

Examining the Use and Perception of Harm of JUULs by College Students: A Qualitative Study

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Purpose

This study investigates how and why college students use Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS), particularly JUUL brand. It further explores how students perceive the safety and harm of JUUL use, how they define the term e-cigarette, and why they continue to use ENDS despite risks.

Background

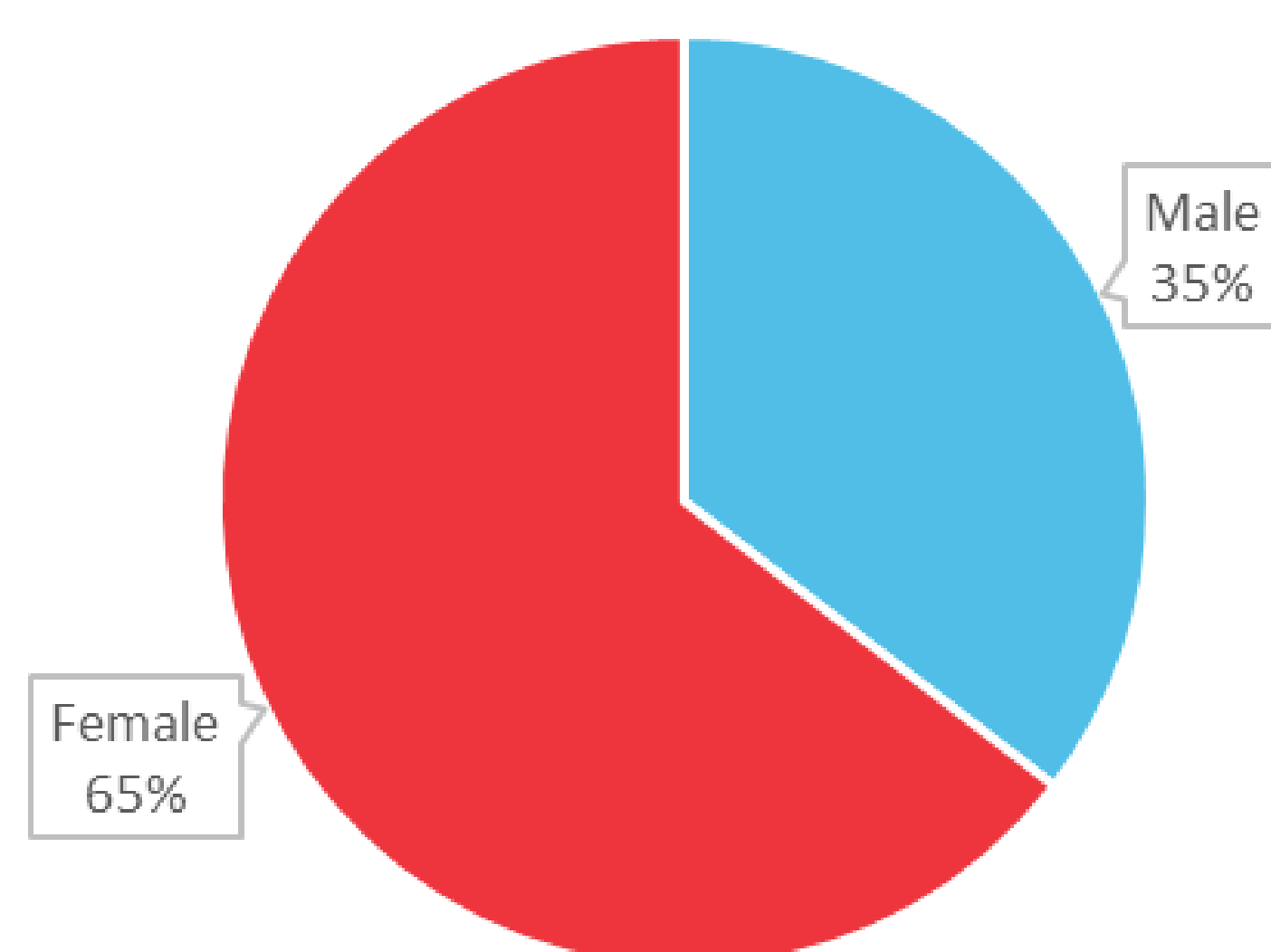
- Past month ENDS among high school students use has increased from 1.5% in 2011 to 11.7% in 2017.¹ Among college students as of Fall 2018, ever ENDS use was 22.6% and past month ENDS use was 12.9%.²
- Research and prevention efforts often refer to ENDS generically as “e-cigarettes”. However, adolescents and young adults use more specific terms to describe subgroups of ENDS, and may perceive them as distinct from e-cigarettes.³
- The JUUL was introduced in 2015. As of August 2018, JUUL captured 72% of all ENDS sales, up from 55% the year prior.⁴ All ENDS sales increased 47% from 2016-2017, driven by JUUL sales.⁵

