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Vaping as Emotional Coping among Gen Z Dental Students in Indonesia: A Phenomenological Study

Abstract: The use of e-cigarettes (vapes) among Generation Z (Gen Z) students in Indonesia has increased and become a social phenomenon reflecting social and cultural pressures among youth. Vapes are not only seen as an alternative to smoking but also as a symbol of modernity and a lifestyle that promotes freedom. This study aims to explore the use of vape as an emotional escape mechanism among Gen Z students and its impact on compulsive behavior and their mental well-being. This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological framework. This qualitative phenomenological study involved five undergraduate students from the Dentistry Study Program at Universitas Mulawarman, Indonesia. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine participants lived experiences and meanings associated with vaping as a form of emotional coping. The study found that students initially used vape due to social influence, curiosity, and to quit smoking. Initially, vaping provided temporary relief, but over time, it became a habit leading to nicotine dependency, negatively affecting emotional regulation. The study implies the need for more proactive interventions in mental health education; The findings suggest that vaping may serve as a coping strategy for difficult emotions. Although counseling and help-seeking were not examined, these findings tentatively suggest the value of exploring more proactive approaches to students' emotional well-being in future research.

Keywords: emotional, escape mechanism, vape, generation z, nicotine dependency

INTRODUCTION

E-cigarette use has become increasingly visible among Generation Z in Indonesia, raising concerns not only as a public health issue but also as a social and behavioral phenomenon. Among young adults, vaping may be associated with various social influences and perceived strategies for managing everyday emotional experiences. For this age group of students, who are hungry for innovation and self-expression, *vaping* is not just a tool but Vaping has become increasingly prevalent among young adults and may

function as a means of coping with stress, difficult emotions, and everyday psychological experiences, freedom, and identity affirmation in the midst of massive social pressures. They do not see it as a substitute for conventional cigarettes that seem 'old-fashioned' and 'smelly', but rather as a lifestyle choice that is in line with contemporary values. The main attraction of vapes lies in their futuristic, practical design and abundant, attractive flavor options, ranging from fruit flavors to unique desserts. This sensation resonates strongly with Gen Z's desire for new and different things, making *vaping* an integral part of their routine and self-image (Ridwan, 2025; Widyanty, 2024).

Furthermore, the normalization of *vaping* is driven by social factors that are very close to the daily lives of students. Peer influence is a very critical trigger in a social environment; *vaping* is often a kind of 'entry ticket' or a quick way to build familiarity and existence (Kalizta et al., 2026). However, family dynamics are no less important; the presence of family members who also vape can significantly shape and legitimize permissive attitudes towards the use of e-cigarettes in the eyes of young people (Bigwanto et al., 2025; Syelvita et al., 2025). The role of social media exacerbates this condition; platforms like TikTok and Instagram effectively promote *vaping* through targeted ads and cool lifestyle portrayals, thus increasingly ingraining the image of *vaping* as something trendy and must-follow. Although the long-term health effects of e-cigarette use remain incompletely understood, existing evidence indicates that *vaping* is not without health risks; the mistaken belief that *vaping* is a safer alternative is the biggest driver of popularity (Syelvita et al., 2025). This cultural shift underscores the urgency for public health interventions that not only touch on the medical aspect but also intelligently address their psychosocial roots, including strict regulation of aggressive marketing and comprehensive education about the real risks posed by these modern trends (Ridwan, 2025; Syelvita et al., 2025).

The dual crisis of increased e-cigarette uses among teens and the mental health challenges facing Gen Z are alarming. Recent studies show that e-cigarette use among adolescents and young adults has increased rapidly, with the prevalence rate among college students exceeding 20% (Iacobucci, 2019; Samad et al., 2024). This increase is particularly noticeable in urban areas, where social pressures and accessibility contribute to the trend (Iacobucci, 2019; Samad et al., 2024). At the same time, Generation Z is reportedly experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, driven by academic pressure and the influence of social media. This mental vulnerability can prompt young individuals to seek immediate relief through *vaping*, which is often considered a less harmful alternative to traditional smoking (Teixeira et al., 2024). The combination of these factors not only exacerbates public health problems but also highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the problem (Teixeira et al., 2024).

