarettes (hashtags included #discreetshipping, #puffbundle, #hiddennic).

Overall, the researchers found that 50.4% of the videos studied advertised popular vaping brands and 45% included cannabis products. Some 28.6% of products advertised were described as "bundled," 8.7% indicated that the products were "hidden," and 6% specified international shipping was possible. Videos directed customers to other [social media](#) platforms—most often (57.5%) Instagram—to use services including Telegram to purchase electronic nicotine products.

The study indicated that vendors, either individuals or businesses, often evade local, state, or national legal restrictions on sales and advertising of vaping products to minors by creating what TikTok users tag as #puffbundles or #vapebundles. These bundles often include other innocuous products (including candy, fake eyelashes, and lip gloss), so the packages do not appear to be vaping products at all. This explains how young adults are purchasing e-cigarettes despite minimum legal sales age and flavor restriction laws.

Among videos posted about selling vaping products on TikTok, almost half (45.2%) advertised that they did not require age verification of the buyer. No video indicated customers needed to provide identification for purchase or acceptance of the mailed package of vaping products.

"Parents should be aware that children may be receiving [e-cigarette](#) products through the mail. These self-proclaimed [small businesses](#) are targeting youth by advertising that they don't check for identification," said the paper's lead author, Page Dobbs.

"If your child receives a bundle of candy or beauty products in the mail, check inside the packaging or inside the scrunchie with a zipper. Also, policymakers and enforcement agencies should be aware that these products are being shipped internationally, meaning people are circumventing tobacco laws in multiple countries."

More information: Page Dobbs et al, #Discreetshipping: Selling E-Cigarettes on TikTok, *Nicotine and Tobacco Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/ntr/ntae081](https://doi.org/10.1093/ntr/ntae081)

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