

E-Cigarettes: Exploring the emergent “Personal Boundaries” of Northern Territory youth to improve preventative messaging.

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INTRODUCTION: Despite legislative reforms, young Australians – including from remote and regional areas - continue to take up vaping. This study explores youth perceptions of Nicotine Vaping Products (NVPs) and the factors influencing their choices to experiment, use or abstain from vaping. The study explores the experiences of youth in the Northern Territory (NT), a group often overlooked that offers unique perspectives due to rural and Indigenous backgrounds.

METHODS: NT residents aged 16–26 years completed a survey and took part in semi-structured focus groups covering their experiences of NVPs and tobacco and responded to four scenarios aligned with risk communication theories. Data were thematically analysed using NVivo to explore risk perceptions, beliefs, and responses to factors influencing health messaging.

RESULTS: Participants (n=33) included Aboriginal people (n= 5), and those living regionally (n=30) or in remote areas (n=3). Participants ranged from never tried (n = 10); former NVP users (n= 7), those socially vaping (n = 8), and everyday NVP and/or tobacco users (n = 5). Data revealed that participants made decisions without the guidance of health risk information. Youth chose to either lean into, or resist health risk by aligning with social, familial or cultural norms, and sometimes as a conscientious objection to norms. Health choices were often expressed as “personal boundaries” and construed as either: feelings of self-endorsement and volition; or autonomy and agency.

CONCLUSIONS: All participants recognized vaping as a health risk, yet in the absence of consistent information, their choices were shaped more by close relationships than by health messaging. Youth framed decisions around “personal boundaries”, not health outcomes. Concerningly, those dependent on NVPs believed they could choose to quit but lacked clear strategies or support to do so.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: This study identifies key influences on NT youth health decisions, highlighting the role of culture, information access and personal boundaries.

1. Vaping information access is inconsistent and inequitable.
2. Youth align NVP risk with autonomy and volition.
3. Addressing gaps in preventative health messaging is critical during identity development.

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