To understand the root of this behavioral crisis in depth, this research is framed by two main theoretical foundations. First, the Minority Stress Theory. Provide lenses to identify sources of stress that students are experiencing. This theory asserts that chronic stress arising from structural, academic, and social pressures (such as struggles to assert identity or deal with marginalization) can trigger an increase in mental health disorders. This high stress then gives rise to the need for instant emotional release, a phenomenon that is explained through a second theory, the Emotional Escape Theory. This theory explains that individuals compulsively seek behaviors that allow them to "escape" painful

self-awareness or negative emotions that are difficult to deal with. In this context (Meyer, 2003)(Baumeister, 1990), *vaping* was chosen as an instant and accessible escape mechanism to reduce the mental distress triggered by minority stress.

Theoretically, this is why *vaping* has emerged as a *maladaptive coping mechanism* among college students, especially in response to academic stress and social pressure (Meyer, 2003). The rapid release of dopamine from nicotine provides a temporary emotional regulatory effect, which causes students to associate *vaping* with relief from anxiety and tension. This dependence on vaping is alarming, as it not only promotes nicotine addiction, evidenced by a two-fold increase in dependence compared to traditional cigarettes, but is also correlated with emotional and behavioral problems, including anxiety and impulsivity (Baumeister, 1990). Furthermore, the prevalence of flavored e-cigarettes has been shown to attract younger users, reinforcing this cycle of addiction and maladaptive coping. The lack of effective coping strategies and mental health support exacerbates this problem, highlighting the critical need for educational interventions to promote healthier alternatives (Firnando et al., 2026).

The link between *vaping* and mental health among teens and young adults is well-documented, with many studies highlighting a reciprocal link between e-cigarette use and increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Research consistently shows that young individuals often use *vaping* as an emotion-focused coping strategy to relieve academic and social stress, a very common behavior among college students (Fiaz et al., 2025; Matthews et al., 2023). Social factors, such as peer group norms and exposure to marketing on social media, significantly influence the initiation and maintenance of e-cigarette habits, further complicating the e-cigarette consumption landscape. Although there is extensive quantitative research establishing this correlation, there are still significant methodological gaps in qualitative investigations of the phenomenon that explore the essence of lived experience and the subjective meaning behind the transition from habitual use to compulsive behavior driven by the need for emotion regulation (Snow, 2020). This gap underscores the need for a more in-depth investigation into the psychological processes and meanings attached to vaping as a coping mechanism, which is very little discussed in the current literature. Existing studies have largely focused on the identification of risk factors and the measurement of correlations, often ignoring the subtle internal psychological dynamics that contribute to compulsive e-cigarette use. Addressing these gaps can improve understanding and inform more effective prevention and intervention strategies, tailored to the mental health needs of young e-cigarette users (Filho et al., 2023; Huang, 2023; Pérez et al., 2025).

Therefore, this qualitative research that uses the phenomenological approach is here to make a new contribution. We'll dive deep (through their narratives and experiences) to uncover the essence of the meaning behind the behavior (Becker et al., 2021). The goal is to capture a whole and rich picture of how these cycles of emotion, coping attempts, and vaping compulsivity actually manifest in their everyday world of consciousness, a depth of understanding that is the absolute novelty of this study (Becker et al., 2021; Huang, 2023).

