

Vaping Perceptions, Concerns, and use of Flavored Products: Key Informant Interview and Focus Group Preliminary Results

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BACKGROUND

- Potential reduced exposure products (PREPs), including vape devices, have been marketed as reduced harm alternatives for cigarette smokers.
- The Institute of Medicine in 2001 reviewed the scientific evidence for PREP claims and concluded that systematic evaluation of claims was needed.
- Previous work suggests net benefit of a PREP product should not just be considered in terms of toxicity and illness, but also in terms of what would have occurred in the absence of PREP products¹.
- Limited research has been done today about consumer beliefs, behaviors and experiences with vaping.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- Gain valuable information about consumer perceptions, concerns, and reasons for initiation of e-cigarettes and use of flavored products.

METHODS

- A total of 22 focus groups or key informant interviews were conducted over Zoom (N=52).
- Basic demographic information was collected using REDCap.
- Participants were led in a discussion of open-ended questions designed to elicit thoughts and reactions to electronic cigarette use, flavor availability, and marketing, and experiences with vaping.
- After all interviews were complete, a team of coders developed a code book with 159 distinct themes.
- Each interview was then coded using these themes by two independent coders who then compared and decided on a final set of codes for each interview.
- Codes were condensed into 10 overarching themes.

THEME	FREQ	EXAMPLE QUOTES
1. Device Type	221	1. I use JUUL, that's the only one I've ever really used 2. ...cheap and it tastes good and it hits well... 3. Hyde ... easiest way to get back into vaping because they were on the verge of outlawing the flavored juices and stuff.
2. Juice Source	97	1. I would buy them online. I would drive to the Indian reservation... 2. You can still get [flavors] at the gas stations, like under the table. 3. ...took a trip to Pennsylvania a few weeks ago, we stocked up and hopefully that'll get us through the rest of the year...
3. Legislation	286	1. (Due to bans on access): I might go back to using regular tobacco cigarettes, or I might just quit all in general. I'm not totally sure. 2. ... if tobacco (flavor) is the only choice, it would be tougher.
4. Flavor Use	322	1. I usually switch flavors every couple weeks or so. One flavor just gets too boring after a while, and th en I'll switch to something else. 2. So I try to like go in, ask for new flavors. [...]They're always like a lot of fun. They have a lot of really cool, like fruity flavors. 3. The first flavor that I've ever tried was Juul, mint pods. Those were a big game-changer. ... your breath is fresh, everything's fresh. It's just great, beautiful thing.
5. Health Perceptions	407	1. ...I guess there's a large lack of scientific studies to say one or the other is healthy at all. But I know it's bad for me. 2. ... I don't feel like it's as bad as cigarettes, although that's kind of hard to tell right now.
6. Product Perceptions	452	1. My purchase was less about aesthetics and more about functionality ...The nicotine matters, and my ability to consume it. 2. I like the way that [Juul] looks. I mean, I guess I prefer the black one because it's a little less flashy, easier to conceal... I mostly just like how small it is. I like, you know, that it's streamline, easy to fit in a pocket.
7. Cessation Efforts	22	1.... And at some point I would like to stop vaping, but there's a lot of stressors in my life right now. So it's very difficult to do. 2. ...I would love to know what it's doing to me. And maybe if I found out it might change. It might make me not want to vape anymore. It might make me cut down. It might change things, but I don't know because ignorance is bliss. 3. I think I had only quit vaping for like a few months and then I got back into it because I never stopped wanting the nicotine.
8. Reasons to Vape	194	1. ...when I was smoking...I would wake up coughing, and I don't do any of that when I vape. And I haven't had any kinds of those issues since I swapped over. 2. I think that it's also a coping skill for me. So, when I'm very stressed out at work and I need to take five minutes going out to my car and vaping, I feel much more calm after being able to do that. It's just one more thing to distract myself from the reality of what's going on.
9. Product Use and Vaping Behaviors	77	1. I have been using them since about 2016, so five or so years ago and I was 24 at the time. But I've been a cigarette smoker since I was 14. 2. I mean, I've tried tons of [flavors]. It's literally if someone has one and they offer it to you, and you use it if you want to.
10. Product Marketing and Industry Perceptions	217	1. I saw one of those cardboard cutouts that they put on the poles and stuff like that at gas stations, and it was advertising a JUUL for 15 bucks or something like that. And I was like, "Well, that's basically a pack of cigarettes." So I went and bought that instead. So the advertising definitely worked there. 2. They're trying to market to people underage and the colors and the flavors appeal to the teenage population to be able, for the companies to make more money, appeal to a population that previously probably wouldn't have used those products.

Table 1: Overarching themes and example quotes

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RESULTS

- Of the 52 participants, 20 identify as female and 32 identified as male.
- Median age of participants = 27.5 years.
- Preliminary results show a diversity of perspectives and experiences with vaping.
- 10 over-arching themes were identified, and these were endorsed between 22 and 452 times (*Table 1*).
- The themes discussed most were Health Perceptions and Product Perceptions where participants reported a range of beliefs, most commonly a positive perception of vaping (especially relative to cigarettes).
- Flavor use (other than tobacco or menthol) was commonly reported.

DISCUSSION

- Most users preferred some sort of fruit or sweet flavor other than tobacco or menthol and did not support flavor bans.
- Many ways of acquiring flavored juice were reported, and subverting (or planning to subvert) flavor bans was common.
 - Some participants indicated that they may try to quite vaping if flavors were inaccessible.
- Participant report favoring devices that are cost effective, as well as those that can are compact and discrete.
- Users reported that they mostly don't experience poor health from vaping and believe it to be safer than smoking cigarettes.
- Most believe there is not enough research to know if vaping is dangerous, although some report that research showing health risks would cause them to consider quitting.
- Reported barriers to cessation include nicotine addiction and fear of not being able to manage stress without vaping.

REFERENCES

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