

Youth have easy access to e-cigarettes online through lax age verification and concealed deliveries

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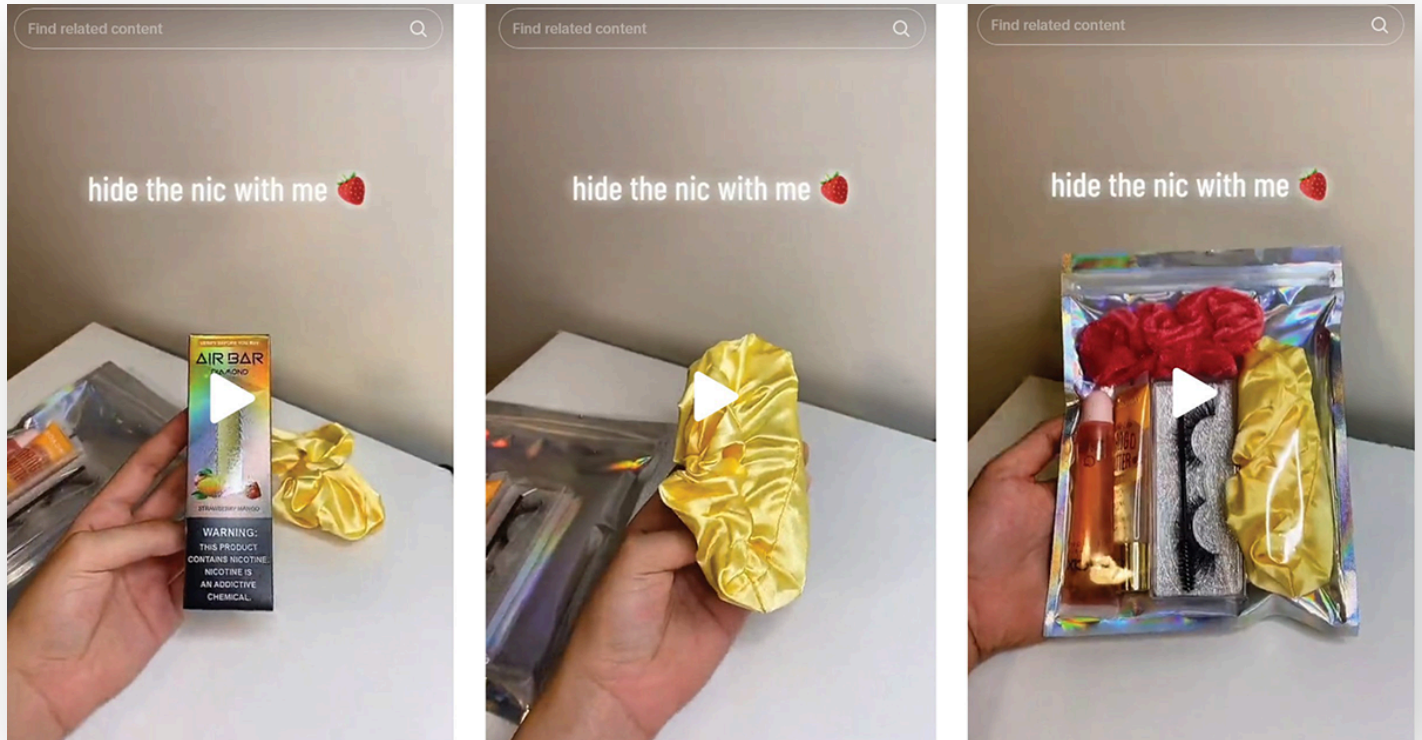
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TikTok accounts promoting “discreet shipping” services that conceal e-cigarettes in cosmetics, candy, and beauty products attempt to circumvent age restrictions on e-cigarette sales as well as parental oversight, according to new Truth Initiative[®] research [published in Tobacco Control](#). The research was published in tandem with [separate new Truth Initiative research findings](#) that most (76.3%) online vape shops allow customers to reach the checkout page without proper confirmation that they are above 21 – the age required to purchase tobacco. Combined, these studies highlight just how easy it is for young people to purchase e-cigarettes online and evade policies intended to prevent youth use of nicotine-containing products.