This research has a significant contribution, considering that *vaping* behaviors that continue to be maintained as a compulsive emotional escape mechanism have the potential to seriously inhibit the formation of emotional regulation and adaptive coping skills in Gen

Z students. In-depth and contextual qualitative findings about these psychological processes are urgently needed to complement existing data. The results of this study will act as empirical insights into participants' lived experiences that may inform campus programs, while acknowledging the limited transferability of the findings for stakeholders (such as campus counsellors and policy makers), which can then be used as a strategic basis for designing psychological intervention programs in the university environment. This program will fundamentally teach students healthy and sustainable ways to manage emotions and stress, thereby supporting the realization of mental well-being and better quality of human resources in the future.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how undergraduate Dentistry students at Universitas Mulawarman experienced and interpreted vaping as a strategy for coping with difficult emotions. The study focused on the participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to vaping within their everyday emotional contexts. According to Hasibuan et al. (2022), this research method seeks to understand and interpret a phenomenon in the context of its natural environment based on the perspective or experience of the people who experience it. The qualitative method is an approach that combines various research techniques with an interpretive and natural focus on the object being studied. The data collection technique used in the qualitative method involves direct interaction between informants and researchers in the form of interviews. Interviews can be conducted in a variety of formats, ranging from open-ended interviews to structured interviews. It is essential to choose the right informant to ensure that the data obtained is representative and relevant (Fatimah et al., 2025).

The research object studied was Mulawarman University students in the Dentistry study program. The selection of the Dentistry Study Program as the research object The study was conducted among Dentistry students at Universitas Mulawarman to explore their lived experiences of vaping, with particular attention to the meaning's participants attributed to vaping during initiation and continued use for researching the relationship between extreme academic stress and emotional escape through vaping. Dental students face double pressures: the burden of theory and the precision demands of clinical skills, where mistakes have a direct impact on patients. This high-risk academic environment triggers acute anxiety and the need to suppress negative emotions. Therefore, this group was chosen to understand how chronic stress drives vaping use as an instant emotional escape while providing a database for future professional ethical interventions. This study aims to understand in depth how *vaping* use is a form of emotional escape for Gen Z students, as well as explore its impact on their compulsive behavior and mental health conditions.

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the Dentistry Study Program at Universitas Mulawarman, aged 18–22 years, who had experience using e-cigarettes. Participants were included if they were willing to share their experiences of vaping and provided informed consent to participate in the study.k. The participants of this study were taken Five participants were recruited purposively based on the inclusion criteria.

Recruitment and interviewing continued until the researchers judged that the available accounts provided sufficient information power to address the focused phenomenological research question. The participants differed in age, duration and frequency of vaping, motives, and smoking history; therefore, the findings are treated as context-specific interpretations rather than transferable or generalizable claims about Gen Z students. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique that is not carried out randomly, in which the researcher determines sampling by determining certain qualifications that are considered relevant and in accordance with the research objectives (Peldi et al., 2024).

RESULTS

The results of this study present the findings of an in-depth interview conducted with five informants of Mulawarman University students; all of whom are *vape* users. The data presented is divided into two main parts: informant biodata and thematic findings based on interview questions.

1.1. Interview Informant Profile

The five informants (MW, SN, RH, FF, RS) are students from Mulawarman University. Their profiles show variations in age and length of *vape* use, which affect their perception of this habit.

Informants	Age (Years)	Long Use of Vape	Main Description
MW	22	5 years	Experiencing addiction/addiction, <i>vaping</i> becomes an automatic mechanism when stressed
SN	18	4-5 years	The main reason is still <i>vaping</i> because I don't smoke tobacco, want to reduce
RH	22	2 years	Originally a substitute for cigarettes, now nicotine addiction and habit
RS	18	2 years	Using times of stress as a quick distraction, tend to habituous

1.2. Interview Findings

The results of the interviews were grouped based on the theme of the questions to analyze the initial motives, emotional responses, frequency, and impact of *vaping* in the informants' daily lives.

1.2.1. Early Motives for Trying Vape

The initial motive of most informants was curiosity and pranks because they were influenced by friends. SN started trying because he "just followed his friends because he was influenced and there was a desire to try when he was in the 8th grade of junior high

school". The hospital also admitted that it was "trying to vape because it was so exciting... The idea of trying to figure out what it feels like". Another motive is as an alternative to quit conventional smoking, as revealed by RH.

