NICFLUENCED.

Smoking, nicotine and the influence of popular culture

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Almost one in three young people aged 11–17 surveyed by ASH recalled seeing a celebrity or influencer smoking in the previous year. [1]

Young people take cues from the people they admire. A cigarette can become part of a favourite character's look. A nicotine brand can offer access to a popular artist. The product becomes connected with something they already enjoy.

Sometimes a brand has paid for that attention. Sometimes smoking appears in a film, fashion image or celebrity post without any tobacco company being involved. Both deserve attention, although different rules apply.

ASH Wales wants young people to enjoy music, films and popular culture without smoking and nicotine being made part of the appeal.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Young people who saw the most smoking in films were 46% more likely to start smoking than those who saw the least. This was the finding from eight studies following young people over time, brought together in a 2016 review. [22]

A 2022 review of 29 studies also found a link between seeing tobacco-related social media content, including vaping, and using these products or being open to trying them. Most participants were teenagers or young adults. [23]

This is evidence of a wider pattern. It does not tell us what effect any single post or film will have on a young person.

32%

of 11–17-year-olds in ASH's 2026 Great Britain survey recalled celebrity or influencer smoking. Vaping was also 32%, asked separately. [1]

57%

of pupils in ASH Wales's 2023 school survey described vaping as common in their year group. This measures perceptions, not prevalence. [9]

80%

of Welsh adults supported banning vape advertising and promotion in shops in ASH Wales's 2026 YouGov survey. [32]

A product does not have to appear in a conventional advert to become part of a look, a story or an experience that young people admire.

WHAT IS CHANGING UNDER THE LAW?

The Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026 is law, but its measures start at different times.

Already in place: tobacco advertising is banned in most settings. Most online nicotine-vape adverts, including influencer ads, are also prohibited. An “ad” label does not make them acceptable. [5][6]

From 29 October 2026: promotional giveaways of vapes and nicotine products, including pouches, are prohibited, alongside substantial promotional discounts. There are public-health exceptions. [27]

Planned from 1 June 2027: wider restrictions cover vapes with or without nicotine and products such as pouches. They cover commercial influencer promotion, advertising and sponsorship, including festivals and sport. TV and on-demand advertising and product-placement rules also widen. June 2027 is the intended start date. [6][7]

Clothing: there is no blanket ban on cigarette prints or vintage tobacco-logo jackets. Existing rules restrict tobacco branding on other products where it promotes tobacco. Further rules need regulations. [7][28]

The separate under-16 social media ban, planned for spring 2027, addresses wider online harms. Reduced nicotine-related exposure would be welcome, but films, TV, music, games, fashion and events still matter. Those aged 16 and 17 retain access. [26]

WHAT DOES THE ASA COVER?

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) checks adverts and considers public complaints. Its rules cover most advertising, including brands’ promotional posts and influencer ads. They do not cover every independent celebrity post or smoking scene. [29][30]

A fashion advert can break the rules by glamorising smoking, even when it sells clothes. The ASA can require adverts to change or be withdrawn, and refer persistent breaches for further action. Its rules sit alongside the law. [15][31]

A LONGSTANDING INFLUENCE

Celebrity appeal has long been used to sell tobacco. In 1932, a Lucky Strike advert paired Jean Harlow’s endorsement with publicity for Red-Headed Woman. [16]

Smoking also reaches young audiences through entertainment itself. A study of 21 Love Island episodes from 2017 estimated 47 million tobacco impressions among UK under-16s, counting repeated exposures rather than individual children. [25]



Historical image: American Tobacco Company / University of Alabama CSTS, 1932. [16]

HOW THE INFLUENCE WORKS

Creator advertising: the vape becomes an accessory

In June 2022, George Baggs, then 19, matched his outfit to an HQD vape in a TikTok video. The agency brief suggested matching colours and using his usual style. The ASA examined the paid agreement and ruled in May 2023 against prohibited vape promotion on TikTok and featuring someone under 25 in a significant role. [24]

