

ASHES, Vol. 3(3) - Addiction and technology: Is tobacco legislation online?

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Anyone, including children, with online access and limited computer skills can enter input and receive output via the Internet. Security is a major concern of parents and lawmakers seeking to protect children from pornography, pedophiles, alcohol and tobacco, which are all present within a sovereign Internet nation. Since the 1990's and the birth of stricter tobacco legislation, it has become more difficult for minors to purchase cigarettes from convenience stores and other tobacco vendors. However, with a new generation of technology-savvy minors, this legislation stands to be undermined by Internet tobacco sales. This week's ASHES will focus on the sale of tobacco to minors over the Internet.

Abrams, Hyland and Cummings (2003) set out to determine the prevalence of Internet cigarette purchasing among underage youth. They conducted an anonymous survey including questions about tobacco use and access to cigarettes with 7,621 ninth graders in three different Western New York counties. Of the eligible schools, 58% (N=46) participated and 95 to 98% of students per school completed the survey representing 47% of eligible ninth graders overall. Researchers defined current smokers as anyone who smoked at least once in the past 30 days. Smokers were asked additional questions about past and future use of the Internet to purchase cigarettes.

Overall 18% (n=1,402) of the sample was classified as current smoker. Few of the smokers, 2.3% (n=31), reported ever buying cigarettes over the Internet, and 1.7% (n=22) reported buying cigarettes over the Internet in the past 30 days. Despite these low rates, 9% (n=126) of current smokers reported that they intended to buy cigarettes over the Internet in the next year. Additionally, only nine of the 31 students who had purchased cigarettes over the Internet in the past 30 days were asked for proof of age. This lack of oversight makes the Internet a viable purchasing alternative to the stricter tobacco legislation in real-world venues.

There are several limitations to this study including restricting the study to ninth

grade students. Older minors might use the internet more frequently to purchase cigarettes because they make more Internet purchases. A study including multiple age groups would more accurately measure Internet cigarette purchasing among underage students. Additionally, the authors used a broad definition of current smoking that included occasional smokers who might have no need to purchase their own cigarettes. In this study, the majority, 57.8% (n=764), of the study's smokers were occasional smokers. Finally, the study content, asking about Internet purchasing of cigarettes, might have alerted some students to this option and prompted their intentions.

Despite these limitations, the present study offers two important conclusions. First, new legislation is necessary to enforce age verification practices by Internet tobacco vendors because based on this survey, the majority failed to do so. Second, the rising instance of underage smokers intending to purchase cigarettes over the Internet will counteract current tobacco control efforts unless immediate actions are taken. The goal of policy reform will be to assure that the off-line laws are enforced online as well.

-Erinn Walsh.

References

Abrams, S. M., Hyland, A., & Cummings, K. M. (2003). Internet cigarette purchasing among ninth-grade students in Western New York. *Preventive Medicine*, 36(6), 731-733.

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