

Exploring Youth and Young Adults' Use of Vaping Products – Qualitative Study

Health Canada

Executive Summary

June 2022

Prepared for:

Health Canada

Supplier name: Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

Contract award date: March 15, 2022

Delivery date: June 2022

Contract amount (incl. HST): \$100,901.76

Contract #: HT372-215502/001/CY

POR number: 136-21

For more information, please contact:

hc.cpab.por-rop.dgcap.sc@canada.ca

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

Exploring Youth and Young Adults' Use of Vaping Products

Executive Summary

Prepared for Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada

Supplier name: Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

June 2022

This report summarizes the findings from 16 online focus groups with youth and young adult vapers. The focus groups were held between May 16th and June 7th, 2022 and included individuals from across the country. Sessions were segmented by age group as well as by vaping frequency. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : L'exploration de l'utilisation des produits de vapotage chez les jeunes et les jeunes adultes – Étude qualitative

This publication may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes only. Prior written permission must be obtained from Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada. For more information on this report, please contact Health Canada at: hc.cpab.por-rop.dgcap.sc@canada.ca or the Public Health Agency of Canada at: hc.cpab.por-rop.dgcap.sc@canada.ca

Department of Health
200 Eglantine Driveway
A.L. 1915C
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0K9

Catalogue Number:

H14-418/2022E-PDF

International Standard Book Number (ISBN):

978-0-660-45899-1

Related publications (registration number: POR 136-21):

Catalogue Number H14-418/2022F-PDF (Final Report, French)

ISBN 978-0-660-45900-4

© His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of Health, 2022




Political Neutrality Statement

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of Quorus Consulting Group Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the [Policy on Communications and Federal Identity](#) and the [Directive on the Management of Communications - Appendix C](#).

Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Nadeau", is written over a light gray, textured rectangular background.

June 30, 2022
Rick Nadeau, President
Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

Executive summary

Background and research objectives

The *Tobacco and Vaping Products Act* (TVPA) came into force on May 23, 2018, to regulate the manufacture, sale, labelling and promotion of tobacco products and vaping products sold in Canada. The TVPA created a new legal framework for regulating vaping products to protect young persons from nicotine addiction and tobacco use, while allowing adults to legally access vaping products as a less harmful alternative to tobacco. The Act includes regulatory authorities to respond to emerging issues, as required. Recently, in July 2021, the Government of Canada has used these authorities to implement further restrictions on vaping products, including establishing a maximum nicotine concentration of 20 mg/mL for vaping products manufactured or imported for sale in Canada. In June 2021, further restrictions on vaping product flavours were proposed as well.

A key policy objective of allowing vaping products on the market is to provide people who smoke with an alternative path enabling them to use a less harmful form of nicotine, while preventing uptake among non-smokers particularly youth. However, vaping products remain popular among youth and young adults. Therefore, reducing youth vaping prevalence is a priority for Health Canada.

Ongoing research indicates that vaping behaviours are highly variable and have changed over the course of the past couple years for a range of reasons (for example, access and COVID restrictions, product evolution).

Research objectives

The main objective of the research was to explore Canadian youth and young adult behaviours and perceptions around vaping, and especially how they differ between those who vape infrequently (defined as fewer than 20 days out of the past 30 days) and frequently (defined as vaped at least 20 days out of the past 30 days).

Specifically, the goal was to gain a better understanding of:

- How youth access vaping products;
- How youth and young adults use vaping products;
- What devices and liquids they use and do they change;
- Who youth and young adults use vaping products with;
- Where they use them;
- When they vape;

- What they do while vaping;
- Connections with smoking cigarettes, if applicable;
- Their perceptions around the health impacts, including what they may have experienced personally, what they have heard, and where they heard it.

Data from this study will help Health Canada to better understand the fluidity of vaping behaviours among youth and young adults (for example, how they vape in social settings vs. on their own, transitions to/from smoking cigarettes), respond to the evolving needs of youth and young adults, and inform the development of future regulatory plans.

Methodology

The research methodology consisted of 16 online focus groups with youth and young adult who vape in Canada. The focus groups were held between May 16th and June 7th, 2022 and included individuals from across the country. Focus groups were segmented by age group, regions with or without flavour restrictions, and vaping frequency. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants were informed upfront that the research was being conducted on behalf of Health Canada and they each received an honorarium of \$100 for their participation. In total, 124 youth and young adults participated in the research.

Note: Those who vape, use substances, smoke, etc., are referred to as vapers, users, smokers, respectively, in the interest of brevity.

Research findings

Vaping products – devices

Ownership of a vaping device was quite common among frequent users, who were also generally more likely to own pod system devices. Pod devices were typically liked for their affordability, ease of switching out or replacing pods, and sleek design. Specific preference of one brand over another was most often determined based on what the user has known since they started vaping, what peers were using, available flavours, general availability, and how the device looks.