Methods

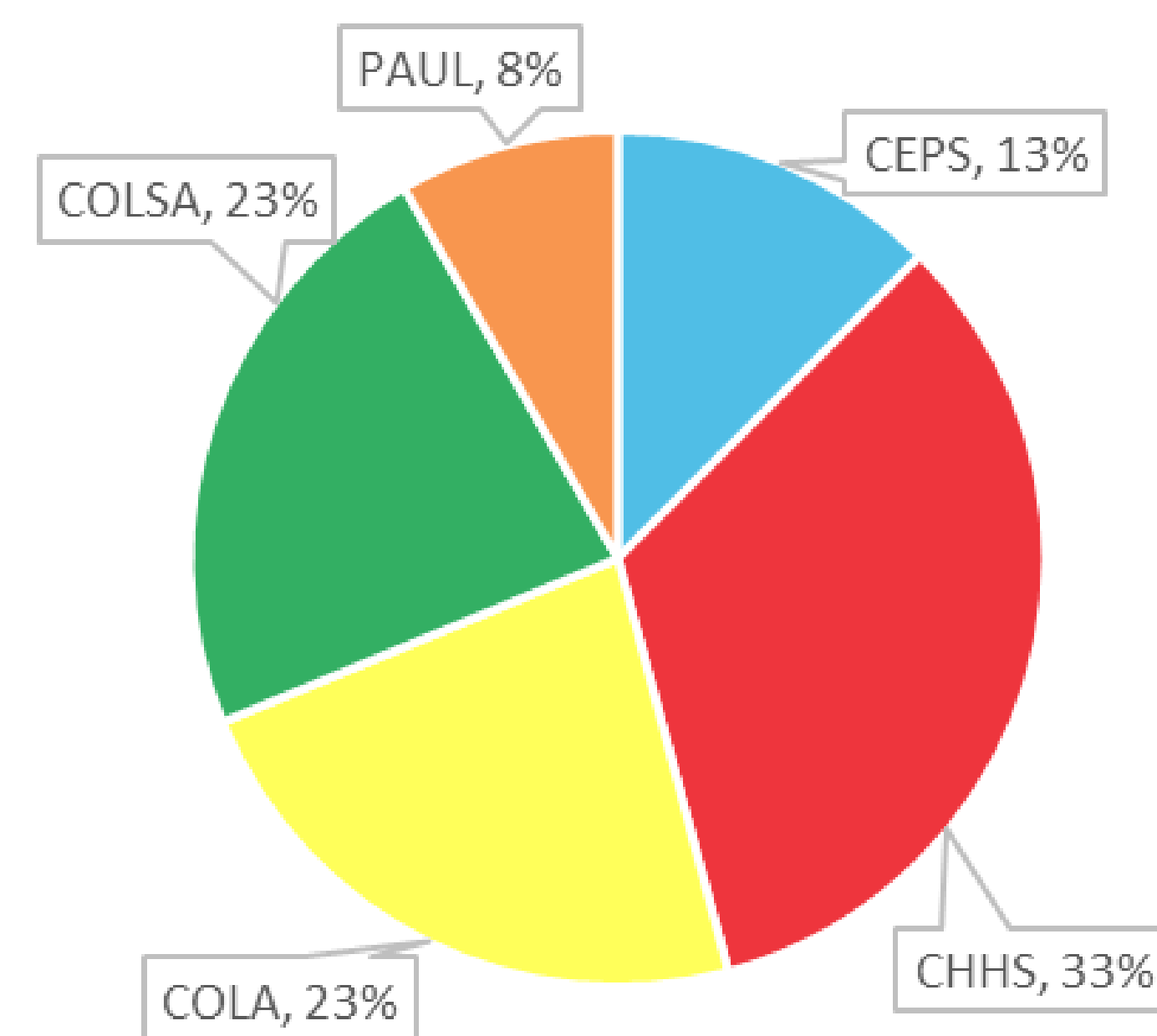
- 49 UNH students were recruited from classes, online postings, and on-campus workplaces.
- Participants attended one of five hour-long focus groups.
- Focus group discussion was recorded, transcribed by a text to speech service, and edited to ensure accuracy.
- Participant responses were coded for content, then organized into major themes.

