

4. Youth as effective health advocates

Social media has changed the communications landscape for mobilization and advocacy. It has been a very effective channel for marketing of commercial products. However, it is underutilized as a channel for improving health literacy.

Young people are highly engaged across various social media platforms, with one quarter to one half of active users aged 16–24 years. Through strategic communications, WHO has worked with Member States to multiply its effectiveness in alcohol and tobacco control.

One in three current drinkers in the Western Pacific aged 15–19 years has engaged in excessive drinking. Sixteen per cent of youth aged 13–15 years smoke cigarettes. Young people are especially vulnerable to alcohol-related harm from injuries, risky behaviour such as unsafe sex and suicide. Social media provides space for discussion and advocacy by young people.

The WHO Office in China uses social media to support its work on tobacco control. In partnership with universities, young people were asked to make their own videos and post them on social media. The theme was: *Why it is not cool to smoke*. In Singapore and the Philippines, youth have also developed video messages and posted them on social media in support of the “tobacco-free generation” – a growing movement to ban cigarette sales to anyone born after 2000.



A WHO forum in Hong Kong SAR (China) applied digital media strategies to raise awareness and engage young people on the harmful use of alcohol.

Through an initiative supported by the WHO Regional Office, films highlighting the harmful use of alcohol were produced by young people in Cambodia, Mongolia and the Philippines. The films have been posted on social media in order to raise awareness and foster critical discussion among young people.

The best films, as selected by peers, were showcased at the WHO Regional Forum on Protecting Young People from the Harmful Use of Alcohol held in Hong Kong SAR (China) from 29 to 30 April 2016.

Fifteen delegates from 11 Member States participated in the forum, including nine national youth representatives.

To guide policy and advocacy on cost-effective interventions, two regional publications – *Young people and alcohol: a resource book* and a brochure entitled *How alcohol harms young people and what you can do about it* – were launched during the forum. These publications translate knowledge into action points for parents, policy-makers, health-care providers and advocates – improving health literacy on the harmful effects of alcohol on youth. ■