

## “Cloud chasers” and “substitutes”: E-cigarettes, vaping subcultures and vaper identities

### Abstract

The use of e-cigarettes is increasing, a practice denoted as *vaping*. We explore user motives, self-identity as vapers and involvement in vaping subcultures, drawing on sociological theory of stigma, subcultures and symbolic boundaries. Based on analyses of semi-structured interviews with 30 Norwegian vapers, we find that there is a vaping subculture in Norway. We identify two dominant vaper identities. The first is labelled *cloud chasers*. These were dedicated vapers who identified with symbols and values in the subculture. Many were politically engaged in improving vaping regulation regimes and felt a sense of belonging to a vaping community. The second group is labelled *substitutes*. These were former daily smokers who used e-cigarettes for smoking cessation in a more pragmatic and defensive manner, to avoid health risks, to escape the stigma of smoking and to manage nicotine addiction. In this group, a self-identity as a vaper was generally lacking. Vaping was often symbolically linked to the stigmatised smoker identity they wanted to escape, and was restricted to private contexts. The perceived symbolic meaning of e-cigarettes varies: for some, they are a symbol of pleasure and community. For others, they connote the stigmatised status of the addicted smoker seeking an alternative to cigarettes.

**Keywords:** e-cigarettes, vaping, smoking, subculture, identity, symbolic boundaries

## Introduction

E-cigarettes are handheld electronic devices that vaporise a flavoured liquid, which the users inhale (WHO, 2014). E-cigarettes were initially developed as a less health-damaging practice to cope with nicotine addiction (Hajek et al., 2014). However, vaping soon moved beyond a cessation-only practice (Weier, 2018), and started to serve social, recreational and sensory expectancies (Pokhrel, Herzog, Muranaka, & Fagan, 2015) and to provide new rituals and social practices (Keane, Weier, Fraser, & Gartner, 2017). The e-cigarettes market has at the same time evolved from early brands highlighting advantages over traditional cigarettes to present products with multiple flavours and product versatility (Zhu et al., 2014). E-cigarettes come in a range of models, along with a wide variation of e-liquids and levels of nicotine (Goniewicz, Hajek, & McRobbie, 2014; Soule, Lopez, Guy, & Cobb, 2016).

## Smoking, vaping and subcultures

As cigarette smoking has moved to the socioeconomic margins of society, its stigma has increased (Graham, 2012). In Norway and many other countries, there has been a dramatic decline in smoking over recent decades. Simultaneously a policy of denormalization of smoking has been favoured by health authorities, redefining tobacco use as socially unacceptable (Peretti-Watel, Legleye, Guignard, & Beck, 2014; Saebo, 2016). Current smoker identities reflect such redefinitions (Bell, McCullough, Salmon, & Bell, 2010). In Scheffels' (2009) study of young Norwegian smokers discourses of smoking as stigmatized and immoral dominated, despite some stories reflecting classical positive meanings of smoking as a symbol of freedom. Evans-Polce et al (2015) identified the process from external stigmatization to self-stigma with consequences such as guilt, loss of self-esteem and defensiveness. Smoker-related stigmatisation has also been driven by possible health consequences of second-hand smoke and company policies against hiring smokers (Stubera, Galea, & Link, 2008). Patients with diseases such as lung cancer may feel particularly stigmatised as the diagnosis is so strongly linked to smoking (Chapple, Ziebland, & McPherson, 2004).

E-cigarettes are marketed as less harmful alternatives to smoking (Farsalinos & Polosa, 2014) However, Lucherini *et al.* (2017), drawing on a sample of young adult Scottish smokers with disadvantaged backgrounds, observed a more complex picture. First, vaping was perceived as more addictive and less controllable than smoking due to the lack of ending point and the possibility to vape indoors. Second, vaping could not replace the social and cultural importance smoking had in these participants lives. Thirlway (2016) did ethnographic research in a working class area in the UK, and revealed how different e-cigarette practises