Student Demographics

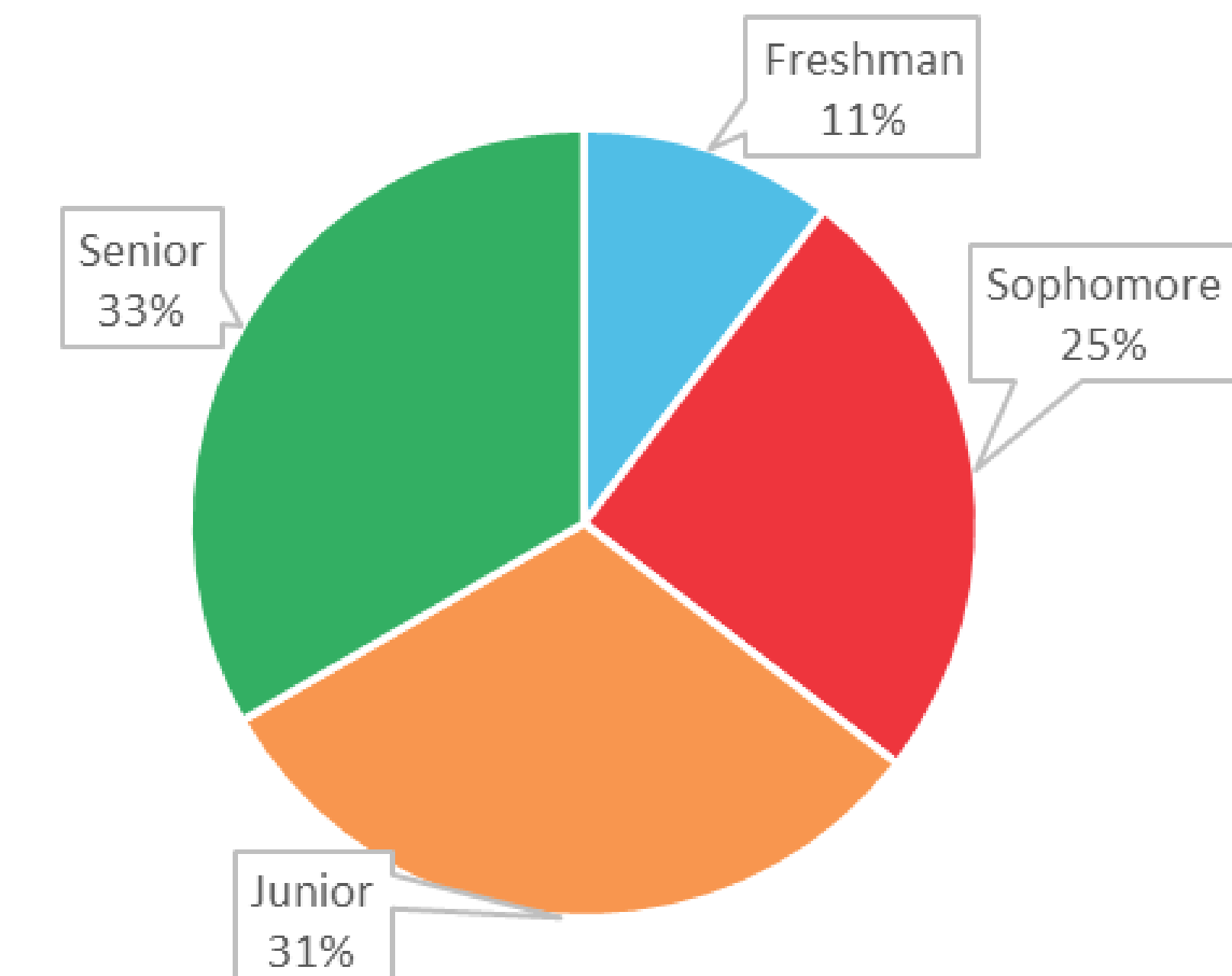
Participant Gender



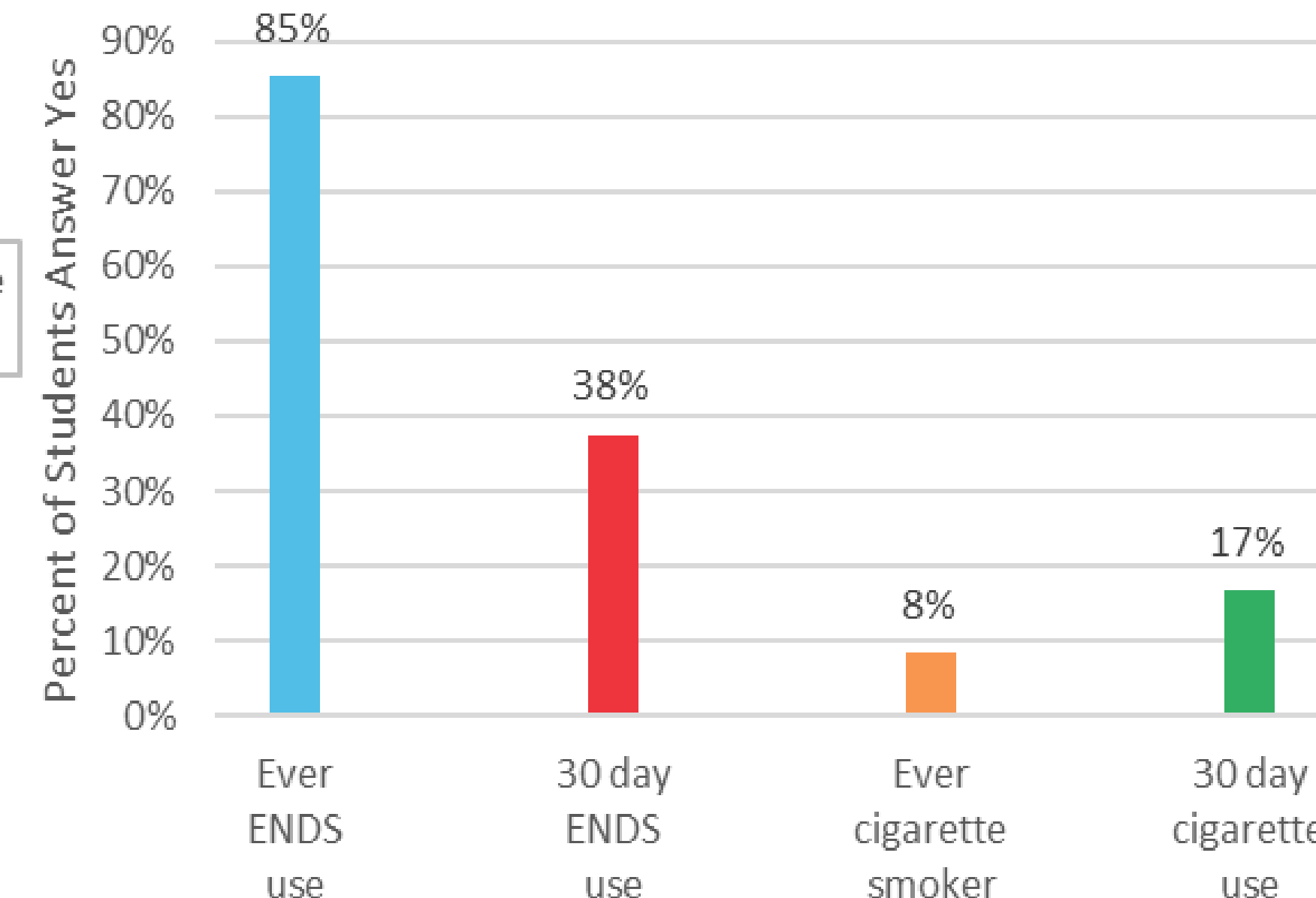
Participant College



Class Standing



JUUL and Cigarette Use



Themes

E-cigarette Definition

- JUUL is not an E-cigarette
- E-cigarettes look like traditional cigarettes, have a set nicotine content, and are used for smoking cessation
- Vapes have variable nicotine content and are used for enjoyment

