

## Vaping - An inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in Queensland

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We are an interdisciplinary group from the University of Sydney undertaking an Industry and Community Project Unit. For our project we aimed to reduce the use of vapes in adolescents and young adults. We are working on a project with the industry partner, Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Abuse, to reduce youth vaping and shift youths' perceptions of vaping. The use of vapes among adolescents is a rising and prevalent issue in society which we believe needs to be assessed.

## **SECTION 1**

- The prevalence of youth vaping in Queensland has been found to be at 15.6% in 2022 (Queensland Government, 2023); a significantly lower rate than NSW population data, which highlighted that 32.7% of young adults have used a vape in 2021 (Watts et al., 2022). Despite the intended use of e-cigarettes being for smokers aiming to quit traditional cigarettes, they are more commonly used by youth and young adults for recreational purposes. This is reflected in Pettigrew et al.'s (2022) study of youth perceptions of vapes, with 50% thinking that vapes are cool/intriguing, and 44% using them out of curiosity. Experts believe that although vaping was never intended for children, because the global rates of cigarette smokers have reduced due to effective regulation and health campaigns, the tobacco industry has a vested interest in younger people adopting vaping as a habit (S.Chapman, personal communication, 2023). Between 2013 and 2019 the e-cigarette market quadrupled from under US\$5 billion to more than US\$20 billion due to the significant investments and consolidation of established tobacco companies (Tobacco Tactics, 2023).
- We conducted a few expert interviews throughout our own research from which we garnered that there are key focus points that make vaping dangerous, especially to an adolescent crowd who are prone to forming it as a bad habit. In the past few years, vaping has garnered popularity amongst younger users, as a more appealing alternative to smoking. It could erode the foundation of many anti-smoking campaigns from the past and could pose the next major public health crisis if not curbed soon.
- Concerns that were raised during interviews were primarily regarding:
  1. Access to vapes: Prescription regulations do not stop the general public from accessing vapes as there are means of buying it online and having it delivered. Many websites sell vapes in Australia with little to no means of age verification and do not ask for a prescription. Unlike America, which has strict regulations on the online sale of vapes like Juul, Australia has no such measures in place.
  2. Regulatory Implications: Vapes are mainly imported and there aren't enough measures in place to control the incoming supply to the country from a commercial or border security point of view. Unlike cigarettes, which are expensive, cannot be bought easily, and have purchase and carriage restrictions, vapes are easy to procure.
  3. Chemical constitution: Experts say there is sufficient information regarding the chemical risks of vaping. One major concern is of course, the presence of nicotine in vapes, which is addictive and has long-term implications, especially when users do not know they are ingesting it, which is very often. In addition, the chemical composition of the liquid itself is questionable, with no robust testing done to determine that the flavoured components of vaping are safe to ingest via the lungs.
- One of the significant challenges regarding e-cigarette and vape education and prevention is the inability to concretely state the health impacts due to the relatively short period of time that has elapsed since e-cigarettes were distributed. However, some of the known/theorised health impacts include the harmful effects of both nicotine and flavouring

chemicals. As nicotine is a highly addictive chemical, it makes it very hard to stop consumption, especially for an individual who is dependent on it. Not only is it addictive, but it can also increase the risk of many disorders to the heart, lungs, etc (Mishra, 2015). Vapes come in many different flavours ranging from blueberry to cherry. To achieve these flavourings, different chemicals are used in each flavouring. Some flavours can be more toxic than others because of the different chemicals. An example of this includes the use of benzaldehyde in cherry-flavoured vapes (Kosmider, 2016). Although there is not much research on benzaldehyde, current research suggests negative effects.

