

Research report



Vaping Among Teens

Professorship Transformational Media

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Colophon

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Introduction

The government, healthcare sector and social stakeholders have long been trying to prevent young people from starting smoking. In recent years, there has been a trend of a huge increase in young people using the e-cigarette, popularly known as "vaping". The e-cigarette, once positioned by the tobacco industry as a means to quit smoking, was introduced as the healthy way to smoke¹. This claim has not been proven, especially in terms of long-term effects². Even though an e-cigarette lacks many of the toxic combustion products of tobacco, in the vapor there are harmful substances released, such as nicotine and propylene glycol, and (traces of) toxic and carcinogenic substances.

Even though little scientific research is yet available for long-term effects, it is now clear that the e-cigarette is more harmful than thought³. The acute toxicity of e-cigarettes is greater than conventional cigarettes. Nicotine is very addictive and use of e-cigarettes is associated with increased use of cigarettes. The e-cigarette is widely available and has now become a widely accepted stimulant among young people. Even young people who do not smoke or have smoked are tempted to vape. This development is causing great concern from the government and healthcare sector, and the need for knowledge on how to dissuade young people from vaping is high.

A collective of medical specialists "Artsen slaan alarm" want to develop a campaign to encourage young people not to vape or to stop vaping. An effective means of behavior change is the use of media⁴. Since young people spend much of their time online consuming audio-visual media through platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, video content is the most appropriate tool for an influence campaign. To this end, WeFilm was approached; this creative agency, at the request of the same group of doctors, previously developed a successful campaign aimed at encouraging smokers to quit.

¹ <https://www.trimbos.nl/actueel/blogs/vapen-de-snoepwinkel-van-de-tabaksindustrie/>

² <https://www.rivm.nl/tabak/producten/wat-is-een-e-sigaret>

³ <https://www.trimbos.nl/docs/160d6402-233a-426e-9343-b10d1c5f5b39.pdf>

⁴ Vigar G., Shaw A., Swann R., (2011) Selling sustainable mobility: The reporting of the Manchester Transport Innovation Fund bid in UK media. *Transport Policy* 18 (2011) 468-479.

Persuasive media campaigns for youth



Media interventions can play an important role in encouraging healthy behaviors or deterring unhealthy behaviors.⁵ Narrative approaches have also proven successful in promoting healthy behaviors, especially when using entertainment education, where the message is embedded in entertainment media such as audiovisual content.⁶ However, in the case of adolescent campaigns, media interventions do not always prove effective. Despite the fact that young people spend a lot of time with media, an average of 156 minutes per day by 2022,⁷ it is difficult to reach the target audience with media messages designed to encourage them to adopt healthier behaviors. Young people are increasingly using digital channels instead of linear media, making media behavior increasingly complex with the advent of new platforms and forms of communication.⁸ It is also difficult to shape the message effectively because young people experience a lot of resistance when confronted with influence campaigns.⁹ It is essential to design a message that does not evoke resistance and responds to the perceptions and relevant underlying mechanisms of the undesirable behavior. The messages can use scientific insights from health psychology based on the idea that it is possible to change cognitions in a target group and that these changes can in turn lead to healthier behavior¹⁰; for example based on the Health Belief Model (HBM) by providing information about the risks of the behavior¹¹. Messages can also be based on a wide range of scientific insights from consumer psychology. To develop effective interventions to influence healthy behaviors, knowledge about underlying processes in behavior and behavior change in the research context is essential.

⁵ Vigar et al., 2011

⁶ Adam et al. 2019

⁷ <https://www.newcom.nl/socialmediaonderzoek/>

⁸ <https://www.mediamonitor.nl/nieuws/mediamonitor-2021-kantelpunt-in-digitalisering-mediagebruik-en-mediaconcentratie/>

⁹ Van den Putte et al. (2015)

¹⁰ Bennett & Murphy (1997)

¹¹ Becker (1974)

Study vaping behavior by youth



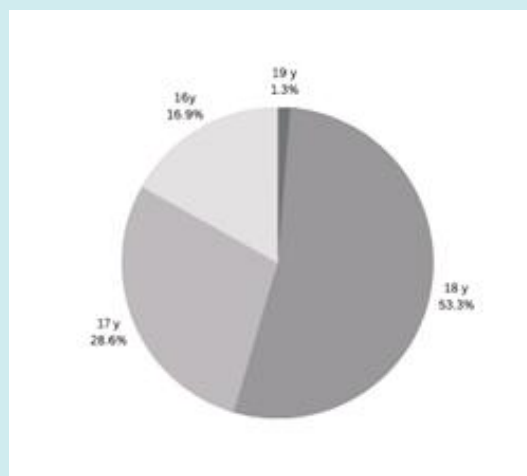
Market data on vaping related issues are widely available. In the Netherlands, the Trimbos Institute published various reports on the risk and the use of e-cigarettes¹². However, this information does not provide sufficient insights that could serve as foundation for an effective media campaign. In particular, there is a lack of knowledge into the sentiments and motives of young people with regard to vaping. Therefore, a study was conducted to gain relevant insights into these topics which can be used to develop a media campaign with the aim to discourage vaping behavior among the younger audience.