had developed: Older men constructed e-cigarette use as functional rather than pleasurable, drawing on a narrative of family responsibility. Younger men more often constructed e-cigarettes as a legitimate alternative to smoking cessation which could otherwise conflict with their masculine ethic of working class hedonism (Thirlway, 2016). Hoek, Thrul & Ling (2017) found some of their participants replicating the smoking rituals, valuing ‘cigalikes’ for the similarity. Others missed attributes connected to conventional smoking such as combustion and the dense smoke. Others again developed new and unique vaping rituals. Farrimond (2017) as well identified differing motivations for use of, and varying political engagement in vaping regimes among UK vapers. She constructed three main typologies: vaping for pleasure, vaping as medical treatment and ambivalent e-cigarette use, suggesting that the motives of vaping may be linked to different social identities. Some studies have pointed to the importance of online forums, blogs, YouTube videos (Luo, Zheng, Zeng, & Leischow, 2014) and Facebook groups in this process (Dai & Hao, 2017; Pepper *et al.*, 2017). These findings suggest that vapers as a group are diverse. One may hypothesize that parts of the vaper culture, such as those who develop rituals for vaping (Hoek *et al.* 2017) and those vaping for pleasure (Farrimond, 2017) may have characteristics typically associated with visible and often self-confident subcultures.

A traditional perspective of subcultures is presented by Ken Gelder (2005, p. 4), defining them as groups of people that are “non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices”. Groups may represent themselves in this manner, but may also be classified in this manner by others. Such a perspective, focusing on atypical and sometimes deviant groups, was typical in both the Chicago school (Colosi, 2010) and the Birmingham school, where these groups were often regarded as cultural responses to socially marginalised positions (Griffin, 2011; Rojek & Turner, 2000). However, such perspectives have been criticised, as many may simultaneously participate in several subcultures. Moreover, such research may have overlooked the more ordinary everyday lives of larger groups who are influenced by such subcultures (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004). Fine and Kleinman (1979) early offered a less rigid understanding, conceptualising subcultures as culturally bounded networks of people who share ideas, material objects, and practices. Following them, subcultures can be interpreted as clusters of cultural elements and forms of distinctions that do not necessarily dominate people’s lives. Thus, they may engage in subcultural practices without identifying as subcultural participants (Thornton, 1997).

Vaping is a new activity and the symbolic meanings and the social practises are constantly being negotiated (Lucherini, Rooke, & Amos, 2018). In this process, subtle distinctions or symbolic boundaries may be important, as they function to establish personal and collective identities (Williams & Copes, 2005). According to Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 168), symbolic boundaries reflect the struggle over definitions of reality. Drawing symbolic boundaries, we can distinguish “us” from “them”, and separate people into groups feeling similarity, unity and group membership. In this respect, the use of symbolic boundaries also offers people who engage in a certain behaviour the ability to distance themselves from those defined as stigmatised. Similar sociocultural processes have been observed with, for example occasional smokers: In Scheffels & Tokle (2017) study, this group often defined themselves as people who “smoke without being smokers”. Similarly Hoek et al (2012), revealed how social smokers simultaneously devaluated smoking, framed themselves as ‘better’ than smokers and yet continued to smoke to maintain membership of a social network. Generally, such developments illustrate the importance of shared narratives, symbols and rituals for substance use. Heavy alcohol use has, for example, been found to symbolise the embodiment of hegemonic masculinities (Peralta, 2007), while cannabis has been linked to political opposition, androgyny and subcultural identification (Sandberg, 2013). The data we present in this study show how individuals sharing the same activity – vaping – in a similar vein may create and negotiate such subcultural boundaries.

## Methods

### The Norwegian context

It is estimated that 1% of the Norwegian population are daily vapers, while 2.5% vape occasionally (Vedøy, 2016). The health authorities have been reluctant to view e-cigarettes as an adequate tool in a harm-reduction-oriented tobacco policy (Lund 2016b). At time of the data collection, Norway permitted the sale of devices but banned the sale of nicotine e-liquid, resulting in 80% of the e-liquid and 60% of the vaporisers being purchased from foreign retailers online or abroad (Vedoy & Lund, 2017). However, these products are to be given market access from 2019. Snus and conventional cigarettes are the most often used nicotine products, with a prevalence of 12% for daily use of snus and 11% for daily smoking (SSB 2018).

### Sample and procedure

Thirty semi-structured interviews with vapers were conducted by the first author in Oslo, Norway between February 2014 and April 2018. The sample consists of 17 males and 13

females, age range 19-52 (mean age 35). They represent a heterogeneous group in terms of socioeconomic status, ranging from senior positions in academia and the private sector to unemployed on welfare support. All but one were former smokers. As an inductive, explorative study of use of e-cigarettes, sampling and analysis followed the structure of grounded theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In the early stages of the purposive recruitment, we observed a variety of users. Some seemed to be proud “public” vapers; others were more reserved and reluctant. To address this hypothesized diversity, we conducted theoretically based sampling from various locations in order to highlight gaps and uncertainties in the existing data and explore different perspectives (Creswell, 2007, pp. 240-241). The first author attended vape meetings and visited vape shops in Oslo to recruit established vapers. Festivals and venues in the nightlife economy were visited in order to investigate use among young adults and the capital’s frontrunners. Some were recruited through a post on the Facebook wall for vapers. In order to reach “the less visible” vapers, half the sample was recruited using a chain-referral strategy and extended personal networks. Interviews were informal, even if an interview guide was used to cover key themes. We talked about perceived stigma related to smoking and the use of e-cigarettes, nicotine addiction, trajectories of vaping, perceptions of groups of vapers, experiences of vaping at work and at parties, and online forums and chat groups. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours and was audiotaped