## **SECTION 2**

- When analysing existing prevention and intervention anti-vaping campaigns and programs, we found significant opportunities to increase effectiveness. Data gathered from our primary research (surveys with young people) uncovered the reality that many young people were unaware of the negative mental health impacts of vaping, however, generally, they were aware that vaping is not good for their physical health. Therefore, although there are opportunities to increase awareness of vaping's health impacts, many young people find this tedious and unnecessary, ultimately requiring the information to be conveyed in an engaging manner and educational space.
- To improve anti-vaping programs and campaigns, there is a consensus that scare campaigns, realism and displaying the direct dangers of vaping are viewed as being more effective, with them showing "a real person struggling with addiction"(Anonymous Young Adult Questionnaire, 2023). However, when undertaking ideation with young people and gaining additional feedback on campaigns, scare campaigns were found to often contain overdone cliches which can seem "tacky and barely engaging"(Anonymous Young Adult Questionnaire, 2023). Additionally, the difficulty of past scare campaigns within the context of youth vaping has been the disconnect with target audiences, as "people who vape are already aware of the dangers of vaping and their addiction already outweighs their concern for any negative side effects on the body" (Anonymous Young Adult Questionnaire, 2023).
- Therefore, an opportunity to better anti-vaping campaigns can be achieved through creating 'cringe' campaigns which provide a balance between conveying the dangers of vaping, connecting to the perspectives and language of the target audience, and altering the perception of vapes as being 'cool'. Such cringe campaigns could incorporate the fear of social rejection which we found to be a compelling driver of change, as "it plays on people's fear of social rejection or judgement by others"(Anonymous Young Adult Questionnaire, 2023). Furthermore, 'cringe' campaigns allow for a connection with the target audience through incorporating 'teenage tones and vibes', rather than 'lecturing' as is common within scare campaigns.

## **SECTION 4**

- The primary policy enacted to curb increasing e-cigarette usage by the Australian Government and the Therapeutic Goods Administration was approved in October 2021. This regulation required a valid prescription to import nicotine vaping products when purchasing from an overseas supplier (Vaping Facts, N/D).
- The regulation had little impact on the accessibility of vapes, with evidence suggesting that 80% of teenagers in NSW have stated that they found it easy to access illegal vapes from individual sellers or purchase products online (Cancer Council, 2022).
- A significant difficulty of e-cigarette regulation is the difficulty differentiating between nicotine and nicotine-free e-cigarettes and allowing only nicotine-free e-cigarettes from entering the country. Border control is unable to easily test e-cigarette shipments that enter the country due to the costly manner of nicotine chemical testing processes. This fault in

the system is a primary reason why nicotine e-cigarettes can easily enter the country with nicotine-free packaging. The deceiving nature of such packaging has resulted in 40% of those who self-reported vaping nicotine-free products as testing positive for nicotine usage (Becker & Rice, 2022).

- A legislative framework and preventative measures case study from New Zealand can be seen through the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products (Vaping) Amendment Act 2020 (the Amendment Act), which commenced on 11 November 2020 (Vaping Facts, N/D). The Act aimed to achieve a balance between ensuring vaping products are available for smokers wanting to switch to a less harmful alternative whilst guaranteeing these products aren't marketed or sold to young people (Vaping Facts, N/D). The Act is a step in the right direction, however, its effectiveness is yet to be seen due to similar hurdles present within Australia.

### **ADDENDUM:**

Our interdisciplinary group from The University of Sydney is currently working on building an anti-vaping campaign targeted towards adolescents and young adults based on insights we've gathered since January 2023. Done with no budget and limited resources, we believe this campaign has the capability to actually resonate with the vaping audience and will be more effective than past campaigns done in the country. To learn more about what we are doing please email [REDACTED], or call [REDACTED].

Group Members: Rosie McCulloch (submitor), Diya Marwah, Justine Daoud, Katherine Tan, Kusum Khatiwada, & Laura Ganley

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\* An anonymous young adult questionnaire seeking to discover young adults vaping habits, perceptions of vapes, and opinions on the effectiveness of past anti-vaping and anti-smoking campaigns. A total of 73 respondents completed the questionnaire, however due to ethical limitations all respondents were over 18 years. Additional informal brainstorming and polling was conducted with young adults across various stages of our project.