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Research on Electronic Cigarettes: Advertising and Promotion

Background

In May 2018, the federal *Tobacco and Vaping Products Act* was enacted to regulate the “manufacture, sale, labelling and promotion of vaping products” in Canada.¹ Among other provisions, nicotine e-cigarettes were legalized. Both this *Act* and the *Ontario Smoke-Free Ontario Act* also permitted advertising of vaping products at retail.ⁱ Paired with recent surveillance data, which shows that youth and young adult e-cigarette use has jumped dramatically from 10% in 2016-17 to 20% in 2018-19,² this is a concern.

Key Findings

- Close to 100% of convenience store vendors now carry e-cigarette products.
- E-cigarettes with nicotine are prevalent at all retail locations.
- Focus group participants generally felt that online marketing targets young people.
- Social media appears to be a common source of exposure to e-cigarette promotion, particularly among youth

As part of the *Research on E-Cigarettes and Waterpipe* Health System Research Fund project, the Ontario Tobacco Research Unit conducted a longitudinal youth and young adult survey, a point-of-sale observational study and a focus group study in an effort to gather insights into changes in vaping cultures, environments, and marketing influences.

Youth and Young Adult Longitudinal Survey

From baseline in 2018 to 12-month follow-up in 2019, youth and young adult survey respondents indicated increased exposure to vaping marketing, particularly at convenience stores/gas stations and through streaming media (Table 1). Overall, respondents not exposed to any form of promotion fell by about half (16% in 2019 from 30% in 2018).

At 12-month follow-up in 2019, respondents indicated being exposed to promotions of several kinds including: e-juice discounts (e.g., 2 for 1 deals; 35%), free e-juice with the purchase of a

ⁱ In Ontario, a new vaping promotion ban came into effect on January 1, 2020, which prohibits promotion at convenience stores and gas stations.



device (23%), multipack e-juice deals (19%), clearance products (18%), discounted or free accessories/hardware (14%) and coupons (13%).

Table 1: Exposure to Vaping Marketing, Past 30 Days, Youth and Young Adults

Setting	2018 (%)	2019 (%)
Convenience stores / gas stations	28	60
Vape shops	46	55
Internet	48	48
Streaming media	-	23
Magazines, billboards, public transit	12	19
Tobacconist / head shop	9	17
None	30	16
TV or Radio	9	16
Bars, clubs, music festivals	7	14
Email / text message	13	13
In a preview at the movie theatre	-	6
Other	1	1

Point-of-Sale Observations

To examine changes at point-of-sale, we conducted structured retail observations in September 2017 and July 2019 (51 stores pre-legislation and 64 stores post-legislation) that examined the availability and marketing of e-cigarette products in five cities in Ontario including Hamilton, London, Ottawa, Toronto and Sudbury. Data were analyzed by four store types: convenience stores, head shops, tobacconists and vape shops.

Before legalization, e-cigarette products were available in 82% of stores (62.5% convenience stores, 67% head shops, 80% tobacconists, and 100% vape shops). Only one-third of convenience stores had e-cigarette products with nicotine. Promotion and advertising were typically limited to the interior of vape shops, but this has drastically changed since nicotine legalization. Almost all stores now carry e-cigarette products (97% in total, and 100% convenience stores, 67% head shops, 100% tobacconists, and 100% vape shops). Overt



advertising on storefronts has also increased, with exterior advertising on 73% of convenience stores, 50% of tobacconists, and 33% of vape shops.

Focus Group Findings

Between November 2018 and February 2019, we conducted 16 focus groups with a total of 73 participants in three Ontario cities. Eight focus groups were held with youth and young adults—four were held with young people who currently vape (n=14) and four with young people who have never vaped (n=22). An additional 8 focus groups were held with adults who had tried vaping to quit smoking cigarettes (n=37). Participant demographics are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant Demographics for Vaping Focus Groups

	Youth and Young Adults (n=36)	Adults (n=37)
Age (mean, range)	20 (17-24)	36 (21-58)
Gender (n, %)		
Woman	17 (47)	8 (21)
Man	18 (50)	28 (76)
Transgender	1 (3)	1 (3)
Region (n, %)		
Toronto	21 (58)	22 (59)
Barrie	5 (14)	7 (19)
London	10 (28)	8 (22)

Youth Non-Vapers

Several youth focus group participants related their experience of seeing vaping ads at local festivals, including on posters and at vape promotional stands/booths. Other participants indicated observing vapes at convenience stores “at the counter next to like cigarettes,” and seeing vapes used by social media influencers such as on YouTube.

Youth Vapers

Youth participants who vaped indicated a variety of exposures to marketing and promotion of electronic cigarettes including on billboards, Instagram (usually as a paid advertisement), YouTube (where someone reviews a product), Facebook, online e-cigarette forums, and at gas stations and convenience stores.



Adult Vapers

Focus group participants were asked about their experiences with the marketing and promotion of electronic cigarettes. Overall, adult participants indicated that they noticed offline e-cigarette marketing (e.g., on food trucks, in convenience or corner stores, gas stations, and vape stores). Although social media did not seem to play a big role in influencing adults' e-cigarette uptake or use, some adults noted seeing e-cigarette marketing online, for example, on 'Amazon Recommends' and YouTube recommendations. Generally speaking, it appeared that e-cigarette marketing did little to impact adults, who indicated that these marketing campaigns were generally geared toward youth.

When marketing images of popular e-cigarette brands were presented to the adult focus groups, participants were able to quickly recognize the JUUL and Vype ads, which was attributed to these brands' widespread availability in convenience stores and gas stations. Adults' reactions to the visual ads presented to them indicated that they were relatively more curious about the contents of the e-liquids compared to the actual shape and size of the e-cigarette device being advertised. Nevertheless, several adults mentioned that new generation e-cigarette devices looked "classy". Overall, adults were unable to associate the presented e-cigarette ads with smoking cessation messaging; one participant's summary of these ads' perceived message exemplifies this point: "like there is a better way to smoke; not, here's how not to smoke."

Discussion

Our research underscores that e-cigarettes have been aggressively marketed at retail and through social media. Recent policy changes by the Ontario government, which prohibits the promotion of e-cigarettes at retail stores (with an exception for specialty vape shops and licenced cannabis retailers), is a welcome change that is expected to benefit the health of Ontarians. The recent announcement by the federal government, which proposes to ban advertising of vaping products wherever they can be seen or heard by youth, is a useful next step.³

Vaping among youth and young adults has dramatically increased in recent years,² which underscores the continued vigilance needed to both determine the factors that promote vaping and the policy options available to effectively regulate vaping.



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References

- ¹ Minister of Justice (Canada). *Tobacco and Vaping Product Act*, S.C. 1997, c. 13 (November 19, 2018). Accessed April 22, 2019.
- ² Government of Canada. [Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey: Data from the Canadian Survey on Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drug Use](#). Accessed January 22, 2020.
- ³ Health Canada. [Health Canada proposes to ban advertising of vaping products wherever they can be seen or heard by youth](#). Accessed January 27, 2020.