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**UAMS and Youth Researchers Help Expose Illegal ‘Mini-Cup’  
and Toy-Shaped E-Cigarettes Promoted on Instagram**

FAYETTEVILLE — A newly published study reveals that illegal e-cigarettes designed to resemble miniature boba tea cups, cola cans, and toy animals are being widely promoted on Instagram, often portraying young people using the products and marketing them in ways that may appeal to youth.

The research, titled [“#MiniCupVape E-Cigarettes Promoted on Instagram: A Youth Participatory Action Research Approach,”](#) was led by Page D. Dobbs, Ph.D., of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health, in collaboration with colleagues and two middle school student researchers from Hot Springs Junior Academy in Hot Springs, Arkansas. The article appears in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Using a youth participatory action research (YPAR) model, the team analyzed 199 public Instagram posts promoting miniature cup- and toy-shaped e-cigarettes that were posted between July and December 2022. The project uniquely incorporated middle school students as research partners in identifying emerging trends and relevant hashtags while shielding them from excessive exposure to tobacco marketing content.

The study found that:

- 77% of posts displayed e-cigarettes resembling miniature boba cups.
- 27% depicted devices resembling small cola cans.
- 15% showed animal or toy-shaped devices.
- 23% portrayed individuals actively vaping.
- 17% depicted young people using the products.
- 35% indicated international shipping.
- 11% showed large-scale manufacturing of the devices

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Although some posts stated the products were intended for individuals over age 18, none of the miniature cup- or toy-shaped devices identified in the study are authorized for sale by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), making them illegal in the United States.

The products’ resemblance to everyday household items raises concerns about accidental exposure among young children and increased appeal to adolescents, Dobbs said.

The study stands out for its direct involvement of youth researchers. Two middle school students participating in the Education Accelerated by Science and Technology (EAST) Initiative program at Hot Springs Junior Academy helped identify the issue, contributed to refining the codebook used in the content analysis, and provided insight into how these products might be perceived by adolescents.

“Engaging students as research partners, we gain authentic insight into how these products are being marketed and perceived,” Dobbs said, “while also empowering young people to be part of the solution.”

Despite FDA warning letters issued to retailers selling disguised e-cigarettes, the study demonstrates that promotion of these illegal products continues on social media platforms popular with youth. Researchers call for increased enforcement of federal and state tobacco control laws, enhanced platform oversight, and education for parents, educators, health care providers, and policymakers.

With 1.63 million U.S. middle and high school students reporting e-cigarette use in 2024, researchers emphasize that social media surveillance and regulatory action are critical components of protecting youth from exposure to nicotine products.

The study was supported by funding from the National Institutes of Health National Cancer Institute.

UAMS is the state’s only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and eight institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute, Institute for Digital Health & Innovation and the Institute for Community Health Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS’ clinical enterprise. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 3,553 students and 1,015 medical residents and fellows. It is the state’s largest public employer with about 12,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children’s, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit [www.uams.edu](http://www.uams.edu) or [www.uamshealth.com](http://www.uamshealth.com). Find us on [Facebook](#), [X](#) (formerly [Twitter](#)), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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