¹²www.trimbos.nl

Methodology

Since the aim of the research was to explore the motives and sentiments about vaping, a qualitative research method was applied. 77 structured interviews were conducted among teens between 16-19 years of age (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Age distribution participants



Data was retrieved both online and physical. The gender distribution was about equal between males (49%) and females (51%). The data was for the largest part retrieved from participants from the North of the Netherlands.

After an instruction, students from the Master Content & Media Strategy conducted the interviews as part of their content strategy course. Before starting the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose of the interview and asked for informed consent. The questions were asked based on an interview guide that was developed in collaboration with "Artsen slaan alarm".

To assign the data reduction codes to the transcripts and analyze word frequencies, NVIVO coding software was used, which facilitated a systematic comparison of the results and interpretations from the data. The findings are based on shared insights retrieved from these interviews. To exemplify the findings, individual quotes in the following sections are used. In specific occasions the frequencies of responses are included to demonstrate weight of the findings.

Results

Vaping behavior

The majority of the participants (#51) vape. Some participants mention that they were already vaping for a longer period of time, from 13 of 14 years of age. The largest part of participants started less than a year ago with the use of e-cigarettes. All participants indicate that there are vapers in their class ranging from a few to the majority of the class members.

Vaping locations

Vaping takes place everywhere. It appears that young people often do not follow the rules and often use the e-cigarette inside public places such as schools and public transportation.

One participant state:

“If people smoke cigarettes they go outside, but people who vape they literally do it everywhere. Like in rooms, bathrooms, in classrooms and well of course outside”

Figure 2: Word cloud “In what place do people vape”?



Associations with vaping

The participants were asked to name three words that come to mind when they think of vaping or vaporizing.

Figure 3: Word cloud associations with vaping



The main association with vaping is smoking, followed by flavors and taste. It is notable that many negative associations are stated, such as: unhealthy, bad and addictive. The most positive associations clearly refer to flavors and taste in general or specific flavors such as melon.

Motivations to vape

The respondents were asked either why they vaped themselves or why they think that others vape. Most vapers indicate that the taste is the main motivation to vape. One participant mentions:

“Because the flavors are nice. It is also very easy and accessible to vape, you can do it anywhere.”

Another participant mentions:

“Mostly the flavor, most of the vapes I used are a bit sweet and fresh in your mouth.”

Other main motivations refer to social reasons and enjoyment. These social reasons refer to both the reason why someone starts to vape:

“It started when a friend of mine had a vape and she asked if I wanted a hint. And yeah, I said yes. And that's when it started to become a little bit addicting. And then I will buy myself- one, two. Yeah. And yeah, then I started to smoke alone and it started to become really addictive.”

Or as a fun time-waster with friends:

“Because I find vaping tasty and I like to do it on a party, also because it's fun to do and stand outside with friends.”

The results also identify that participants vape because they consider it as a healthier or better alternative to smoking. Some indicate that they started in order to quit smoking, others started vaping without ever having smoked.

“I thought vaping was healthier than regular cigarettes, so I started it. Later I found out that wasn't the case at all.”

The findings show that many participants did not realize the addictiveness of vaping. Vaping starts at parties of social settings and it often leads to regular behavior:

“Smoking stinks and this is nice and sweet. I used to smoke at parties and now I vape a lot.”

A participant even indicates that vaping is the easiest way to fill the nicotine need:

"It sounds kind of terrible, but because I want nicotine 24/7 and I'd rather vape than be going out to smoke many times during the day."

Motivations for peers to vape

To the question why classmates or friends of the participants vape the participants refer to the taste as the main driver.

"I do think it is like an alternative smoking. Maybe it is more tasteful and you can also do it inside."

Second the addictiveness of vaping is mentioned:

"Because it is addictive and because everybody is doing it nowadays, so it is a trend."

Furthermore, enjoyment, vaping as an alternative to smoking and because it is a trend are frequent mentioned reasons why the participants think that their peers vape.

"I think we are all doing it for the same reason like to be trendy and so you don't feel like you're not updated or missing out something and because we can buy them online instead of letting someone older than you buy a normal cigarette."