1.2.2. *Vaping* in Response to Emotional Stress

Participants described vaping as serving different functions: emotional coping for RS, RH, and MW, and habit, tobacco avoidance, or coffee substitution for SN and FF. Vapes are chosen because they are considered to provide a quick calming effect. RS explains that the sensation of sucking and sweetness is "a quick distraction that is very effective to distract the mind from stress". RH calls it a light escape when stressed.

- Mood Swings: Feelings before vaping when stressed are reported to be anxious and restless (MW, RS). After vaping, the feeling becomes calmer, more relieved, and more relaxed, or at least gives a pause/break from the mind.

1.2.3. Frequency of Use

The level of motivation to use *vaping* varies from high addiction to conditional use:

- Anytime/Almost Every Day: MW reports its use is "all the time—no longer a whim." RH uses it "very often, every day and almost all the time".
- Conditional/Distracton: RS uses "only if you really want to, so it doesn't have to be every day". FF only turns on "if you feel sleepy", not when you're in a hurry.

1.2.4. Influence on Emotional Regulation and Daily Life

Perceptions of the effect of *vaping* on emotional regulation are divided:

- Affecting: RH feels that this habit is "quite affecting" because Participants described the act of vaping as involving a repetitive sucking and breathing pattern that they experienced as calming and regulating. This account suggests that the sensory and behavioral ritual of vaping, rather than nicotine alone, may contribute to the perceived calming experience. MW felt "Quite influential but not significant".
- Unrelated: SN and FF state nothing to do with each other; emotions can be resolved in other ways. The hospital felt that "there was no drastic effect", only needed a break.

All five participants reported that vaping did not interfere with their daily routines, interpersonal relationships, or perceived mental health. At the same time, some participants acknowledged habitual use or perceived dependence.

1.2.5. Key Reasons for Sustainable Use

The main reasons that are most strongly maintained are addiction and habits:

- Addiction/Opium: MW (already addicted/opium) and RH (Addiction, due to nicotine substances).
- Habits: The hospital states the main reason is "more likely to be due to habit".

SN and FF mentioned that they still use it because they don't smoke tobacco or when they are in the middle of the night/hanging out, and both are currently in the stage of wanting to reduce vape use.

1.3. Initial Motives and Reasons for *Vaping Use*

The initial motive of Gen Z students in trying e-cigarettes (*vapes*) was dominated by curiosity and the influence of the social environment. The hospital informant revealed that he tried *vaping* because *he was "really curious. You see, I often see friends vaping, so I thought about*

trying it out to see what it tastes like". This is in line with informants SN and MW, who also admitted to trying it because they were friends and pranks. For them, *vaping* was initially only seen as a trial-and-error activity that was common in the social environment.

Apart from being curious, another main motivation is the use of *vaping* as an alternative or transition tool to quit conventional smoking. The RH informant specifically explained, "The main reason is that he wants to quit smoking. After using cigarettes for a long time, he finally quit completely about three months ago. I use this vape as an alternative or substitute for cigarettes so that the habit (smoking ritual) remains RH described *vaping* as a substitute that allowed the familiar smoking ritual to continue without using conventional cigarettes". However, some other informants continue to use vapes simply because they are considered lighter than tobacco cigarettes.

In the context of continuous use, *vapes* have different functional meanings. FF informants use it as a functional aid to support strenuous activities at night, namely as a substitute for coffee: "*Vapes are used when you are sleepy or are doing assignments/studying in the middle of the night. It is used instead of coffee because the stomach is not strong, and vaping helps to make you literate*". However, for most users, the main reason they continue to vape has shifted to addiction and habit. RH openly admitted that he had experienced dependence: "Addiction, addiction has become a habit and Because it is addictive, it has also become a habit that I cannot get rid of because it contains nicotine, a view that was also voiced by MW, who said that *vaping* has become an addiction/opium.

1.4. *Vape as a Response Mechanism to Emotional Distress*

Participants described different experiences of *vaping* in their daily lives. RS reported feeling more relaxed after *vaping*, while the other participants described varying functions of *vaping*, including habit, substitution, and emotional coping. None of the five participants reported that *vaping* interfered with their daily routines, relationships, or perceived mental health. These findings are in line with the results of an interview with one of the informants, a dental student with the initials RS, a *vape* user for two years, who revealed that he felt more relaxed after using a *vape* when he was stressed.

