

2024

IS SMOKING

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S T Y L E ?



A Look at
How 90s
Aesthetics
and
College
Culture
Fuel a
Resurgence

BY: ELLA
HEYDENFELDT

It's said that everything eventually comes back in style. A few years ago, it was neon colors, shoulder pads and chunky sneakers, all straight from the eighties. But now it seems like the nineties are having their moment again.

From mini dresses and claw clips to the return of *Sex and the City* on streaming platforms, the decade's rebellious, effortlessly chic vibe has resurged, bringing some of its more dangerous accessories back into view: the Marlboro Lights, the unfiltered Camels, and the social scenes that once surrounded them. Shows like *Sex and the City* present the idea of being a free spirit, moving to a big city, surrounding oneself with friends, and getting into "good trouble" with a cigarette in hand—romanticized to the max.

This imagery isn't just nostalgic; it's becoming trendy again. Gen Z, many of whom are experiencing their college years, seem to be reviving the cigarette's image as an accessory to freedom and social life. But what's fueling this new wave of smoking? To answer this question, several individuals across generations and communities have come forward, and a pattern started to emerge: while the aesthetic of smoking is back, its cultural appeal has shifted across generations and regions, with each decade offering a new twist on nicotine. In recent times, it seems, the younger generations are starting to forgo the vape and reimbrace the classic cigarette.

DECADES OF NICOTINE



Tom Richards in his kitchen

A father in his fifties who prefers to go by Tom Richards, who has had a complex relationship with nicotine over the past forty years reflects on how nicotine has remained a constant through different eras, each decade finding new ways to make it accessible and appealing. A tall guy with bits of grey streaked into his dark black crop cut hair, sporting a white t-shirt and loose dark blue pants, he perches at the kitchen counter looking patient. "In the 80s, I would say smoking was not cool—more trashy," he states, reflecting on his college years. "But in the 90s, it became cool again, and I would say a lot of that was Hollywood." Back then, cigarette scenes were prominent in movies and TV, making smoking seem glamorous.

Richards himself never picked up the habit but was a "perpetual user of chewing tobacco," a common alternative during his high school years in Northern California, where he recalls, "For me, it was baseball, and we were chewing." He sees today's resurgence as part of a pattern: "With each decade, we have different popular methods. Nicotine is what it is, but how people ingest it—that's what changes."

Richards' perspective brings into focus that while nicotine itself remains addictive, the manner in which it's consumed transforms with each generation's unique set of social cues and cultural influences. From chewing to cigarettes to vapes, nicotine is constantly being rebranded. The electronic cigarette, or vape, took youth by storm a mere few years ago; but with recent health studies uncovering the deadly chemicals found within the flavored syrups, there has been a strong public backlash. Today, vaping seems passé, while cigarettes—once denounced for their toxicity—are ironically making a comeback in certain social circles.

Illustrating said comeback, standing on top of a chair set out on the porch, cigarette in hand, and looking down at me with a goofy smile, a UC Santa Barbara grad student going by Trey Douglas opens up about his journey into nicotine addiction. An athlete in high school, he had minimal exposure to smoking despite living in the heart of San Francisco. But coming to college changed things. He first encountered bongs packed with marijuana, but soon, his friends started adding nicotine into the mix.



Trey Douglas on his chair

After a particularly rough breakup, Douglas found himself hooked. Gazing up at the sky with a slight grin, he recalls the turning point: "When I went to Brazil, it was over because everyone was smoking cigarettes all the time." Now, back in Santa Barbara, he can barely go a few hours without a cigarette before withdrawal symptoms kick in. "The desire to avoid withdrawal... that's addiction," he admits. He describes the triggers that make him reach for a cigarette: "In the morning, after school, after a high-intensity situation, socially, or after exercise." For Douglas, smoking has become a constant companion.

"With each decade, we have different popular methods. Nicotine is what it is, but how people ingest it—that's what changes."

THE SOCIAL SIDE



James Preston lighting one up

For many young people today, smoking serves as a social glue. James Preston, a college student from Saratoga, California, grabs the light blue American spirit packet and takes out a pinch of shredded tobacco to stuff into his rolling papers as we sit at his dining table overlooking the Pacific. Preston first encountered cigarettes in college, and he describes his initial introduction with a laid-back nonchalance: "It started as a social thing," he remarked. "We have a great balcony, and it's fun to just sit there and hang out. That's how you kind of de-stressed and talked with people."

What started as a shared pastime with friends has, for Preston, become more of a habit, especially after moving in with other smokers. Despite the social aspect, he doesn't see himself continuing long-term: "I have something to look back on," he notes, suggesting that having lived smoke-free for the majority of his life could help him quit. Weather or not this is true remains to be seen.

Interestingly, Preston has a strong aversion to vaping, a trend that had surged among younger people just a few years ago. "I know what goes into my cigarettes," he says seriously, nodding to the one he is currently rolling, "but I don't know what goes into vapes."

The use of vapes, or E-cigarettes, increased among young adults from 2019 through 2022, in a National Health Interview survey. However, its usage is now at about a third of its height, according to a 2024 CDC study. This leads many to wonder, what is replacing these vapes?

The transparency of traditional cigarettes, where the dangers are known and disclosed, contrasts sharply with the sometimes murky chemical cocktails found in vapes. For Preston and many of his friends, smoking cigarettes feels more authentic—a surprising stance, given the generation's overall emphasis on health and wellness.