Motivations not to vape

Participants who do not vape are mostly motivated by the fact that they perceive vaping as unhealthy. Other reasons that were mentioned were the costs, because they don't feel the need, they don't like it or to avoid addiction.

"As I said, I think it is stupid. Because vaping is addictive and usually addictive things are not good for your health or pocket. And I don't want to spend my money on something that gives me no benefit at all."

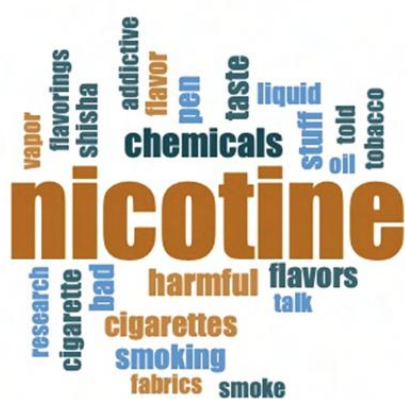
Two participants indicate that they prefer regular smoking over vaping.

Knowledge about vaping

The knowledge level of young people about the substances present in vaping pens is very low. Although nicotine is frequently mentioned, the far majority of the participants (#67) don't know what is inhaled.

"Nicotine, but other than that I don't know."

Figure 4: Word cloud substances in vape pens



Young vapers do not always feel the need to know what it actually is they inhale while vaping.

"Honestly no and I don't really care. Why would I? Like it's not like I care about health stuff when it comes to this. I know it's bad and that's it. Even if I found out it wouldn't change if I vape or not."

Or that knowledge about the dangerous ingredients does not motivate to quit vaping.

"Well in the beginning I did not know what was in the vapes, but my mom found out I was vaping. So, I had to come clean to her, at that moment she told me how bad it was for your health. After that talk I looked up what was in the vapes, I did not know it. It kind of shocked me, but I still do it."

Perception of harmfulness

Although knowledge about the substances in vape pens is lacking, most participants know that vaping is very harmful. Others indicate that it is somewhat harmful. Only two participants do not consider vaping to be harmful at all. Interestingly, many participants feel that vaping is less harmful than cigarettes, however eight respondents think that vaping is in fact more harmful than smoking. There is not a clear difference in results between vapers and non-vapers.

Availability of vape supplies

The findings show that it is very easy for young vapers to buy vaping supplies. The regular cigar shop “Primera” and online is most frequently mentioned. Some participants also buy their vape pens from classmates.

Figure 5: Word cloud where to buy vaping supplies



It seems rather easy for young vapers to get access to vaping supplies even when they are under the age of 18 either in stores or online.

“In night shops or vape stores. Some vape stores ask for an ID but some don't ask for it.”

And;

“I didn't use pens but I bought all my vape supplies either online or in a store in downtown Utrecht. Online is super easy though. You just click the button that you're over 18 and they will just ship it to your house.”

Advertising on vape pens

The far majority of the participants (#54) mention that they have not been exposed to advertising on vape pens. The participants who did see advertisements refer to advertisements distributed via social media platforms. Instagram, YouTube and TikTok were mostly mentioned.

When asking specifically if the participants ever came across content about vaping on social media the majority (#56) indicated that that was the case.

Figure 6: Word cloud exposure to online vaping content



TikTok and Instagram are most frequently mentioned platforms in which vaping content is shown.

"Mainly on Instagram or TikTok. There are videos of TikTokers who tell that they quit smoking cigarettes because of vaping."

And;

"I see it sometimes on Instagram or TikTok. Just people vaping and filming themselves. Like a group of guys smoking with music on or something like that."

Conclusion

This study shows that vaping is a generally accepted behavior among young people between the age of 16 and 19. Although some participants are already vaping for a long time, it seems that vaping more recently became a trend amongst this target group. Vaping supplies are widely available, and also easily accessible for minors. Furthermore, contrary to smoking, vaping is done everywhere, including places where it is prohibited.

The taste of vaping seems to be the unique selling point of vaping. In particular the flavors are appreciated. Although specific knowledge about the substances that are included in vape-pens is lacking, most young people know that it is harmful. Nevertheless, some vapers indicate that knowledge about health-related issues with vaping would not affect their behavior.

For non-vapers health is the main reason not to vape since vaping is strongly related to smoking. One of the reasons young people start with vaping is to quit smoking or as an alternative to smoking. The general perception is that vaping is less harmful than smoking. Some participants seem surprised that vaping is addictive on a short term. They start with occasional vaping within a social setting and quickly it became a need.

Young people are not aware of being confronted with vaping advertisements. Exposure to content with vaping on social media seems common. It is possible that the participants do not identify this content as advertising.

Due to the sampling method and the limited geographical spread of the interview locations the findings of





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