"Use vaping when you're stressed because you need something to calm down. The sensation of sucking and exhaling is like a quick distraction that is very effective in distracting the mind from the pressure."

"Actually, there is no drastic effect. Because there are so many thoughts, you just need an activity that can calm down for a while and give you a break from stress, so it just makes you calmer, not solve problems."

However, another informant with the initials RH, a dental student who has also been using *vapes* for two years, felt the negative impact in daily life because he had experienced dependence or addiction.

"Because it's addictive, it's also a habit that I can't get rid of because of the ingredients in nicotine."

From the results of the interview, the use of *vapes* was initially considered to help relieve stress and provide a temporary relaxation effect. However, Participants described *vaping* as a habit that could be difficult to stop. RH, for example, attributed this difficulty to nicotine, while RS reported no drastic effect and described *vaping* as making them feel

calmer and affects emotional balance and mental health. This suggests that while *vaping* can provide a momentary calming effect, its psychological impact can worsen emotional control and increase the risk of recurrent stress due to nicotine addiction.

1.5. Emotional Changes and Their Impact on Daily Life

The use of e-cigarettes (*vapes*) in overcoming emotional stress basically serves as a mechanism to trigger emotional changes from negative conditions to calmer. In general, informants report that *vaping* is used in response to feelings of anxiety, a lot of thoughts, or stress. After using it, they feel an immediate impact. MW's informant, who had felt anxious and restless before, recounted that after vaping, his feelings "immediately became calmer as if he could pause to relieve all the tension". This effect was also felt by SN, who felt relieved and more relaxed afterwards. This calmness is also associated with the physical aspect; RH explained that the automatic suction process "makes breathing more regular, so the effect is calmer when there are many thoughts".

This calmness is interpreted as a distraction and a temporary pause from problems. RS, a *vape* user for two years, explicitly stated that he vaped when he was stressed because *"he needed something to calm himself. The sensation of sucking and exhaling is like a quick distraction that is very effective in distracting the mind from the pressure"*. However, all informants who felt the benefits of relaxation realized that this effect was only a delay, not a solution. RS insists that *vaping* only *"makes it calmer, not solves problems"*, and RH admits that he only *vapes* to *"take a break for a while"*.

Although it provides a momentary calming effect, continuous use has long-term effects that are the opposite of the original purpose, which is addiction or dependence. RH, who had the initial intention of reducing cigarettes, ended up with a new addiction, and admitted that the main reason he still uses *vapes* is that *"it's an addiction, addiction is already a habit, and I can't get rid of it because the ingredient is nicotine"*. Similarly with MW, where *vaping* has become addictive/addictive and is an *"automatic mechanism when stressed"*. This indicates that the tools used to relieve emotional stress create new psychological pressure in the form of needs that must be met to maintain emotional balance.

Despite the admission of addiction and high-frequency use (MW: all the time, no longer a fad), all informants consistently stated that *vaping* use did not interfere at all with their routine, social relationships, or mental health. They consider that *vaping* only serves to fill time or is used conditionally (when sleepy or hanging out). However, some participants described a perceived difficulty in stopping vaping and associated this experience with nicotine. However, the participants did not report worsening emotional control because of vaping. that *vaping* has become an integral part of daily life, potentially affecting emotional control and increasing the risk of recurrent stress if access to it is hindered.

1.6. Meanings and Functions of Vaping among Dentistry Students

Based on the results of the interview, the reflection on the meaning of *vape* use for Gen Z students can be seen in the interview results of dental students with the initials Rh, who use *vape* as an alternative to cigarettes and use *vape* as a coping mechanism or escape from stress

"Initially, the intention was to reduce smoking, but unconsciously, vaping became a habit as well. Now use it because I want to or as an escape when I am stressed, so there is no benchmark for when to use it, but on the other hand, it can be a habit that is difficult to stop."

