



Interviews With Vapers In Malaysia: Perceived Advantages And Disadvantages Of Vaping

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Introduction

Electronic cigarette (E-cig) use has dramatically increased among adults including middle and high school students. E-cig sales were estimated at \$1.7 billion in 2013 and are projected to exceed sales of conventional cigarettes (C-cig) (J.M Grabutt 2015). At present, there is considerable controversy about the health effects of E-cig, especially in comparison to C-cig. However research assessing health effects is limited, with no research on the long-term health effects of the use of this device, in part because it is a relatively recent phenomenon (E.L. Sutfin et al 2013). Common findings from surveys examining the use and attitudes of the users are that most users believe that E-cig is healthier than C-cig, and use of vape in similar ways as nicotine replacement therapy, mostly for smoking cessation. (dockrell 2013). Most adult E-cig users are or were smokers. However the increasing trend of usage in adolescent is of a concern (JK pepper 2013).

E-cig is a battery-powered device. It generates vapor by heating a liquid solution of propylene glycol or glycerine with different concentrations of nicotine (E.Kralikova, 2013). The smoker inhales the aerosol that contains nicotine into the lungs and exhales the aerosol into the environment (S.E. Evans 2014). Many sellers attract their customers by advertising claims that E-cig is cost-effective, can be used indoors and is more socially acceptable (A.K. Regan 2011).

In Malaysia, nicotine containing E-cig can only be sold by licensed pharmacist or registered medical practitioners as nicotine is classified as a class C poison. The government is looking into ways to regulate the use and sale of E-cig, while 5 state governments in Malaysia have prohibited the sale and usage of E-cig in their states.

The aim of this explorative study was to better understand the reasons motivated the use of e-cig among the users in Malaysia and their perceived advantages and disadvantages of e-cig.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. 20 users were approached and 14 agreed to participate. They were Malaysian adults, age ranging from 21 to 40 years old. All were males and current E-cig users. Consent forms were filled up by participants upon agreement to participate.

Procedure and analysis

This study was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews. All questions were open-ended questions. The interviews were audio recorded. Each interview lasted for the duration of 15 to 20 minutes. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by listening to the recordings and double-checked with the notes taken during the interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify the themes emerging from the scripts.

Results

Table 1 shows the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews. The 3 main themes which fulfill the objectives of the study are; reasons for starting E-cig, perceived advantages and disadvantages of E-cig. Another theme that emerged was regulations pertaining to the use of E-cig.

Reasons for starting E-cig

Vapers learn about E-cigs from various sources including friends, family members and social media. Peer and family members have an important influence on other smokers. For example, a vaper was influenced to start vaping when his friend introduced him to the device and reassured that it is safe as it does not contain tobacco. Apart from that, participants claimed that E-cig is a safer alternative compared to *shisha* and C-cig and this motivated them to become users. One user claimed that he used to smoke heavily everyday and he started E-cig so that he could stop smoking. The other switched from *shisha* to E-cig when researchers claim that taking *shisha* is like taking charcoal directly and that would harm.

Table 1 The major themes and subthemes

Major themes	Subthemes
Reasons for starting E-cig	
Influenced by family and friends	<p><i>"I heard about the device first time from my friends. He shown me, and he said that this device can provide a sweet taste and it is safer because it has no tobacco"</i> – P1</p> <p><i>"My uncle actually the one who start vaping. He said that he want to stop his smoking habit. Then I started to try the vape with him and had interest on it."</i> – P4</p>
Influenced by social media	<i>"I learned about the vape firstly when I'm accidentally cross to it on my facebook account. Then I started to do some personal research regarding the device. Since then, I've been using the vape"</i> – P8
An alternative to <i>shisha</i> and conventional cigarette	<p><i>"Every time people asking me try shisha, I will join like. But when researchers found that it is like taking charcoal directly, I try to shifted to vape."</i> – P14</p> <p><i>" Before I started vaping, I smoke heavily every day. Honestly the main intention was to stop my smoking habit."</i> – P2</p>
Perceived advantages of E-cig	
As a tool for smoking cessation	<i>"Firstly, vape did reduce my tendency to smoke from day to day. This is because it contain nicotine and the concentration is lower than cigarettes."</i> – P2
A better alternative to conventional cigarette	<p>P 13 : <i>"If you smoke, your teeth will turn yellow. You can try see vaper's teeth, none of them had a yellow teeth."</i></p> <p>P 6 : <i>"Vape is cheaper comparing to the cost that I used for cigarettes. Besides that, the liquid flavour was easily accessible. You can find it everywhere, including the device. At the stall, in the internet or on roadside."</i></p>
Perceived disadvantages of E-cig	
Complexity of the device	<p>P 6 : <i>"From my experience, the only things that bothered me was the battery and charging place. This device is battery-dependent. So if this device needs to be charged, if there is no socket for charging, I use the device."</i></p> <p>P 13 : <i>"It's quite annoying because you need to change the cotton every 2 days or you won't get the maximum satisfaction."</i></p>
Produces unwanted effects	<p>P 1 : <i>"After a long time of using the device, I did feel some effects like palpitation and restless. I thought through vaping I can avoid any restless feelings, but it turned out differently."</i></p> <p>P 9 : <i>"In term of health, the device did exert some negative effects like dizziness, tachycardia, and the worst was sore throat."</i></p>
Increases the desire to smoke heavily if E-cig is stopped	<p>P 3 : <i>"I'm still a smoker. So if I vape for a long time, then I stopped it for a while, my feelings to smoke again increased rapidly."</i></p> <p>P 9 : <i>" So from what I saw, mostly the people that failed to use the vape correctly or efficiently, they tend to smoke heavily after that."</i></p>