Participants were paid a NOK 300 fee (approximately GBP 30). The Privacy Protection Committee at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health gave ethical approval for the study, and the study was conducted in accordance with their ethical guidelines. All interviewees gave informed and active consent for participation. To ensure anonymity, names of participants and all identifying details have been changed.

### Analysis

The first author and two qualified research assistants transcribed the recordings. In line with grounded theory, the analysis started immediately, and continued in parallel with data collection (Sbaraini, Carter, Evans, & Blinkhorn, 2011). The HyperRESEARCH software was used in the coding process. First, codes were labelled close to the wording of the vapers themselves (Glaser, Strauss, & Strutzel, 1968). Both authors then took part in the development of broader and theoretically motivated coding categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), such as *vaping versus smoking*, *addiction*, *health*, *stigma*, *community feeling*, and

*vaper identity*, drawing on literature on stigma, subcultures and symbolic boundaries. This work lead to the construction of our two main categories “cloud chasers” and “substitutes”.

## Findings

First, we present two contrasting perspectives on the vaping subculture, followed by the identification of the two dominant vaper identities. We then outline the key dimensions of these vaper identities. Finally, we discuss our findings in relation to theory on subculture, coping and stigma.

### Two perspectives on vaping subculture

Users of e-cigarettes agreed that one can indeed talk about a vaping subculture in Norway, but they differed in the degree of identification with its symbols and values. Roger (44) and Axel (29) represented opposite positions in this respect. Roger, a former daily smoker, valued the vaping subculture and praised e-cigarettes:

*«Cigarettes and e-cigarettes are like beer and wine. Beer is just that pint, right. With wine, it's so much more. You can learn; it's about quality. You become a connoisseur. That is how it is with e-cigarettes as well. It's just so much more than smoking».*

For Roger, e-cigarettes were a symbol of high-quality enjoyment. E-cigarettes had given him pleasure in a more complex and sophisticated manner than ordinary cigarettes. Axel took a completely different position. He had smoked since he was 13 years old, and had managed to quit smoking for half a year by switching to e-cigarettes. However, at the time of the interview, he had gone back to “the deadly ones”, sardonically referring to ordinary cigarettes, smoking a package a day. Axel’s explanation was that he had taken an “*aesthetic evaluation*”, in the same manner as Roger, but with the opposite conclusion:

*“You become part of a subculture totally involuntarily, one you don't identify with at all... I was terrified that I would be identified with those people on YouTube if I continued.”*

Axel described the vaping scene as a “masculine, street-car-aesthetic with bikini-women and bad music”. He said the use of e-cigarettes unintentionally made him part of this vaping subculture, which he disliked. He used rich metaphors:

*“I skate, you know. Skaters do not like longboard. It represents something wrong. For me, e-cigarettes are the longboard, while fags are the skateboard”.*

In this manner, Axel constructed symbolic boundaries to separate smoking from vaping (Copes, 2016; Lamont & Molnar, 2002). His metaphors pointed to the “the edge” of skateboards, compared to the more “inauthentic” longboards. Skateboards and smoking were seen as “the real stuff”, echoing how smoking was once perceived as a classical symbol of freedom and individuality (Scheffels, 2009). Vaping, like the longboard, was used to appear cool or to fit in. It was, however, done in a manner that has been associated with “pretenders” or “wannabees” (Driver, 2011; Fox, 1987).

However, the common denominator in these two stories is how both talked about an emerging vaping subculture, albeit from completely different positions. Both referred to vape forums on the internet, championships and vape festivals. Both agreed that traditional cigarettes and e-cigarettes hold different symbolic meanings, describing cigarettes as simple and straightforward and e-cigarettes as more advanced. However, Roger eagerly outlined the possibilities for customisation of e-cigarettes, the range of flavours and the attractive subculture. Axel’s negative perception of the vaping subculture as “wrong” and unappealing at the contrary made him quit. These differing approaches to the vaper subculture were echoed in the rest of our data material. Two dominant vaper identities became evident; we labelled them “cloud chasers” and “substitutes”.