However, this reflection also shows a paradox of the meaning of *vape use*: on the one hand, *vape* is used as a coping mechanism to help calm down, but on the other hand, it causes a new dependence that negatively affects emotional balance. Long-term vape use has the potential to worsen psychological conditions. *Vaping* is no longer just a tool to quit smoking, but rather a reflection of the way the younger generation channels emotional stress amid the high demands of academic pressure.

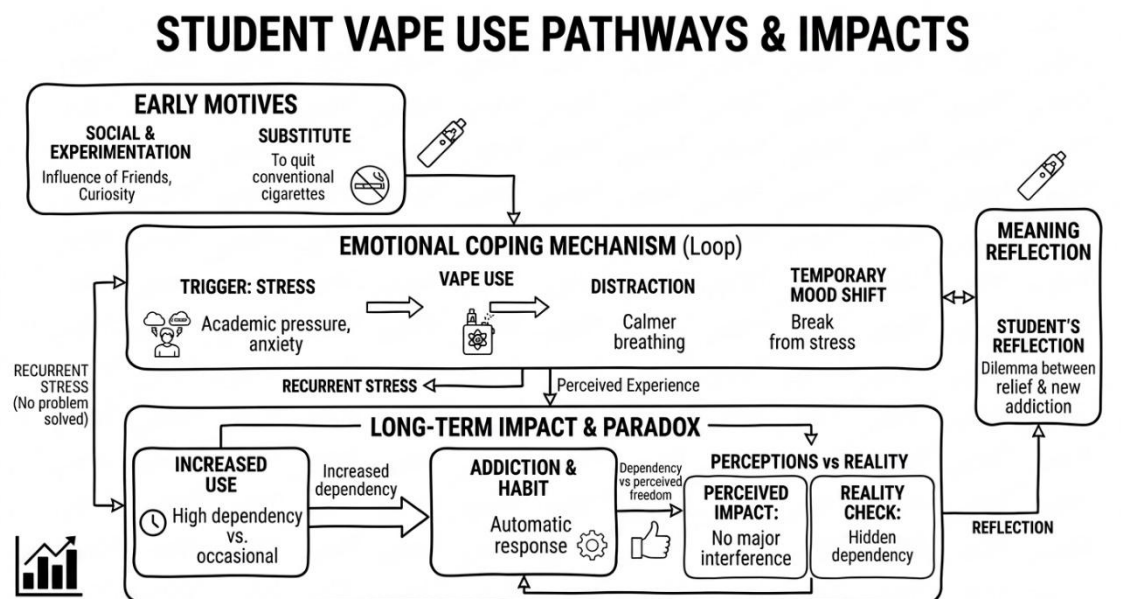


Figure 1. Overview of the relationship between vaping behavior and the mental health of Gen Z students

DISCUSSION

The use of e-cigarettes (vapes) among Gen Z students was initially driven by curiosity and influence from their social environment. Many college students first try vaping because they see their friends using it, which then sparks curiosity. For example, one of the informants, RS, revealed that he tried vaping because he was "very curious, because I often see friends vaping, so I thought of trying it on a whim to see what it tastes like." This is in line with the confessions of other informants, such as SN and MW, who admitted to trying vaping because they were friends and just a prank. In the early stages, vaping use was considered a common thing in their social environment and was often even seen as a less serious activity. In other words, vaping is seen as part of social association, where students feel encouraged to try it out (Peldi et al., 2024).

In addition to curiosity, many college students are turning to vaping as an alternative to quitting conventional smoking. Informant RH, who has been smoking for a long time, explained that he uses vapes to replace the habit of smoking tobacco. "The main reason is that they want to quit smoking. After using cigarettes for a long time, he finally quit

completely about three months ago. I use this vape as an alternative or substitute for cigarettes so that the habit (smoking ritual) remains, but not using cigarettes." However, the use of vapes is still attractive to some other students because it is considered lighter and less dangerous than tobacco cigarettes. Some informants, such as FF, even use vapes instead of coffee, especially when they must stay up late to complete tasks. "Vapes are used when you are sleepy or are doing assignments/studying in the middle of the night. It is used as a substitute for coffee because the stomach is not strong, and vaping helps to make you alert," said FF. For these reasons, vaping then became part of the daily routine, which was originally intended as a temporary solution, but over time turned into a habit that was difficult to avoid (Becker et al., 2021).

