

Tobacco point-of-sale displays, brand awareness, and smoking and vaping among young people in Scotland

Insights for policymakers from the DISPLAY project

In 2013, the Scottish Government set an ambitious target to create a tobacco-free generation in Scotland by 2034, with cigarettes out of sight and out of mind for generations born in 2013 and after.

Since 2013, important reforms aimed at reducing the visibility and availability of tobacco and nicotine products to young people have been introduced as part of Scotland's tobacco control policy. These include: banning tobacco displays and promotions at point-of-sale; prohibiting the sale of vaping products to under-18s; and banning the sale of vaping products through vending machines. In addition, smoking in cars carrying passengers under 18 years of age has also been banned.

However, further action is needed to embed the cultural change necessary to raise a tobacco-free generation. A consultation is also planned in Scotland on what further regulation of e-cigarettes is required, such as the restriction of domestic advertising and promotion of e-cigarettes. In a rapidly changing environment, where smoking rates among young people are falling but experimentation with e-cigarettes has increased, understanding the influence of tobacco branding and the display of tobacco and nicotine products is essential in order to develop effective policy interventions that protect young people.

This briefing draws on research led by the University of Stirling's Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, and provides insights into the relationship between tobacco branding, point of sale marketing and e-cigarette uptake among young people in Scotland. The paper will be of use to policymakers in Scotland, and further afield, when considering the next steps necessary to combat the uptake of smoking and vaping among young people.

Key findings

- Prior to implementation of the POS display ban in Scotland, young people found tobacco displays highly attractive and eye-catching.
- Among 13 and 15 year-olds, tobacco brand awareness was significantly associated with regularly visits to small shops and noticing tobacco POS displays in small shops and large supermarkets.
- Following implementation of a partial POS ban, brand awareness fell within a year and continued to do so until early spring 2015. Brand awareness also fell after the comprehensive ban, but to a lesser extent.
- The impact of the POS ban on brand awareness was greatest among the youngest pupils, aged 11 to 12 years.
- However, cues that tobacco is available remain prominent and ubiquitous in the retail environment, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities where smoking rates are the highest.
- E-cigarettes are promoted at point-of-sale and on the internet and the recall of e-cigarette promotions was associated with young people trying e-cigarettes.
- Among young people who had never smoked, the use of e-cigarettes at baseline was associated with the trial of traditional, combustible cigarettes both at one and two years follow-up.
- The transition among 'never' smokers from e-cigarette use to smoking combustible cigarettes appears to be mediated by increases in the number of smokers in friendship groups and in pro-smoking attitudes.

The DISPLAY Study

Legislation that prohibited tobacco displays and promotions at point-of-sale was implemented in Scotland in large supermarkets in 2013 (partial ban) and in small retailers in 2015 (comprehensive ban). The Determining the Impact of Smoking Point of Sale Legislation Among Youth (DISPLAY) study set out to assess the impact of the legislation on young people's exposure to tobacco promotions, their brand awareness, their attitudes towards smoking and their smoking behaviour.

The study was conducted in four communities on mainland Scotland between 2013 and 2017, and collected information annually on the locations of shops that sold tobacco and the characteristics of their tobacco displays. Annual surveys in four schools located in the study communities collected information about pupils' exposure to tobacco displays in small shops and supermarkets, their attitudes to and susceptibility to smoking, and their smoking and vaping behaviour. Annual focus group discussions with pupils then explored themes from the school survey in more detail. Further detail on the study's design and methods can be found in the DISPLAY report.

Implementation of point-of-sale legislation

School survey data collected in 2013, prior to the implementation of the POS display ban in large supermarkets, indicated that brand recognition among secondary school children was high. One third of pupils recognised five or more cigarette brands, just over one quarter recognised three to four brands and a further quarter one to two brands. Only 13.9% did not recognise any brands at all. The number of brands recognised was greatest among those young people who visited small shops at least twice a week, the group most exposed to tobacco POS displays.

In focus groups, young people said that they found tobacco displays 'highly attractive', 'eye-catching' and 'colourful' – in one group tobacco displays were likened to 'an adult sweetie shop'. These findings highlight the importance of POS displays in promoting tobacco brand awareness, which is an important determinant of youth smoking susceptibility and subsequent smoking initiation.

Compliance with the legislation was high both amongst large supermarkets and small retailers, and the school surveys showed that brand awareness decreased over the course of the study. The proportion of pupils who did not recognise any cigarette brands after the partial ban increased from 13.9% in 2013 to 22.4% in 2015, and then increased further following the comprehensive ban to 27.3% in 2017. The mean number of brands recalled declined by 95% between 2013 and 2017. However, the fall in brand awareness was only statistically significant among the youngest pupils, aged 11 and 12 years, the age group with the fewest years of exposure to uncovered tobacco displays.

Point-of-sale displays and e-cigarette use

E-cigarettes entered the UK market in 2010 and underwent a period of rapid growth, with an increase in the number of stores selling and displaying e-cigarettes.

While tobacco POS displays and promotions are banned in Scotland, there are no such restrictions on the display or promotion of vaping products. In focus groups, young people reported that e-cigarettes were being widely promoted and not just at POS. As one young person put it, '.... they're in the movies, they're on posters, they're in adverts... they're everywhere... taken the world by storm.' The proportion of young people who had tried an e-cigarette increased rapidly over the course of the study from a baseline of 14.3% in 2014 (when data on their use was first collected), and by 2017, more young people in the study had tried an e-cigarette (33.7%) than a conventional cigarette (21.1%). Nevertheless, the proportion of young people reporting regular vaping remained low over the course of the study.

However young people who recalled having seen e-cigarettes in small shops and supermarkets were more likely to intend to try vaping in the future compared with those who had not, while those who recalled having seen them in small shops were more likely to have actually tried an e-cigarette. The 2016 survey data also revealed that young smokers who had never tried an e-cigarette but who recalled seeing e-cigarette displays in shops and online were more likely to have tried e-cigarettes within a year.

E-cigarettes and subsequent tobacco usage

Longitudinal analysis of the survey data also found that the young people who had 'never' smoked but had tried e-cigarettes in 2015 were more likely to subsequently try smoking a cigarette both at one and two years follow-up, compared with 'never' smokers who had never tried an e-cigarette. The transition from e-cigarette use to smoking initiation was found to be mediated by an increase in the number of smokers in friendship groups and an increase in pro-smoking attitudes.

Implications for policymakers

- The Scottish tobacco POS legislation has been successful in reducing exposure to tobacco products but there has only been a significant reduction in brand awareness among young people aged 11 and 12 years.
- In addition, tobacco as a generic product is ubiquitous in the retail environment, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities.
- Regulation of the size, design and positioning of storage units might contribute to a reduction in this inequality.
- With the reduction in product visibility, the relative impact of parental smoking on smoking susceptibility and access to tobacco is likely to increase.
- Tobacco control policy should continue to focus on reducing parental smoking, particularly in front of children in the home, and on encouraging parents to keep tobacco products out of sight.
- E-cigarette displays and promotions are not regulated and young people's exposure to them increases the likelihood of experimentation. The use of e-cigarettes in 'never' smokers is also associated with smoking initiation up to two years later.
- Future policies should prioritise the protection of young people by limiting the visibility of (and access to) e-cigarettes and other nicotine products as they come onto the retail market.

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