



Smoke-Free Colusa County Newsletter

The Smoke-Free Colusa County Subcommittee, part of the Colusa County Partners for Health, aims to improve the health of Colusa County residents through education and promotion of a tobacco-free lifestyle.

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In 2020, young people binge-watched shows like Netflix's "The Queen's Gambit" and "The Umbrella Academy" and Showtime's "Shameless," all of which featured heavy tobacco imagery, according to Truth Initiative's latest report on tobacco imagery in entertainment.

Truth Initiative's fourth annual report on the topic, "While You Were Streaming: Nicotine on Demand," is the first to look at shows that were commonly binge-watched, an important behavior to examine because the research shows that the more tobacco imagery one sees, the more likely they are to go on to vape. Watching shows in a compressed time may influence the amount and intensity of exposure.

Most top binge-worthy shows — 64% — contained tobacco, including "The Queen's Gambit" and "The Umbrella Academy," which both showed tobacco in every episode and stream on Netflix. Additionally, about a third (30.1%) of 15- to 24-year-olds surveyed report that they binge-watched the Netflix hit "Stranger Things" in the past year, even though it did not have a new season in 2020, according to a follow-up survey specifically on binge-watching that underscores how older content still exposes many young people to tobacco imagery. The last season of "Stranger Things" in 2019 included 721 tobacco incidences, quadrupling the instances of tobacco imagery in the show's first season.

In addition to binge-worthy shows, the report looks once again at top shows most popular with 15- to 24-year-olds and found that tobacco continues to be pervasive, with 60% of the 2020 top 15 shows depicting tobacco. "Family Guy" (Fox), "The Simpsons" (Fox), "On My Block" (Netflix), "Big Mouth" (Netflix), "Bob's Burgers" (Fox) and "Rick and Morty" (Adult Swim) top the list of shows with the most tobacco depictions.

The rising popularity of streaming and binge-watching shows coupled with past Truth Initiative research indicating that exposure to tobacco imagery through episodic programming can triple a young person's odds of starting to vape raises concerns about young people's continued exposure to tobacco through their favorite shows.

"The Queen's Gambit" tops binge-watched shows with most tobacco depictions

Researchers asked young people ages 15-24 to name streaming shows they binge-watched in 2020 to come up with the most "binge-worthy" shows, and found that many popular shows contained tobacco imagery, including cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and cigars.

Among binge-watched shows, Netflix's Emmy award-winning chess drama "The Queen's Gambit" had the most, with 220 tobacco depictions. The coming-of-age story prominently features characters using tobacco. In its first season alone, the show depicted tobacco in every episode.

Shows like “The Queen’s Gambit” appear to portray tobacco as something characters turn to when under stress. This characterization of tobacco taps into a common misconception that nicotine is a stress-reliever, when in fact nicotine can worsen anxiety symptoms and amplify feelings of depression. (For more on the connection between nicotine and mental health, see the Truth Initiative report “Colliding Crises: Youth Mental Health and Nicotine Use”)

“The Umbrella Academy” triples tobacco use

Another Netflix show that was frequently binge-watched, “The Umbrella Academy,” tripled tobacco instances from 65 to 205 instances in its latest season compared to its first season, also managing to include tobacco in every episode. The show revolves around a family of adopted sibling superheroes who reunite to solve both the mystery of their father's death and the threat of an imminent apocalypse.

“Shameless” is popular with young viewers despite its “mature” rating

The binge-worthy show that came in third in number of tobacco depictions, “Shameless,” depicts the poor, dysfunctional family of Frank Gallagher, a neglectful single father of six. It highlights how Frank’s alcoholism and drug abuse force his children to learn to take care of themselves – themes that aptly earn the series its TV-MA rating, deemed appropriate for mature audiences ages 17 and older. The show streams on Showtime, a premium television channel, which may have been effective in protecting younger people from tobacco exposure in the past thanks to the nature of cable television and parental control. However, in a changing media landscape, the show is easily accessible to younger audiences on platforms such as Netflix or Hulu.

Protecting youth from on-screen tobacco imagery

Increased tobacco imagery in entertainment, media, and pop culture points to an overall problem with the renormalization and glamorization of smoking and vaping. What we see requires urgent and ongoing action. Necessary actions include:

- Developing and publishing comprehensive policies that prohibit the normalization of tobacco.
- Certifying that companies have not received industry payoffs.
- Distributing anti-tobacco and anti-vaping messages.

Onscreen tobacco use and imagery directly contribute to the youth e-cigarette epidemic, and the entertainment industry should not be complicit with the tobacco industry in helping addict a new generation of young people to nicotine.

Colusa County Partners for Health Meeting

The next Colusa County Partners for Health meeting will be announced to those subscribed to the e-mail list. Please e-mail TEP@ColusaDHHS.org to receive updates on meetings and coalition activities.

Resources

Interested in a meeting or community presentation to learn more about secondhand smoke, thirdhand smoke, tobacco marketing towards youth, or the Colusa County Tobacco Education Program? Contact us directly to schedule an appointment:



Colusa County Tobacco Education Program
Contact: Rafael Perez
Phone: (530) 458-0380
<http://www.countyofcolusa.org/tobaccoeducation>

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