



“Almost constant”: Young people overwhelmed by harmful online marketing

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Summary

There is mounting evidence that digital spaces are filled with harmful commodity marketing that reaches young people. The current government inquiry into harms youth encounter online needs to recognise the challenge this poses.

As shown in our research, young people, including those aged under 18, report high exposure to vape and alcohol marketing. They also identify the benefits and the harms of social media platforms, which form an everyday and growing part of their lives, health, and thriving.

In this Briefing, we highlight youth voices from recent studies to articulate some of the harms they shared and propose potential protections that reduce the harms but retain the benefits of social media that young people enjoy.

Accessing digital spaces can be beneficial and affirming for young people but also have potential for harm. As described by a participant in one of our studies.

[Social media] can be positive, like it can be a good thing, it can spread awareness, it can like make people happy, but I think it can also be like really bad, like, especially like younger kids... *Kowalski, 19, Pākehā, group discussion*

When young people are online they are exposed to the intensive marketing of unhealthy products including alcohol, tobacco and ultra-processed foods. Industries that sell addictive or habituating commodities use digital marketing to recruit young consumers to increase their consumption over lifetimes.¹ This has long-term negative health consequences² that also deepen inequities between Māori and Tauīwi (non-Māori) in Aotearoa New Zealand.³

We have presented [findings from our research](#) to the Education and Workforce Committee as part of the [inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online](#), urging a ban on digital marketing of unhealthy products and making social media platforms liable for online harm.

In 2022, we surveyed over 3,600 young people aged 14-20 years in Aotearoa. Virtually all of them—97%—reported using the internet several times a day or almost constantly, via an average of five platforms, most commonly Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok.^{4,5} Respondents reported frequent exposure to marketing of unhealthy products. In follow-up in-depth group discussions and interviews, young people shared some of the impacts they experienced from engaging with profit-driven digital environments, which we outline below. (Also see [Appendix](#).)

Unhealthy marketing is pervasive and harmful

Digital marketing, which can occur anytime, anywhere, especially via routinely used

smartphones, normalises and intensifies the attraction of unhealthy products and recruits new generations of users.

And for children, like, since, since you're very impressionable, like if you as a kid go through these experiences, like you can end up idolising alcohol, you know, being oh, this is cool. *Male, 19, Asian, metaverse discussion*

Participants reported significant exposure to alcohol and vape marketing on the social media platforms they used regularly (59% of survey respondents reported using social media for more than five hours a day), including those aged under 18 years. In interviews and discussions, participants described pervasive digital marketing of unhealthy commodities in their feeds throughout the day and night, which targeted them and encouraged consumption.

I get a lot of beer ads like on my Instagram... vaping and tobacco as well. I've seen certain accounts be like pushed to me, like, you know, vaping trick accounts... Um, and it was almost like inescapable on all social media platforms. *John, 17, Māori, group discussion*

Digital platforms are habit-forming

Beyond being exposed to addictive products, many participants discussed feeling “addicted” to social media itself, particularly TikTok, and were concerned about how much time they “wasted” on these algorithmically-driven platforms that kept them online and used their data.

what does concern me is the aspect of just like getting me more addicted to my phone... Like, I mean, nine hours, thirty-two minutes on a Thursday on my phone... and they're just getting more data to make my ads like more personal to me. *Sarah, 18, Pākehā, group discussion*

Most participants stressed the benefits of connectivity but were mindful of how it intrudes upon social and material realities.

What I feel about social media in general was it can be quite a hindrance. Like, in terms of, um, being attentive to, like, life in general, the real life in front of you.... But there's also, there's pros and cons... like, you can get to know what's happening around the world, but then you also get cut off from people that are around you in real life. *Bartholomew, 19, Māori, group discussion*

Harmful content is readily shown

Alongside product marketing, young people in our studies described how platforms showed other unwanted content in their personalised feeds, including body-shaming, self-harm, alt-right and hate speech content.

TikTok was awful as you couldn't filter out content that is harmful like content that would show people cutting themselves or starving themselves. *Pākehā, 19 survey respondent*

Problematic materials could be unpredictably juxtaposed with valued content.

You can have some really good content. And then suddenly, it can spiral into some really bad stuff... like you need to be skinnier. You need to drink the, do this, and like, the difference, you have to be healthy, you have to do this. whereas it's not just you're okay, being you, kind of thing. *Andrea, 20, Māori, digital ethnography*

Recommendations

Better protection of young people from online harms is needed⁶ given the growing importance of digital spaces to social, civic and commercial life, and young people must be involved in the development of any proposed solutions.

Key actions could include banning commercial digital marketing of harmful commodities and extending liability for online harm to social media platforms. To avoid unintended consequences and further harm, a rights-based approach to digital redesign should be considered to minimise algorithmic promotion of content. It should move beyond simple age-limit regulations and focus on creating age-appropriate platform design to reduce harms.⁷

What this Briefing adds

- The voices of young people, alongside the research evidence and broad issues distilled from local and international literatures, demonstrate the real-world urgency of addressing the digital marketing of unhealthy commodities.
- Challenges the use of social media platforms to market unhealthy commodities to minors and centres rights-based approaches to regulation.

Implications for policy and practice

- To be transformative, solutions will require interventions at the level of design of systems rather than post hoc or simplistic ‘person-change’ approaches.
- Young people need to be involved in and contribute to the development and application of such work.
- Finding *effective* means to provide young people with the protections and preventions they need is complex and should be evidence-based.

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Appendix

[Our submission](#) to the Education and Workforce Committee as part of the [inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online](#) presents findings from four recent studies carried out between 2022 and 2025, with young people across diverse ethnicities living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

- the survey with 3,698 respondents (aged 14–20 years)
- 10 focus groups with 43 friends (aged 16–22)
- online ethnography interviews (with 9 young people recording their social media feeds three times a week for 15 minutes, aged 16–23)
- focus groups and interviews with 18 young people (18–24) who engage in metaverses

(online worlds where user avatars can engage with others in virtual environments).

Qualitative data from these participants were transcribed and explored using reflexive thematic analyses that are currently being prepared for publication.

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