However, as time went by, vaping use among college students began to turn into a more serious dependency problem. The use of vapes, which was initially considered as an alternative to quitting smoking or as a tool to overcome fatigue, is now more often used as a mechanism to cope with stress. As expressed by RH, "Because it's addictive, it's a habit too; I can't let it go because the ingredient contains nicotine." This indicates that although the initial purpose of using vaping is to reduce smoking habits or overcome fatigue, in the end, vaping becomes a daily necessity that is difficult to stop. Vaping use becomes a habit that triggers nicotine dependence, which has further psychological impacts (Fiaz et al., 2025; Matthews et al., 2023).

Vape use has also been linked to negative impacts on mental health, especially when it comes to stress management and emotional control. Many college students report that they use vaping to relieve anxiety and emotional distress. For example, RS revealed that he felt calmer after using a vape when he was stressed, "Use a vape when you are stressed because you need something to calm yourself. The sensation of sucking and exhaling is like a quick distraction that is very effective in distracting the mind from the pressure." Although vaping provides a temporary relaxation effect, RS itself admits that vaping only provides a respite from the problem, not a permanent solution. "Actually, there is no drastic effect. Because there are so many thoughts, you just need activities that can calm down for a while and give you a break from stress, so yes, it just makes you calmer, not solve problems," said RS. This suggests that although vaping use can provide a momentary calming effect, it does not solve the underlying problem and can instead worsen the psychological state in the long run (Snow, 2020).

In addition, despite the recognition of the temporary positive impact offered by vaping, users end up facing the fact that vaping not only provides momentary relief but also gives rise to long-term dependency that is difficult to stop. Increasingly frequent vaping use leads to nicotine addiction, which worsens emotional control and increases repetitive stress. As expressed by RH, "Because it's addictive, it's a habit too; I can't let it go because of that, because the ingredient contains nicotine." This suggests that vaping, although initially seen to relieve stress or quit smoking, ends up creating greater dependency and worsening emotional balance (Ridwan, 2025; Widyanty, 2024).

Vape users who experience this addiction also reveal that vape use has become part of their daily routine. Although they acknowledge the existence of a dependence on vaping, they feel that vaping use does not interfere with their daily activities or social relationships. Vapes are considered a tool that helps them stay focused and relaxed in the face of daily

stress, be it while studying, working, or socializing. However, even though they feel that vaping does not interfere with regular activities, the truth is that vaping has become an integral part of their lives that worsens emotional control and increases the risk of recurrent stress, especially if they are prevented from accessing it (Meyer, 2003).

Partial support for the theory of Emotional Escape is evident as RS, RH, and MW found vaping helpful to achieve temporary calmness or emotional relief, whereas SN and FF highlighted habit, tobacco substitution, or fatigue management and showed that emotional escape was not an overall purpose. On the contrary, the application of Minorities' Stress Theory is less likely as the investigation did not involve studying stigmatization, discrimination, or any other stressors of minorities; thus, the work of Meyer (2003) should be considered as theoretical background only. The limitations of the study include the number of self-selected participants (only five people); the use of self-reported and retrospective information; potential bias due to the common institution (social desirability); the lack of gender data that was collected systematically. Reflexivity is also essential as one researcher was connected to the Faculty of Dentistry, and participants could be influenced by the knowledge about their dental education and oral/health risks associated with nicotine consumption.

