

A qualitative analysis of e-cigarette supply routes used by underage youth

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BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVE

- Underage youth from many countries continue to use electronic cigarettes (ECs, vapes),^{1,2} despite a minimum legal sales age of 18 or 21 years.
- While some studies identify supply channels used by young people, little is known about how these evolve or operate.
- Objective:** To explore how young people engaged with social and commercially-oriented supply routes to access ECs.

METHODS

Design: Qualitative (in-depth interviews)

Participants/Recruitment: 30 adolescents aged 16-17 who vaped at least monthly; drawn from two separate samples. Recruitment occurred via social media, personal networks, snowball sampling, school roll invitations, and teacher referrals.

Interviews: Semi-structured; 30-112 min; Jun 2022-Mar 2023.

Analysis: Inductive/reflexive thematic analysis; transcripts coded using NVivo 20 (release 1.7.1).

RESULTS

Sharing

i.e. passing around vapes while spending time with others

- All participants shared, usually with close friends, particularly at parties and social gatherings
- Sharing connected people to peer groups
- Sharing allowed some to avoid owning a device and cultivated a 'social', non-committed user identity

"We all try each other's... I can't even explain how big it is... If I'm with my friends, I'm probably not using my vape, I'm using theirs."

—Keira, 17F, NZE/Māori

"In the three years I've been vaping, I've never owned one... not letting it get addictive... I've tried to keep it under control."

—Diego, 17M, NZE

Social purchasing

i.e. enlisting others to buy vape products, usually from retail shops

- Most participants relied on 'proxy' buyers, typically older friends or siblings aged 18+
- Some proxies were well-known, supplying a wider (underage) peer group
- Some enlisted 'randoms' on social media, or approached someone on the street, and asked them to purchase ECs

"There's always [someone with]... an older sibling or [person] that's fine with buying for them... [So] everybody will ask them... whenever they want [product]."

—Sally, 16F, Māori

"It's the same with alcohol... you'd stand outside a shop... wait for someone to come out and just ask [them] to buy."

—Charlotte, 17F, NZE

Quasi-commercial supply

i.e. proxy entrepreneurs

- Some suppliers (typically not close contacts) charged participants more (NZD \$5 - \$10 above product cost) for procuring vapes or vape juice
- They also profited from younger teens (13-14 years) without close connections to older buyers, who would pay more out of desperation

"There's quite an economy running here [at school]... I get [vape] juice [refills] from my person who sells me marijuana."

—Jennifer, 16F, Other European

Commercial Self-Purchasing

i.e. from a retailer

- Nearly all participants knew of "dodgy dairies" (convenience stores) who sold to underage youth
- Many had friends who successfully used fake IDs
- Few purchased from online retailers as they worried parents might intercept home deliveries

"People always know of... certain small [dairies]... [by] word of mouth. Someone [goes] in and [doesn't] get ID'd... then they tell people."

—Selma, 17F, NZE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions:

- Vaping access routes sit on a continuum from informal/spontaneous sharing, to enlisting proxy buyers, to carrying out carefully planned in-person retail purchases.

Limitations:

- Data were drawn from two separate qualitative studies
- We identified key supply channels but cannot estimate the relative importance of these

Recommendations:

- Future research and monitoring is needed to examine how supply channels evolve over time
- Evidence of non-compliant retailers suggests existing monitoring and enforcement mechanisms need strengthening
- A comprehensive response that reduces EC appeal, affordability and availability is also required to address factors fostering and maintaining youth vaping

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