### Cloud chasers

In the Urban Dictionary (nineX, 2015), a cloud chaser is defined as: *“a person who, using a personal vaporizer expels large amounts of vapor from their lungs as a spectacle to behold. “Cloud chasers” display their skills at cloud chasing competitions.”* Hence, the term is partly defined by the practice of vaping, partly by participation in certain public events. Previous research has linked the term “cloud chasing” to performing demanding “tricks” with vapour (Measham, O'Brien, & Turnbull, 2016). Here, we use the term in a wider, more symbolic sense. As such, the cloud-chaser identity is based on the stories told us by dedicated vapers, those who identified with a vaping subculture. Out of 30 interviewees, 12 shared perceptions connecting them to such a subculture. In addition to (i) the visibility of the performance of vaping and the vapour exhaled, we identified and included three other dimensions to the cloud-chaser identity: (ii) vaping as performance and hobby, (iii) a community dimension and (iv) publicly advocating the vape cause.

### Vaping as performance and hobby

Kenneth (34) was an articulated representative of the cloud-chasers and expressed how many were well aware of the variations in vaper identities:

*“There are two groups of vapers: those who have a technical interest, you may call us nerds, where vaping has turned into a hobby, and who are likely to be members of a range of forums. The other group, I believe, are the typical smokers who want to stay off cigarettes. They use simpler equipment and are happy with that.”*

The cloud chasers shared a general notion of e-cigarettes as a health-improving tool to stop smoking. However, importantly e-cigarettes also offered social and symbolic functions not provided by ordinary cigarettes or snus. Some of the younger adult vapers, for example, described vaping as a tool for attention. Nils (28), a dedicated vaper, described it like this:

*“One of the aspects of it [vaping] is that it’s new and exciting and that you don’t really mind having the role as the person with the new, cool gadget.”*

Particularly in night-life settings vaping could create positive feed-back. The novelty aspect of vaping may change when vaping diffuses. However, in the Norwegian context, public vaping is still quite rare. Edward (25) described his motives for vaping in a similar manner:

*“It’s new and exciting; we can be early adopters, that’s a driving force. It makes it more fun. I vape in a manner that I hope people will notice and ask ‘what do you think you are doing?’ So I can use the arguments I have prepared: That this is vapour not smoke.”*

Edward had an oppositional attitude and highlighted the dedicated vapers’ visible, proud use of vaporisers. Some decades ago, smoking among youth was in a similar vein linked to sociocultural opposition (Pedersen, 1998; Willis, 1977). Statements such as those from Edward indicate that today, in some contexts, e-cigarettes may serve as a similar symbol of opposition. At the same time, vaping was clearly distinguished from cigarette smoking. These participants consciously separated the two products; many described vaping as a lifestyle, and used vaporisers with little resemblance to ordinary cigarettes.

Embracing the vaping subculture, cloud chasers described vaping as a hobby, with pleasure, performance and knowledge as important elements. Andre (45) said:

*“For me it [vaping] has become a hobby. Smoking never was. I want to build my own e-cigarettes – or personal vaporisers to call them by the right term. It’s all about advanced equipment to get the best experience possible in terms of taste and clouds”.*



These vapers often talked about personal customisation of vaporisers, liquids and the “unlimited amounts of flavours” (Barbeau, Burda, & Siegel, 2013; McQueen, Tower, & Sumner, 2011). Critics have argued that sweet flavours such as fruit and candy are designed to encourage vaping in under-age groups (Bonhomme *et al.* 2016). In our study, the range of flavours was in fact part of the appeal. Trying to explain this phenomenon to us as outsiders, they compared vaping to wine connoisseurs and professional baristas. Such unambiguous descriptions of enjoyment is not typical in the substance-use discourse (Duff 2008), due to the dominance of the medical model for accessing health harms, with little room for accounts of pleasure (Moore 2008).

