

Priority Youth Perceptions of Nicotine Vaping: A Vignette Framed Qualitative Study of Living Experience

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Introduction: Nicotine vaping products (NVPs) are increasingly used by young Australians for social connection and stress relief rather than smoking cessation. Despite reforms restricting NVP access, illicit availability remains high. Uptake is disproportionately high among priority youth populations, including in rural and remote areas and those with lived experience of mental health challenges or substance use, where perceived benefits and accessibility may override health risk concerns.

Methods: A mixed-methods study employed vignette-guided semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 58 Australian youth aged 16–26 years, including attendees of mental health and drug and alcohol services and rural/remote residents, from Queensland and the Northern Territory. Narrative vignettes grounded in prospect theory, social cognitive theory, and gain/loss framing elicited NVP perceptions and preferences for prevention messaging. Mental health (PHQ-4), alcohol use (AUDIT-C) and cannabis use (CUDIT-R) were assessed. Data were dual coded and thematically analysed using an integrated deductive-inductive approach.

Results: Four themes characterised engagement: (1) social exposure and curiosity-driven experimentation; (2) accessibility and appeal of illicit NVPs; (3) use of NVPs for stress without alternative coping strategies; and (4) perceptions of relative harm, with NVP use rationalised as safer than tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs. Most participants reported current or past use, with elevated psychological distress common. Participants demonstrated temporal discounting of long-term risks for short-term stress relief and social belonging.

Discussion and Conclusions: Engagement is shaped by intersecting social, psychological, and structural factors. Prevention messaging may be more effective when moving beyond deficit-focused, negative-outcome framing toward gain-framed, youth-centred approaches that acknowledge lived experiences and offer credible alternatives to NVP-based stress management.

Implications on communities, practice, policy: Strengthens youth-centred, strengths-based prevention, integrating stress management and coping skills into practice, tightening access controls and flavours, and designing campaigns to be less negatively framed, addressing social norms, curiosity, and perceived relative harms.

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