
New Report Details Alarming Surge in Tobacco Imagery in On-Screen Entertainment Most Popular Among Youth and Young Adults

Truth Initiative's sixth annual "While You Were Streaming" report calls out harmful depictions that glamorize tobacco, fueling a public health threat of youth e-cigarette use and smoking

WASHINGTON, D.C. (March 5, 2024) – Tobacco imagery is surging in shows, social media, music videos and movies — including nearly every Best Picture nominee at the 2024 Academy Awards — exposing millions of young people to depictions that glamorize and normalize tobacco use. The impact of tobacco imagery is well documented, with recent [peer-reviewed research](#) showing that exposure to such images makes young people up to three times more likely to start vaping, while the U.S. Surgeon General concluded in 2012 that youth and young adults were twice as likely to smoke compared to those with less exposure. According to Truth Initiative's sixth annual "While You Were Streaming" report titled, "[Lights, Camera, Tobacco? How Rising Smoking and Vaping Imagery in Top Entertainment Influences E-Cigarette Use and Fuels Nicotine Addiction Among Young Audiences](#)," this adds up to a serious public health threat, putting a new generation at risk for a lifetime of nicotine addiction.

The report reveals the number of tobacco depictions in streaming shows **popular among 15- to 24-year-olds more than doubled in 2022, exposing nearly 25 million young people**. The rise was largely driven by Netflix's "Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story," which contained a third of all tobacco depictions. The number of **tobacco depictions in binge-watched shows nearly quadrupled**, highlighting a significant source of exposure.

"Tobacco imagery plays a bigger role in youth and young adult tobacco initiation than many people realize, so this report intends to educate the Hollywood community about the impact these shows are having," said Truth Initiative CEO and President Kathy Crosby. "As youth e-cigarette use continues to remain a public health threat, the entertainment industry has an opportunity to play a significant role in protecting young people's physical and mental health by clearing the smoke-filled screens."

Six out of seven networks (Netflix, FOX, HBO, AMC, CW and FX) all increased tobacco imagery in 2022. BBC One joined the list as top offender due to hit show "Peaky Blinders," and Netflix followed closely in second. **Netflix more than doubled tobacco imagery in 2022 compared to the previous year, as did Fox, which rounded out the top three.** Despite a 2019 pledge to



eliminate tobacco in original, youth-rated shows and movies that are not historical, Netflix continues to include depictions in shows popular with young people, such as “Cobra Kai,” which is rated TV-14.

Social media is another way young people are exposed to tobacco imagery. Nine in 10 U.S. teens say they use YouTube, the top social platform, according to a [2023 Pew Research Center survey](#). Truth Initiative data included in the report found **more than a third of 15- to 24-year-olds reported exposure to tobacco imagery on YouTube.**

Truth Initiative’s new “While You Were Streaming: Lights, Camera, Tobacco?” video shows how tobacco imagery is taking center stage on screens everywhere. You can view it here: youtu.be/dXscOjP2oto

The report illustrates how tobacco is both normalized and glamorized in today’s top streaming entertainment. Key findings include:

- While more than half (53%) of the top 15 streaming shows most popular among 15- to 24-year-olds contained tobacco — down slightly from 60% during the previous two years — **the number of depictions in these shows increased by 110% in 2022:**
 - In addition to “**Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story,**” other notable shows with a high number of depictions include “**Euphoria,**” “**The Simpsons,**” “**Stranger Things**” and “**The Walking Dead.**”
 - Two top shows feature minors using tobacco products: “**Law and Order: SVU**” and “**Euphoria.**”
 - Four of the top 15 shows were rated TV-14: “**The Simpsons,**” “**Stranger Things,**” “**Bob’s Burgers**” and “**Law and Order: SVU.**”
- The report underscores the significant impact of binge-watching on increasing frequency and risk, where the number of tobacco depictions **quadrupled, rising to 2,002 in 2022 from 537 the previous year.** In addition to “Peaky Blinders” and “Euphoria,” other popular binge-watched shows with such imagery include “The Simpsons,” “The Boys” and “Snowfall.”
- Animated shows continue to feature tobacco on repeat. “**The Simpsons,**” “**Bob’s Burgers**” and “**Family Guy**” all increased the number of tobacco portrayals this year. In fact, depictions in “The Simpsons” more than



doubled from 75 to 195. In addition, “All American,” “Big Mouth,” “American Dad” and “SpongeBob SquarePants” are frequently binge-watched animated shows that contain tobacco imagery. “SpongeBob SquarePants” is rated TV-Y7.