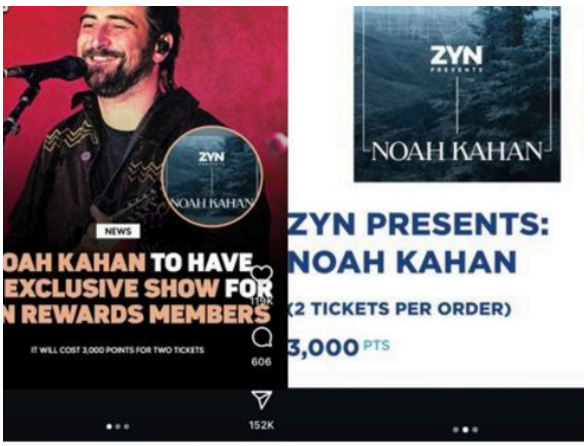
The brand was buying a place in a familiar getting-ready video. Enforcement needs to look at who pays for and shapes this content, as well as the creator who posts it.

Source: ASA ruling, HQD Tech UK, 10 May 2023

Music rewards: a nicotine brand offers access

In April 2025, ZYN rewards members could exchange 3,000 points for two tickets to an exclusive Noah Kahan concert in Denver. Posts on Instagram linked the nicotine pouch brand with access to a popular artist. Both the member and their guest had to be 21 or over. [18]

The reward connects nicotine-brand loyalty with access to a popular artist. Restricting attendance to adults does not tell us who saw the posts. The reach and appeal of promotion matter alongside age checks at the door.



@countryhub, reproduced in Dobbs et al., Tobacco Control, Figure 1, 2025.

Source: Dobbs et al., Tobacco Control, 2025

WHAT ASH WALES IS CALLING FOR

1. MAKE RESPONSIBLE CHOICES IN ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURE
Fashion brands, publishers and creators: stop using smoking to sell a look.

Broadcasters, streaming services, film and games producers: reduce avoidable smoking and nicotine imagery in content reaching young people, including trailers, publicity and fan material. Ofcom and the BBFC should review their guidance and publish regular findings.

Event organisers and venues: reject nicotine-brand sponsorship, sampling and rewards. Consider who sees the promotion as well as who attends.

2. MAKE THE ADVERTISING RULES WORK
UK Government: publish clear guidance before the wider restrictions begin, covering influencer promotion, sponsorship and tobacco branding on clothing.

Welsh Government and local authorities: provide the Trading Standards capacity to monitor nicotine promotion, act on breaches and report action taken.

Platforms and regulators: make prohibited promotion easy to report, remove it promptly and act on repeat breaches.

3. UNDERSTAND AND REDUCE EXPOSURE IN WALES
Welsh public health and education partners: work with young people to understand what they encounter, including Welsh-language content. Publish findings and assess whether exposure falls as new protections take effect.

Schools, youth services, universities and students' unions: help young people recognise commercial promotion and discuss how culture shapes what feels normal. Support student-led work and challenge nicotine-brand sponsorship, sampling and giveaways on campus.

Protecting young people must go alongside clear advice for adults who smoke. Vaping can help adults quit smoking. Smoking, vaping and nicotine pouches do not carry the same risks. [6]

SOURCES AND SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

1. ASH / YouGov, youth survey (2026). 5. CAP, Electronic cigarettes: Media prohibitions. 6. DHSC, advertising implementation (2026). 7. Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026. 9. ASH Wales, Youth Vaping Survey (2024; fieldwork 2023). 15. ASA, Social Responsibility. 16. University of Alabama CSTS, Smoking in the Balcony II. 18. Dobbs et al., Tobacco Control (2025). 22. Leonardi-Bee et al., Addiction (2016). 23. Donaldson et al., JAMA Pediatrics (2022). 24. ASA, HQD Tech UK (2023). 25. Barker et al., Love Island exposure study (2018). 26. UK Government, New rules to protect children online (2026). 27. DHSC, Selling vaping and nicotine products (2026). 28. Brandsharing Regulations 2004. 29–31. ASA, About, complaints and sanctions. 32. ASH Wales / YouGov, Annual Adult Population Survey 2026.

Full references and legal notes: ash.wales/nicfluenced/#nfi-briefing-sources