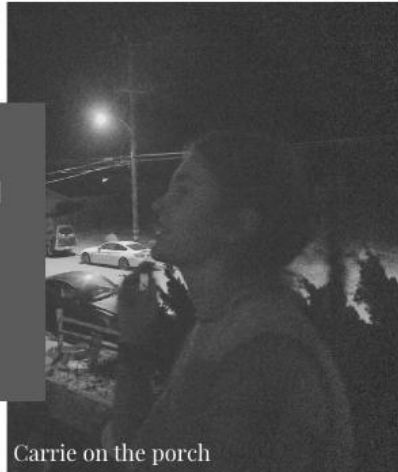


Preston smoking on his front porch

Similarly, another college student going by Carrie Shaw reflects on how her perception of smoking changed upon arriving at university. Growing up in a smoke-free household in Seattle, she recalls a deep-seated aversion to cigarettes. "You know how when you go to an airport and out front there's a cloud of smoke?" she laughs. "My siblings and I would hold our breath and say 'Oh, it's so gross!'" But in college, Shaw's outlook softened as she noticed friends she admired smoking. "Once I saw the people I enjoyed being around smoking—people who are smart and respectable—I thought, oh, maybe it's not just gross or something to villainize."

Shaw's relationship with cigarettes grew from there. "A friend bought me a pack on a camping trip, and it progressed from there to where I smoke at least one a day," she admits, picking at her thumb. "It's calming—the deep breaths, the head rush, looking up at the stars, just letting your stress fade." Yet, Shaw acknowledges the toll it's taking. "My lips are so chapped, and my lungs feel heavy," she says. "I need to quit." Her story highlights the push-and-pull of smoking as a way to unwind versus its undeniable health costs.

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Carrie on the porch

While college students might be experiencing this new exposure to cigarettes, cigarette smoking as a whole has been in a 30-year steady decline among adults in the United States, according to the American Lung Association. Yet, in 2020, for the first time in two decades, an FTC report found cigarette sales increased. There has yet to be a more recent report published, but it would not be surprising if this trend continues.

Higher sales typically signal higher consumption, and while it's unclear whether this surge comes from young people, the increased demand is bound to ripple through every demographic, amplifying the reach of cigarettes and nicotine alike.

A mother with concern for this younger demographic, Sandra Black recalls how smoking was embedded in high school culture in the 80s, particularly as a social ritual in her Georgia hometown. "It was what people did to be cool, to fit in," she reflects, dressed in athleisure and visibly healthy from her runner's build. While the habit began socially, it became part of her private routine—a way to unwind on her back porch, where it evolved into something more solitary—sound familiar? Looking back, she shakes her head, describing it as "counterintuitive to

all the good things I'm doing for my body," echoing the tension many feel between smoking's allure and its health consequences.

Though Black quit with determination, she admits she's now deeply concerned about the social environment her daughters are in, knowing firsthand how easily cigarettes can transform from a social accessory to a habit. "I hope they haven't started. It's sad because it's a hard thing to stop." Black's words underscore an enduring truth about smoking's grip: it's easy to pick up and just as easily a habit hard to shake.

A Junior from Loyola Marymount University with the preferred name of Charlotte York offers an international perspective. While studying abroad in Europe, she noticed the ubiquity of cigarettes in cities like Paris and Barcelona. "You see people smoking everywhere," she says. Though she's tried it a few times herself, she admits she's "never been into smoking" and prefers drinking. Still, York acknowledges the cultural weight of smoking in Europe. "The smoking culture definitely affects you. It's everywhere—the smell, the look of it. It feels like a natural part of life here."

The normalization of smoking in Europe further justifies adopting the habit for many exchange students. While abroad, they may find cigarettes as their ticket into social circles and as a fun activity. But as American tourists witness smoking as a casual, often social activity abroad, some bring that outlook home. This cultural exchange adds another layer to the rising popularity of cigarettes among young adults, especially in urban areas where the influence of European culture is often strongest.

POP CULTURE'S INFLUENCE

For many college students today, smoking feels like more than just a rebellion against vaping (who knew the cotton candy flavor could be so detrimental to one's health?)—it feels like an aesthetic choice connected to a wider pop culture revival. Recently, actors and actresses in popular films and media have been spotted lighting up, mirroring the old

Hollywood glamour of the 90s. In a world shaped by social media, the visibility of these figures plays a role in shaping trends. Just as *Sex and the City* once glorified cigarettes, celebrities are reigniting the image of smoking as a stylish, almost aspirational act, as read in *USA Today*.



Model in 2024 NY Fashion show

Still skeptical? Charli XCX, hailed as the queen of “brat summer,” made headlines when she received a cigarette bouquet for her birthday, as reported by *Vogue*. Her album, which dominated the U.S. charts in the final weeks of summer, solidified her status as a cultural icon. Meanwhile, Paul Mescal, the star of the highly anticipated *Gladiator II*, recently revealed that he refused to give up smoking while preparing for the blockbuster role, adding to the narrative of cigarettes as a defiant, yet fashionable, statement.

Ultimately, the resurgence of cigarettes may not signal a full return to smoking as a lifestyle. For many young adults, smoking is less a habit and more a trend, a nod to an aesthetic that glamorizes the past while ignoring its costs. The question of whether smoking is back might depend on who's looking: to some, it's a fleeting style choice, while to others, it's a dangerous step backward.

As college students adopt the look and feel of the 90s, it remains to be seen whether cigarettes are here to stay or merely passing through. Either way, the trend reflects the power of nostalgia and culture to override even the most well-known health risks.



Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City* smoking her classic Marlboro