"Where do you hide the nic?"

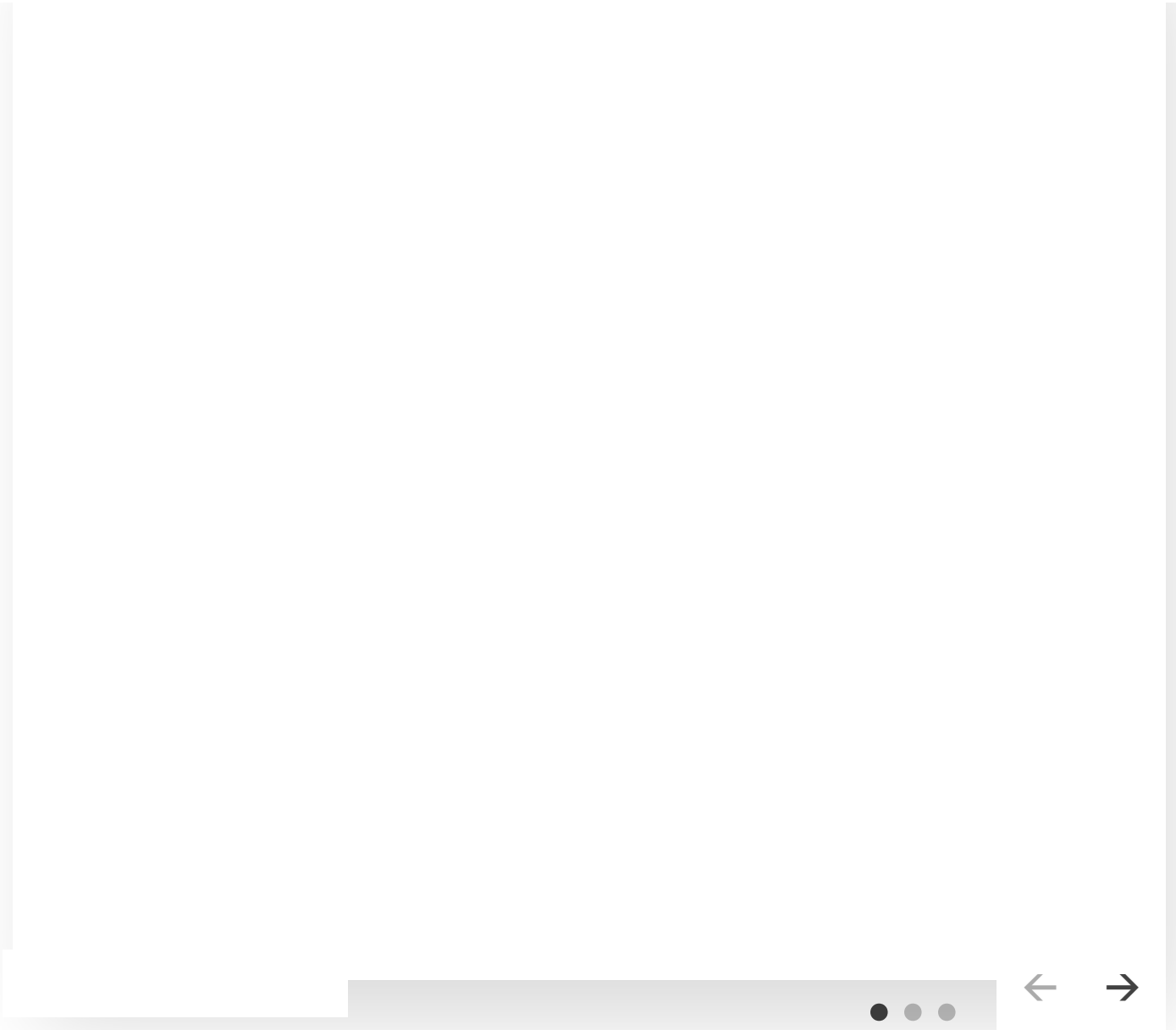
E-cigarette use among young people remains a problem, with 10% of high schoolers currently using e-cigarettes, and many of those vaping daily, [according to the 2023 National Youth Tobacco Survey](#). Retailers are not permitted to sell tobacco products – including e-cigarettes – to those under the age of 21. Despite the age restriction, e-cigarette sellers are promoting products to youth on TikTok by advertising discreet shipping services that hide e-cigarettes inside cosmetics or hair accessories, assuring customers that they won't be asked for identification to prove their age during purchase or delivery.