Perceptions of Harm and Safety

- JUUL is highly addictive
- JUUL is either safer than or equally as dangerous as traditional cigarettes
- Negative side effects included addiction, nicotine overdose, and physical discomfort from JUUL use or cessation
- There is a lack of ENDS safety research
- Because of the lack of safety research, students questioned the credibility of ENDS safety information

Reasons for Use

- Non-smoking students start using ENDS because of curiosity or peer invitation
- Smoking students start using ENDS because of curiosity and smoking cessation
- Nicotine use and JUUL flavors are physically enjoyable, especially with alcohol
- JUULS are discreet, portable, and can easily be used in non-smoking places

Patterns of Use

- There are “categories” of JUUL users, generally divided into one-time users, social/party users, and addicted users
- Young people use JUUL – generally, those age 15-25
- Social users use JUUL at parties and bars
- Addicted users use JUUL in all locations, including nonsmoking areas
- JUUL use is a social activity and students expect to share JUULs
- Common combination of alcohol and nicotine
- JUULs and JUUL pods are expensive, but cheaper than cigarettes

Student Perspectives

“[People use] the vape for the flavor or the e-cig to wean you off hard cigarettes. But when there's a JUUL involved, it's definitely a combination of both...especially because kids who have never picked up a cigarette or a vape in their lives are picking up JUULs.”

“Even talking about it makes me want to do it.”

“I think some people get addicted a lot easier than others. Like I have friends who say they like took one hit at a party and then they had to get a JUUL.”

“I've never actually seen like tangible evidence that it's bad for you. I can't imagine it would be good for you, but I remember [seeing] the black lungs and they said, 'this is what happens when you smoke.' But we have never seen anything like that for Juuling. So a lot of people don't like pay attention to that stuff because they don't have the tangible data.”

“One of the attractions with the JUUL is it's convenience. As long as it's charged, it's going to work. You can use it inside. It's not like smoking where you have to go outside, light your cigarette, that's not easy to do in a social setting. But Juuling, you can just have it in your hand or in your pocket and take it out whenever, rip it, and put it back”

“I used to smoke cigarettes and my coworker used an e-cigarette and she told me about it and she was like, I should switch just to try and cut down on cigarettes.”

“I was at a party, one of my roommates had one and I was like, okay, I'll just try it. And you immediately get this huge head rush. Your whole body goes numb and it can be a feeling that you enjoy. It makes you feel a little bit more drunk than you are.”

“There's no better combination than alcohol and a cigarette. So I feel like Juul has just been a substitute for it.”

“It's \$20 just for a little starter pack thing, and then a pack of five [pods] it's like \$16. It's really expensive. Blows my mind.”

“I did notice this past weekend... people can ask the bartender to charge their JUUL for them... I've seen people like, can you charge my phone?... But I've never seen people actually ask to charge their JUULs”

“I actually know someone who has a JUUL for himself and a JUUL he brings to parties. Just so if other people want to hit a JUUL, he has a party JUUL and his own personal JUUL..”

Discussion

- This research validates previous findings that young adults use specific language for ENDS, not only the term e-cigarette.³ Students likely do not apply harms identified in e-cigarette research to JUULs.
- Students are savvy about the validity of safety claims. They look for research and do not believe claims of JUUL harm that are not supported by credible research. However, they are very aware that JUUL is likely unhealthy.
- Nicotine use is physically enjoyable and a common social activity, especially in combination with alcohol. These benefits attract college students to JUUL use.
- Prevention activities to address student use and perceptions of harm should include JUULs specifically.

Limitations

- Participants were drawn from a convenience sample of students who chose to participate in focus groups.
- Focus groups were conducted on one public four year college campus in the northeast. Results may not be generalizable to other populations.
- The sample size of this study was relatively small due to its qualitative nature.

References

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