Disposable vaping products seemed popular among both frequent and infrequent users. Those who chose this format felt they were affordable and practical since they could be found in most vape shops and corner stores and purchased on a whim. Many¹, especially infrequent users,

¹ Terms such as “most”, “many”, “some” and “a few” are commonly used in qualitative research to distinguish between responses that were heard more frequently by a greater number of participants and responses that were heard less frequently or by a fewer number of participants. Due to the nature of qualitative research, responses are not calculated by frequency but are instead summarized to reflect trends observed in and across groups. The use of such quasi-statistical terms should not infer any particular proportion of focus group participants would say or behave in the same manner.

seemed to view disposable devices as “low commitment” – in other words, they feel that if they owned a pod system device, they would probably vape more often.

Many infrequent vapers have never owned their own device and instead will use a friend’s device. These participants had limited feedback on devices, or any particular preferences.

Vapers who own their devices typically purchased from vape shops which were generally seen as common in their area. Many also purchased their vaping products from peers at school, or from friends or family members. Those who were not of legal age tended to visit a specific store they know that does not ask for proof of age or purchased their device from a peer.

Vaping products - liquids and nicotine levels

When it comes to refilling or replacing their vaping device, frequent users would typically replace their pod or disposable device every few days, with only a few indicating that a pod or a disposable device would last them a week or longer. Conversely, infrequent users suggested that a disposable device or a single pod would last anywhere from a week to a month. Pods or disposables were said to run out faster (sometimes only lasting a day or two) when getting together with friends, since a get-together typically meant greater use and/or sharing with others.

There was a high level of awareness of nicotine content among frequent users, many of whom specifying they consume vaping products with 2% or 2.5% nicotine content (or 20 MG). Frequent users were also acutely aware of the restrictions that were introduced that eliminated availability of products with 5% content. Other than knowing that there is nicotine in what they vape, infrequent vapers were much less aware of the specific nicotine level in the products they vape.

There was some interest, especially among frequent users, in reducing either the nicotine level of the products they vape or in reducing how much they vape overall, primarily for health reasons. That being said, nicotine remains a key part of the vaping experience, as many expressed that they would not vape without nicotine.

Product discovery and availability

The most common way that participants discover and try new products is through their friends and social networks. Less commonly, new products are discovered when visiting vape shops through staff recommendations, promotional items, or from browsing the products in store. Very few recall seeing any sort of advertising for new vaping products.

In terms of overall availability of vaping products, many participants have been noticing that vape shops are becoming increasingly common in their area, and many explained that vaping products are typically sold at most convenience stores in their area. Overall, nearly all participants believed

that finding and purchasing their preferred vaping products has become easier since they initially started vaping, and very few feel they face any particular challenge in buying what they want.

Current vaping patterns

Vaping patterns varied a great deal and were distinctly different between frequent and infrequent vapers.

- Typically, frequent vapers will vape often and at various points throughout each day. These individuals will vape early in the morning and throughout the day, each session involving two to three puffs and lasting a few minutes. While many started only in social situations, they no longer seek specific circumstances to vape and are just as likely to vape when they are by themselves. Some felt they are especially likely to vape if they are bored or conversely, when they are drinking with friends. It is also commonly used as stress relief, with a number of students noting that they vape more often during exam time.
- Typically, infrequent vapers are social vapers, only vaping when they are with their friends, particularly at social gatherings. These individuals might only vape on weekends or, for students, a few times during the week. When they vape, it is either short sessions involving two or three puffs (such as during a bathroom break at school or during recess), or it involves an entire evening with one or two puffs taken repeatedly throughout the evening (such as when hanging out with friends or drinking at a party). This pattern is in part largely driven by the fact that they do not own their own vaping products and will only vape what their friends have. Vaping tends to be something that “just happens” rather than being an activity that is craved or sought out with any great degree of effort.

Reasons for vaping

Similar to many research findings in this study, results pertaining to the reasons for vaping were fairly different between frequent and infrequent vapers.

- Frequent vapers were much more inclined to explain that they vape because it’s a habit, or because they feel they are addicted. For many, this has shifted from their initial reasons to try vaping for social reasons or just “for fun” (although they do continue to vape socially).
- Some frequent vapers also explained that vaping provides some sort of stress relief or helps them disconnect.
- Infrequent users were more inclined to explain that they vape because their friends vape and that it is an activity that they do when they get together. Many will vape to either “fit in” or to share in a fun collective experience.

- Among both segments, there were those who said they aren't sure why they vape, or, upon reflection, said that their reasons for vaping are not really "good" reasons at all.
- Participants in both segments liked that vaping gives them a head rush ("headie") or makes them feel good.

Impact of restrictions on flavours

Among both frequent and infrequent vapers, flavours play an important element in the overall vaping experience, with some saying they would not see the point in vaping if the liquid was flavourless. Availability of flavours was often listed as one of the main reasons that some participants choose a certain type of device over another. Some vapers have very specific preferences regarding which flavours they will vape.

- Those with firm flavour preferences tended to opt for fruity or sweet flavours. "Ice" or flavours that combined fruit with menthol were also popular and was sometimes said to enhance the potency or head rush, giving it the feel of a higher nicotine level.