Many of the cloud-chasers described vaping as a time-consuming hobby. Mikael (19) said: “[Vaping] is something to tamper with for hours. There are so many models and so much to get your head around. I use YouTube tutorials to boost my understanding”. Like Mikael, several used YouTube tutorials to learn relevant skills, in a manner described as typical of the so-called “YouTube generation” (Morris and Anderson, 2015). Several described how they performed “*sick tricks*” with the vapour and ranked it as a key attraction (see also: Measham *et al.*, 2016: 229). Other used social media platforms to share images, video footage and tutorials. Some considered cloud chasing a sport and refereed to competitions with more or less professional vapers (Mosbergen, 2017). The majority of the cloud chasers in our study also invested much time keeping up-to-date on vaping-related topics. Ola (32) said:

*“Part of the hobby is to be up-to-date on what’s happening out there, like: “Have you seen the newest one? Have you read that piece? Have you checked out this?”*

Martin (41) spent much time on vape-related activities – managing a blog, keeping abreast of product development, research and regulations. ‘*Being in the know*’, using the concept coined by Thornton (1997), came out as an important part of this hobby. Most cloud chasers had a high level of knowledge and used numerous vape-related-references. Many used English terminology despite the interviews being conducted in Norwegian, illustrating insider competence. As observed in other substance-using subcultures (Johnson, Bardhi, Sifaneck, & Dunlap, 2006), they used complex argot such as “*dripping*”, “*steeping*”, “*throat hit*” for communication within the vaper subculture. The dynamic use of such argot constitutes a flexible communication system that is also hidden from mainstream culture.

### A community and policy dimension

In addition to “being in the know”, several of these interviewees were politically engaged with regard to the legislation of e-cigarettes and were often dedicated to the “vaping cause”, reflecting how polarised regulatory responses are in this area (Caponnetto, Saitta, Sweanor, & Polosa, 2015). They told us how they fought for better regulations and aimed to educate others by spreading vape-related information on forums, blogs and Facebook. Rita (34) called this activity “*measures in the fight for the vaping cause*”. The most active vapers echoed Rita and used the word “*cause*” when discussing their involvement. Their opponents in these stories were often the public health authorities as well as “Big Tobacco”.

*“The enormous potential e-cigarettes have to save lives is heavily limited by the [Norwegian] sales restrictions. I will go so far as to say that it’s completely unethical and irresponsible of the Ministry of Health.”*

Several cloud chasers expressed frustration with existing regulations on e-cigarettes and the way health authorities communicated information related to vaping. Interestingly, as they distinguished between vaping and smoking when describing their motives, their social commitment seemed motivated by their enthusiasm for the product as a health-improving smoking substitute. Emma (27) stated:

*“The Norwegian government always says no straight away. It doesn’t matter that e-cigarettes are a well-functioning alternative to getting cancer. It is only “NO!” It’s difficult to take them seriously, but we have to try to make them understand for the sake of other smokers”.*

Many argued that the government should help smokers to switch from conventional cigarettes to e-cigarettes. In addition, many wanted vaping to be acknowledged in its own right – as a product for pleasure (McQueen et al., 2011). The strict legislation may have inspired vapers to unite in a form of shared resistance, reflecting the classical motive of the subculture (Hall & Jefferson, 2006).

These vapers often talked about a fellowship of vapers. In Norway, vapers have formed their own organization, Norwegian Vaping Society, with over 13 000 Facebook members. Several cloud chasers followed this group. Their political engagement reinforced the dedicated vapers’ feeling of community. Martin (41) said:

*“It is extremely important for us who have taken vaping to the next level to find a culture or a hobby that unites everyone. People come from different backgrounds – cultures, sex, race, and they immediately have something in common.”*

The vaping subculture was described as inclusive, inviting trust, affective friendships and social networks, echoing earlier research on substance-using subcultures (Foster & Spencer, 2013). However, the in-real-life-subculture was described as a small “*much above the average dedicated group*” and most claimed that the better part of it was taking place online. Their stories underlined the importance of online communities and national or international vaping forums. The dedicated cloud chasers described themselves as a minority in numbers among users of e-cigarettes, and shared the perception of the majority being former smokers using e-cigarettes to substitute their addiction to conventional smoking.

### The substitutes

The majority of our interviewees could be classified in the constructed vaper identity we have labelled the *substitutes*. They were former daily smokers who talked about their vaping in a pragmatic and sometimes defensive manner. The substitutes often echoed a medical model of smoking, solidified by the development of medical treatments to quit smoking (Farrimond, Joffe, & Stenner, 2010). They expressed little or no identification with the subcultural dimension of vaping. They were, however, well aware of the existence of more enthusiastic vapers. As Tone (49) said: “*It is a hobby for some, but I believe the majority just use it to substitute smoking*”. Isak (49), in a similar vein, stated, “*I am not interested in building mods. I just want it to work. It’s just a smoking substitute I use to get nicotine*”.