- The report also highlights an analysis by NORC at the University of Chicago, which found that tobacco imagery in top movies decreased overall in 2022, but 35% of films still contained these depictions, **exposing an estimated 21 million youth and young adults**. No film rated PG-13 or below should contain tobacco, and yet **40% of all movies with tobacco were rated appropriate for youth**. Notably, four PG-rated films — “Brian and Charles,” the rerelease of 1946’s “It’s a Wonderful Life,” “Mr. Malcolm’s List” and “Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris”— contained tobacco imagery, the most PG/G films with tobacco since 2020. Long-established research confirms that exposure to smoking in movies leads young people to start smoking.
- Twice as many music videos featured tobacco. **28% of the 2022 Billboard top songs included tobacco** — more than doubling from 12.8% the previous year. Including major recording artists such as Bruno Mars, Farruko, Elle King and Miranda Lambert, and The Weeknd, the **videos were viewed nearly 7 billion times combined** on YouTube as of October 2023.

While the report focuses on 2022 seasons, it is released to coincide with the 2023 Academy Awards, which continue to recognize films that contain on-screen tobacco imagery:

- **Nine of the 10 films nominated for Best Picture** — all except “Barbie” — feature tobacco imagery, up from seven last year. Two of these nominees — “The Zone of Interest” and “Past Lives” — are rated PG-13.
- Notably, a **PG-13-rated nominee for Best Animated Feature Film** — “The Boy and the Heron” — also features smoking.

“With so many streaming options available to young people on demand, on multiple devices, at any time, the stakes remain high,” added Crosby. “We want the entertainment industry to partner with us to protect young audiences from these harmful and influential images.”



The findings emphasize the urgent need for stricter regulations and increased awareness to protect young audiences. Truth Initiative calls for the entertainment industry to adopt a comprehensive set of policies to curb tobacco depictions on screens, including:

- Expanding education and outreach to ensure stakeholders including directors, writers, and producers understand the importance of keeping tobacco out of shows;
- Informing actors of the power they wield when they use tobacco on screen, as actors rejecting smoking and vaping on screens would send a powerful statement;
- Continuing the use of anti-tobacco and anti-vaping messaging before and after shows featuring tobacco imagery and featuring specific messages demonstrating the harmful effects of increasingly popular e-cigarette products;
- Implementing a robust ratings system that ensures that titles with smoking are listed as TV-MA or R, which has the potential to reduce young people's exposure to tobacco.

In addition, Truth Initiative's long-standing Tobacco-Free Screens Coalition works with local community agencies and state and national partners to eliminate tobacco product use on screens and to help educate creatives in the entertainment industry. To learn more and to get involved, email tobaccofreescreens@truthinitiative.org.

To read the full [report](#) and list of entertainment industry recommendations, as well as for research methodology, visit truthinitiative.org.

About Truth Initiative®

Truth Initiative is the nation's largest public health organization dedicated to achieving a culture where all young people reject smoking and vaping, and anyone can quit. Our impact has helped drive youth smoking prevalence down from 23% in 2000 to a historic low of 2% in 2023. Through our proven-effective and nationally recognized **truth**® public education campaign and market leading cessation programs, we are leading the fight as e-cigarette use threatens to put a new generation at risk of nicotine addiction. Our first-of-its-kind, text message quit vaping program *This Is Quitting* has enrolled over 700,000 young people nationwide and our youth e-cigarette prevention curriculum *Vaping: Know the truth*® is being used in more than 9,000 schools nationwide. Our rigorous



scientific research and policy studies, community and youth engagement programs supporting populations at high risk of using tobacco, and innovation in tobacco dependence treatment continue to help end one of the most critical public health battles of our time. Based in Washington D.C., our organization was established and funded through the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between attorneys general from 46 states, five U.S. territories and the tobacco industry. To learn more, visit truthinitiative.org.

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