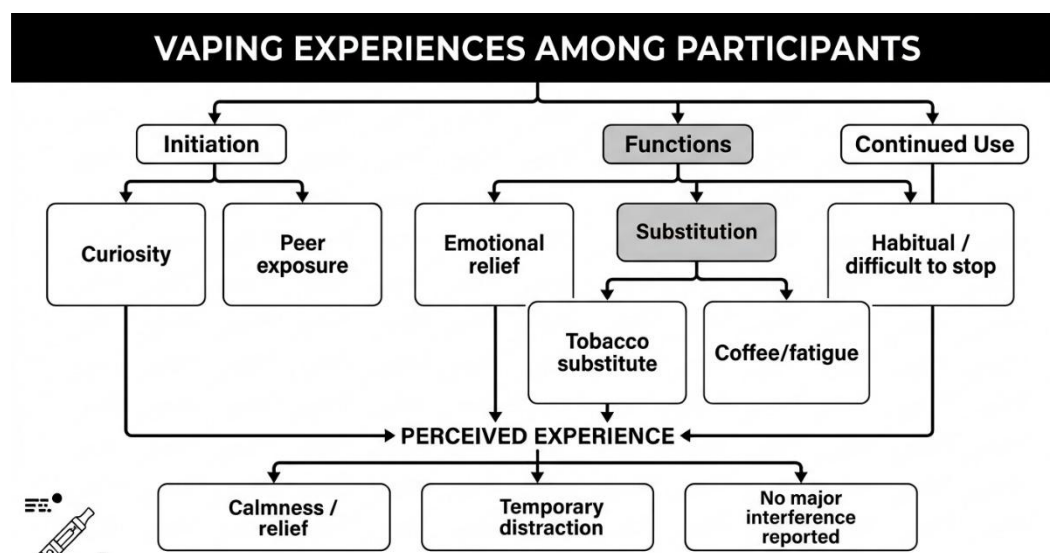


Figure 2. Qualitative Data Pathways for Vaping Experiences

CONCLUSION

Accordingly, the results suggest that vaping had various roles for the five Dentistry students, ranging from temporary relief, habit formation, cigarette replacement, and staying awake, rather than as a dysfunctional coping strategy. Even though some of the participants mentioned that they vaped while taking examinations or engaging in clinical practices and explained the calming effect of breathing exercises, the interviews did not reveal any indication of academic stress leading to vaping, and all five students stated there was no significant disruption in their daily life, relationships, or mental well-being caused by their vaping habits. The results imply a hypothesis about higher nicotine dependence correlating

with problems in emotion regulation that could be verified quantitatively by employing the Penn State Electronic Cigarette Dependence Index (PSECDI) and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS). Since the students SN and FF admitted their desire to quit vaping, assisting with vaping cessation such as nicotine use assessment and referral could serve as a tangible way to approach the issue, along with alternative stress management, peer prevention approaches, and explicitly stated campus vape-free policies with consistent enforcement.

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Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their information, and their right to withdraw from the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. Participant identities were anonymized using initials in the reporting of the findings.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests or financial relationships that could have influenced the conduct, analysis, or reporting of this study.

Transparency of Data

The data underlying this study consist of qualitative interview transcripts containing potentially identifiable information and are therefore not publicly available. Relevant de-identified excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to participant confidentiality and applicable ethical and institutional requirements.

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The Statement on the Use of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, generative artificial intelligence tools were used solely to assist with language editing, grammatical improvement, and clarity of presentation. AI tools were not used to generate, fabricate, or alter research data, participant statements, empirical findings, or their interpretation. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted text and remain fully responsible for the content, accuracy, interpretation, and final version of the manuscript.

Authors' Contributions

The contributions of the authors in the preparation of this article are as follows:

- Nur Syifa Zakiah: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, and writing original draft.

- Jefri Firnando: Conceptualization, literature review, interpretation of findings, writing original draft, and writing review and editing.
- Muhammad Nur Ansyar Pratama: Methodology, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and writing review and editing.
- Nur Riski Larasati: Literature review, data interpretation, and writing review and editing.
- Tika Noprija: Supervision, critical revision of the manuscript, methodological review, and final approval of the version to be published.

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