We identified three dimensions of the typical substitute’s identity: (i) e-cigarettes were perceived as a health-improving smoking substitute; (ii) several in this group struggled with stigma related to smoking; and (iii) they used e-cigarettes to cope with nicotine addiction in an often smoking-hostile context.

### Improving health

The vapers holding the *substitutes* identity typically had a long history as addicted smokers. For this group, e-cigarettes were a smoking substitute and they often still struggled with nicotine addiction and an identity as smokers. Their stories evolved around ambivalence and problems related to numerous efforts to quit, reflecting “the ambivalent e-cigarette user” identity (Farrimond (2017). They reported benefits of e-cigarettes, but strongly rejected a vaper identity and took no interest in online forums. Laila’s (40) motivation for vaping was a

desire to improve health and at the same time maintain her smoking habit, which was associated with highly ambiguous feelings:

*“There are those who want to quit smoking and those who don’t want to quit smoking. I am in both categories. I wanted to quit smoking because it is so harmful; you can get cancer, COPD, claudication, you name it. Then there is a part of you that really enjoys it. I like vaping because of that; that it tastes good and is vapoury – like cigarettes”.*

For Laila, vaping filled the deeply felt void after cigarettes. She was well aware of the adverse health consequences of smoking. However, at the same time, smoking held a positive quality for her, in the same manner as described by Richard Klein (2012) in his politically incorrect exploration of the sublime appeal of cigarettes. In this manner, Laila emphasised both similarities and differences between smoking and vaping. Along the same lines, Ingrid (41) said:

*“E-cigarettes are for people who don’t want to quit smoking, but who should quit. This [referring to her e-cigarettes] is smoking. Chewing gum is not smoking; using a nicotine bandage is not smoking. This is the only way you can give up smoking if you don’t want to quit smoking”.*

Thus, in an apparent paradox, she said she simultaneously quit smoking and continued to smoke. All participants in our study preferred e-cigarettes to traditional nicotine replacement therapy (NRT). Statements such as *“I was chewing myself to death on disgusting gums”* to *“Champix [a cessation medication] made me suicidal”* were common in the stories on how vaping was superior to NRT-products. The success formula was that e-cigarettes combined the intake of nicotine and the pleasure of smoking. Other cessation methods – abstinence, NRT or medication-assisted withdrawal – operate under the idea that the user has to give up rituals and habits linked to smoking (Weier, 2018). Isak (49) had used e-cigarettes regularly for three and half years. He had tried to quit smoking several times, with deep depressions as a result, reflecting research suggesting that unsuccessful smoking cessation may increase mental health problems (Capron, Allan, Norr, Zvolensky, & Schmidt, 2014). He praised the e-cigarettes as they gave him his *“much needed nicotine in a safer manner”*. He continued:

*“I have decided to never stop smoking again. I am addicted to nicotine and I am going to stay addicted for the rest of my life. I am not putting myself through another three months of depression”.*

Interestingly, Isak also displayed his smoker identity in that he insisted on calling his use of e-cigarettes smoking, explaining that vaping meant “healthier smoking” to him.

### Avoiding stigma

Another important motive for using e-cigarettes among the substitutes was the strain of feeling stigmatised as a smoker, reflecting the increasing negative normative climate related to smoking (Saebo, 2016). Isak (49) talked about incipient COPD. We asked whether he switched due to such harmful effects. He replied:

*“Yes, but equally important was the social stigma. My girlfriend was a doctor and in that environment, it is so extremely stigmatising to show your addiction; to go out on the balcony to smoke in a dinner party. I really am an old radical and tried not to give a fuck, but it just became too incriminating.”*

Carl echoed this motive: *“I got concerned by health, but most of all bothered by the stigma”*. Surprisingly, these pragmatic users of e-cigarettes often transferred their perception of stigma on to their use of e-cigarettes. Marco (42), a former heavy smoker, talked about how he avoided vaping in public because of the reactions from bystanders:

*“Many people have given me these weird looks when I’m using one of these (showing his vaporiser), They are probably wondering what it is, right. And it isn’t particularly cool. I don’t think vaping is cool”*.

Marco, like several of the interviewees in the substitutes group, preferred to vape in private, despite the good sensory feeling he got when using e-cigarettes. For many in this group, e-cigarettes became a visible symbol of their addiction. Previous research on smokers in cessation services have reported that a narrative of continued nicotine use is seen as a threat to basic goals of getting nicotine-free as well as smoke-free (Rooke, Cunningham-Burley, & Amos, 2016), and this was also shown in our data. Noelle (31) explained that she never vaped and preferred to smoke when she was at work explaining that: *“...e-cigarettes show them how addicted I really am to smoking”*. Thus, vaping could undergo a symbolic reversal from a health-improving product to one that displays your addiction. For some of the substitutes, it was impossible to escape their internalised feelings of smoking-related stigma. Their hypersensitivity to being perceived as addicted to smoking was transferred to their use of e-cigarettes, resulting in their avoidance of vaping in public.