Major themes	Subthemes
Regulations	
Banning is unfair	P1 for me it need to be regulated. To ban the device, it is not acceptable. If they insist, they should ban shisha and cigarettes too. P13 why must ban the vape? They should have a proper justification on their decision. Same goes for cigarettes. Besides tendency to get disease is higher in cigarettes than vape.
Regulation is needed	P3 when I go to shopping mall and restaurant, some uneducated vapers just exhales the vapour to everyone around him, so some regulation is needed. P2 I believe adolescence and young adults wont buy it again

Perceived advantages and disadvantages of E-cig

Many users with the intention to stop smoking have actually started on E-cig. One users mentioned that E-cid reduced his tendency to smoke every day as it contains lesser nicotine. While some claiming that it is cheaper than C-cig, easily available in many retail stores and online, does not cause yellowish teeth as smoking cause discoloration to the teeth and has attractive added features such as the many different flavors. However a few find that the device is very complex and maintaining it is very troublesome.

Adding to that, a few claimed that it does cause some side effects for example, two users claimed to have experienced dizziness and restlessness. Some also states that E-cig actually increases the desire to smoke more frequently.

Regulations

Many participants disagreed that E-cig was banned in some of the states in Malaysia. They felt it was unfair that other forms of smoking such as C-cig and shisha was allowed but not E-cig. Rather than completely banning E-cig, they suggested that some form of regulation is needed to control the use of E-cig especially in public area and in adolescent group.

Discussion

This interview provided some insights and understandings about the vaping community. Peer, family and social media definitely play important roles in influencing one to start vaping. A research in the United States found that about 34% of young adults tried E-cig because they were offered and that became their starting point (Pepper et al. , 2014) . The main motivation for starting E-cig and one of the perceived advantages was that it helped in smoking cessation. A study in Italy has claimed similarly (Polossa, R, 2011). In fact it reported that E-Cig can help smokers to remain abstinent or reduce their cigarette consumption (Polossa, R, 2011). However these claims need further investigation especially in the context of withdrawal, dependency to E-cig and relapse following E-cig.

Users believed that E-cig produces lesser unwanted effects compared to C-cig and has smaller threat to their health and this motivated them to switch to E-cig from C-cig (dockrell 2013). In contrast some claimed that E-cig did cause them side effects. Concerns were raised about E-cig and researchers cautioned about the use until an independent research is conducted (Pauly 2007). Evidence on long-term effects of E-cig is not available and it will take many years for a research to come up with the findings. Another concern is that vaping could prevent the smoker's intention to quit smoking by opting for another risky alternative.

Users in this study have expressed their dissatisfaction that E-cig is banned in some of the states in Malaysia and questioned why there was no similar reinforcement on C-cig and *shisha*. The use of E-cig is still at its infancy stage. Despite that, many claims have been made by the manufacturers or sellers without strong evidences. The short-term and long-term effects of E-cig are still not well known. Unlike medicines, where post-marketing surveillance is available for monitoring purpose, E-cig does not have any such system. Perhaps a thorough and systematic monitoring is needed. Future research should also address concerns about the special features of e-cigs and flavored liquids. Until then, it is wise to enforce regulations to prioritize the safety of the E-cig users especially since it is trending among adolescent and women.

Conclusion

Peers, family members and social media are the major reasons one start vaping. Although many claim that E-cig helps in smoking cessation, further study needed to confirm these claims. The safety and efficacy of E-cig are still vague and are a major concern globally. Future research are needed to assess the long term effects of E-cig, safety and efficacy of E-cig as a smoking cessation tool and second hand exposure to E-cig.

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