When faced with a fictitious scenario involving a complete ban on flavours over the coming months, participants reacted in a variety of different ways:

- Many felt that this would discourage them from vaping as much if not entirely, and they believe this would also be the case for their peers who vape. This was especially true for infrequent vapers who felt refraining from vaping would be easy. For frequent vapers, many also felt they would curtail their vaping although they believed this would be difficult. Some frequent vapers, especially those who had tried to quit or who had considered quitting said that this would likely be the push they needed to actually quit.
- Others would be okay with the elimination of flavours and would continue to vape since the feeling and/or nicotine they get when they vape is more important than the flavour.
- Some believed they would still be able to find their favourite flavours through "connections" they have, through some of the retailers they have already been using, online, or through people they know in other jurisdictions.
- Very few of the participants would resort to producing their own liquids. A few who started vaping to quit cigarettes said they would return to smoking cigarettes.

For participants in jurisdictions with restrictions on the sale of flavours, very few seemed to remember those restrictions being introduced do not feel that those restrictions have had any impact on their vaping behaviours. In jurisdictions where the restrictions limited the sale of flavoured products to vape shops, participants tended to purchase their products from these

shops anyways. In jurisdictions where flavoured products are not available at all, participants explained that they knew retailers who would sell flavoured products, they ordered their products online, or they “stocked up” when they traveled to a province with no such restrictions.

Multiuse

Co-use was fairly common among both frequent and infrequent vapers, with alcohol and vaping being the most popular combination. Quite a few vapers also mentioned consuming cannabis, although this was mostly as a separate activity and usually involved smoking or edibles rather than vaping (from a separate device). Very few participants also smoked cigarettes, while shisha or hookah use was mentioned in a number of groups by one or two participants.

Participants were asked to provide a chronology of their substance use with a focus on tobacco, nicotine (vaping), alcohol, cannabis and other recreational drugs. While this was very individual, some of the trends noticed through this exercise included the following:

- Alcohol was often one of the first substances consumed, which would often happen at ages of 13 to 17 years. For a few, cigarette smoking also tended to start with the use of alcohol.
- Either vaping or cannabis tended to be the next substance started, often seen in the 16 to 18 years-old range. These substances were usually added to the use of alcohol rather than replacing anything although for a few, vaping replaced or reduced the use of cigarettes. A few explained that they did replace some of their alcohol use with cannabis. Those who started consuming cannabis after they had started vaping did not believe that one activity led to the other. They feel they would have started consuming cannabis anyways.
- There has been some stability in the frequency of use of these substances since late teens other than perhaps vaping, which, especially for frequent vapers, has increased over time. Some decreased their use of alcohol and vaping as they got older and their circle of friends changed while some have also made a conscious decision to reduce their use of these substances recognizing that they are having a detrimental effect on their health.
- Cigarettes were rarely used, and there was low interest. Vaping was preferred as many felt cigarettes have an unpleasant smell that is also harder to hide. There was very little mention of other recreational drugs.

Changing Substance Use Patterns

Over the coming years, very few participants expect their use of any of the given substances to increase. Some of the younger participants suspect their use of alcohol might increase when they attend post-secondary and a few infrequent vapers suspect their vaping might increase since they feel they are slowly becoming addicted to it.

The most common shift in substance use over the coming years is likely going to be a reduction or cessation in vaping among frequent vapers. A few have already made efforts to reduce their vaping and plan to eventually stop vaping altogether. There was a sense that “older people just don’t vape” and that they will eventually age out of it, too. Participants were more likely to expect they would stop vaping at some point in the near future than that they would stop their cannabis use.

Perceptions regarding the health impacts of vaping

Many feel that society has become increasingly receptive to vaping, especially as an alternative to smoking cigarettes. Most participants would not consider themselves well informed about the health impacts of vaping and very few had sought out information. There was awareness of some health concerns, especially in light of media coverage of serious illnesses and deaths associated with vaping which they believe has added to the negative perceptions that some have on vaping. That said, participants tend to agree that there is a lack of scientific evidence suggesting that vaping is detrimental to their health and, until such evidence appears, many are not overly concerned. Lack of concern is particularly noticeable among infrequent vapers who feel that they do not vape nearly enough to be concerned. Those most likely to have concerns or to have taken some form of action to curb or end their vaping are those who had experienced ill effects such as shortness of breath during physical activity, or those who believe that inhaling a foreign substance is not good for your lungs.

Qualitative research disclaimer

Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. The purpose is not to generate “statistics” but to hear the full range of opinions on a topic, understand the language participants use, gauge degrees of passion and engagement and to leverage the power of the group to inspire ideas. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions, irrespective of whether or not that view is shared by others.

Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor were they intended to be, projectable to a larger population.

Specifically, it is inappropriate to suggest or to infer that few (or many) real world users would behave in one way simply because few (or many) participants behaved in this way during the sessions. This kind of projection is strictly the prerogative of quantitative research.

Supplier name: Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

Contract number: HT372-215502/001/CY

Contract award date: March 15, 2022

Contract amount (including HST): \$100,901.76

For more information, please contact Health Canada at: hc.cpab.por-rop.dgcap.sc@canada.ca