Thus, e-cigarettes have a complex position between pleasure and smoking cessation, perceptions partly originating outside the medical/pharmaceutical sphere, resulting in their controversial status within public health (Stimson *et al.* 2014). This may also be one of the reasons for the complex strategies witnessed among the substitutes. They were insecure about the basic status of e-cigarettes, in much the same manner as observed within the medical profession itself (Cummins *et al.*, 2016).

### Managing addiction

As opposed to the cloud chasers, most substitutes shared a preference for discreet equipment and vaping in private. A key reason for vaping was that it enabled them to cope with their occasionally deep nicotine addiction. E-cigarettes were also presented as a solution to public and personal smoking restrictions (Keane *et al.*, 2017). Carl (34) really enjoyed smoking and described himself as someone “*who would love to smoke all day*”. By means of e-cigarettes, he was able to function throughout the day, despite his craving for nicotine. Carl appreciated the convenience of vaping, notably that: “*e-cigarettes do not burn out, smell or pollute the surroundings*”. The fact that e-cigarettes smell less than ordinary cigarettes increases the range of settings in which they may be used (McKeganey *et al.* 2018). At the same time, Carl stressed that, ideally, vaping would be something no one noticed. Camilla (36) agreed:

*“I want it to be as simple as possible and as similar to smoking as possible. I don’t want to think about it or have others thinking about it”.*

The majority of the substitutes preferred neutral second-generation devices over customised mods, due to their sensitivity to the possible stigma of their nicotine addiction. Some talked about how they wished the smoke were invisible; they disliked the attention from bystanders and used strategies to avoid it, such as using the sleeve to hide their e-cigarette and swallowing the vapour to avoid the appearance of smoking. These strategies allowed them to vape in places where smoking was not an option. In this way, they managed their use of e-cigarettes without an identity as vapers in a discreet manner. These vapers differ from the proud pleasure-seeking vapers who hold more of a cloud-chaser identity. However, in the same manner as reported by Farrimond (2017), we also observed a more subtle dimension of “pleasure” in this group: they felt healthier and reported having improved their life quality due to their use of e-cigarettes.

## Discussion

This study suggests we witness the contours of a new vaping subculture in Norway. Key characteristics among the vapers centre around two dominant identities, labelled *cloud chasers* and *substitutes*. They differ in their motivations for vaping and hold different positions towards this subculture. Findings are summarized in Table 1 and extend earlier studies by identifying how the symbolic meaning of vaping and vaping subcultures are developed and perceived differently by these two main categories of e-cigarette users.

[Table 1 about here].

As shown in table 1, those holding the cloud chaser identity are embedded in the vaping subculture in line with Fine and Kleinman's (1979) understanding of subcultures as culturally bounded networks of people who share ideas, material objects, and practices. They engage in vaping-related activities on social media, feel belonging to a vaping community and are engaged in the "vape cause". The performance- and the policy aspects of the vaping subculture can often be seen as a reaction towards what they perceive as a repressive health policy and the lack of a harm-reduction oriented approach. Among these vapers, a devaluated smoker identity (Scheffels, 2009; Evans-Polce et al, 2015) has often been transformed to a proud vaping identity, which reflects the classical motive of the subculture (see e.g. Hall & Jefferson, 2006) expressing resistance and opposition. The policy dimension is marked by a bottom-up-structure with the aim to impact regulations. This grass-roots movement distinguishes this group of vapers from other users of e-cigarettes, in a similar manner that has been witnessed in the cannabis policy field (Matthews, 2003). Hence, such subcultures may represent organized responses to powerful institutions that do not value their activities (Willis 1979).