The Aircosmeticss (@aircosmeticss) TikTok account (now removed) was of particular concern, researchers note. The account promoted Air Bar e-cigarettes hidden inside cosmetics sets and had the highest engagement of any account researchers reviewed.

Aircosmeticss' most popular video – captioned "where do you hide the nic" – showed an e-cigarette hidden inside a hair scrunchie concealed within a

cosmetics gift set. The post had more than 1.5 million views. Comments made on Aircosmeticss' posts reassured users that signatures or ID are not required to purchase or deliver e-cigarettes, that e-cigarettes are hidden, and that there is no minimum age requirement to purchase. The posts appeared to successfully reach their target audience of underage e-cigarette users: one user commented that their 15-year-old sister successfully ordered the product without ID.

Discreet shipping on TikTok, a platform used by 67% of U.S. teens, is one of the latest ways vendors target young people through social media and online platforms to make tobacco products more appealing and accessible. Makers of the e-cigarette JUUL, which played a major role in elevating youth nicotine use to the highest rates seen in decades, conducted an influencer engagement campaign as part of the product's 2015 launch. A growing body of **recent Truth Initiative research** has shown that the tobacco industry is using social media platforms popular with young people to advertise tobacco products, control tobacco-related conversations, evade flavored tobacco restrictions, and spread misinformation about nicotine.



A wider problem of relaxed age verification policies

Aircosmeticss is just one example of a widespread problem: loose marketing and age verification policies make buying e-cigarettes easy, even for young people who aren't permitted to purchase them legally.

A separate Truth Initiative study also [published in Tobacco Control](#) finds that the majority (76.6%) of online vape shops allowed visitors to type in a birthday or choose the "21 or older" option to access the site. The majority of sites

that shipped to buyers (76.3%) allowed visitors to reach the checkout page without verifying ID.

E-cigarette market remains robust despite efforts to regulate

The U.S. Food & Drug Administration has allowed many e-cigarettes to remain on the market for years while it conducts a delayed review. In the meantime, illegal e-cigarettes continue to flood the market without authorization. The number of unique e-cigarette products more than quadrupled from 453 in June 2021 to 2,023 in June 2022, according to a Truth Initiative [review of U.S. retail sales data](#). Many of these e-cigarettes feature higher nicotine strengths and larger capacities for e-liquid, all at cheaper prices, according to a separate Truth Initiative study [published in Tobacco Control](#).

Recently, the FDA has cracked down on illegal e-cigarette sales. In December 2023, the FDA [issued warning letters to 11 online retailers](#) selling unauthorized e-cigarette products and also worked with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to [announce the seizure of more than \\$18 million in illegal e-cigarettes](#). While these steps are promising, they also underscore the scale and severity of challenges faced by those attempting to curb e-cigarette sales in the U.S., particularly among young people.

"Although Aircosmeticss and similar accounts should be removed, others will likely replace them," researchers write. "Instead, TikTok should strengthen surveillance and responses to curtail discreet shipping of age-restricted products." Indeed, the Aircosmeticss TikTok account was removed three days after publication of the research but a [new account](#) with similar videos recently appeared.

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