The substitutes perceive the vaping subculture more as a barrier to the use of e-cigarettes. They neither identify with, nor want to be associated with this subculture. As shown in table 1, they have a pragmatic perspective and regard vaping as an efficient harm reduction tool and vape as a smoking substitute. Through discrete use, they manage nicotine addiction as well as stigma. Thus, they emphasise improved health, the pleasures of vaping and successful smoking cessation. At the same time they are defensive and often ambivalent regarding the symbolic meaning and their use of e-cigarettes, often drawing symbolic boundaries (Copes, 2016) by distinguishing and distancing their use of e-cigarettes from

“performance” vaping and the aesthetic of the vaper subculture. Our study yields new evidence of the importance of the ritual aspects of vaping (Barbeau et.al, 2013; Hoek, Thrul & Ling, 2017). Several substitutes described the paradox that e-cigarettes enabled them “to quit smoking without quitting”; letting them continue with the often-valued practice of “smoking”, albeit in a completely different manner and with potential for less damage to health (Barbeau et al. 2013). However, among the substitutes, the perceptions of vaping as an activity intrinsically linked to their nicotine addiction (Hoek et al., 2017) come with a price in terms of transferring stigma. As such, vaping is linked to the same smoking-related stigma they are trying to escape.

Our study echo research pointing to the symbolic meaning and identity aspects of other types of substance use as well, such as cigarettes (Scheffels, 2009; Scheffels & Tokle; Hoek et al., 2012), alcohol (Peralta, 2007), cannabis (Sandberg, 2013), as well a previous studies investigating e-cigarettes from such a perspective (Barbeau et al., 2013; Measham et al., 2016; Thirlway 2016; Farrimond 2017; Hoek et al 2017). New in our study were the complex perceptions among the users, as some embraced the emerging vaping subculture, while others avoided it. Thus, the subculture may possibly serve as both an efficient tool and a barrier for a successful switch from ordinary cigarettes to e-cigarettes.

Moreover, our findings point to how vaping and vaper identities are still linked to and interwoven with the symbols and practices of cigarette smoking. As smoking has gradually disappeared in high SES groups, remaining smokers are highly stigmatized (Stuber, Galea, & Link, 2008). Previous smokers make up the majority of vapers (Dockrell, Morrison, Bauld, & McNeill, 2013). This is coherent with the purpose of the invented product: e-cigarettes were designed to substitute smoking (Hajek et al., 2014). From a diffusion perspective (Rogers, 2010) early adopters of new inventions hold top positions in the social hierarchy. However, in the case of vaping this might not necessarily be the situation since adult vaper groups largely consist of former smokers. Admittedly, e-cigarette users appear to have higher socio-economic status than the ordinary smoker (Brown et al., 2014). In our data, the substitutes’ stories reflect processes were the images of the stigmatised smoker and the stigma of smoking influenced their perception of vapers and contaminates their use of e-cigarettes.

Academic and media discourses may also have contributed to curbing the adoption of vaping in creating a narrative of uncertainty about the long-term health effects from the use of e-cigarettes (Pepper et al., 2017; Roditis, Delucchi, Cash, & Halpern-Felsher, 2016).



Nonetheless, we also observed resistance to such narratives. Participants in both groups aggressively pointed to how health authorities had tried to make it harder to use vaping as a smoking substitute. Hence, more liberal future regulations may affect the symbolic meaning of vaping, potentially normalise vaping and lower the “switch barrier” for targeted smokers.

### Limitations

There are limitations to the study. Firstly, the interviewees are not representative of the wider population of vapers. This also goes for the relative prevalence of the varieties of vaper identities. Even though the interviewees are only scattered in two vaper identities, we do not claim that the relative size of each group is representative of the broader picture. These identities are typologies based on the common and distinguishing characteristics identified in this study. Secondly, data were collected over an extended period of time (2014 – 2018), and this may raise concerns about datedness, given the high level of innovation and changes characterising the field of e-cigarettes (Farrimond, 2017). However, as the goal in this explorative study was to capture different user groups and identities, we argue that the design offers the needed variety to obtain new insights into the symbolic meaning of vaping.

### Conclusion

The social meaning of e-cigarettes and vaping varies and involves a vaping subculture, ideas about health through harm reduction, pleasure and community, as well as addiction and stigma. The existing vaper subculture has played a significant role for some vapers; however, the aesthetic and performance part of the subculture in particular may have little appeal for large groups of other vapers. In conclusion, our findings suggest that there is a “split vision” of health and stigma in the perceptions of vaping where the vaper identities are constantly negotiated. We argue that our findings add to the understanding of varying motives for use and new insights in the possible diffusion process of e-cigarettes.

Table 1. *Defining codes for constructing two vaper identities*

| <b>Cloud chasers characteristics</b> | <b>Substitutes characteristics</b>             |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Subcultural participants             | Harm reduction                                 |
| Holding a vaper identity             | Vaping primarily a smoking substitute          |
| Vaping as a hobby                    | Discrete use of e-cigarettes                   |
| Part of a vaping community           | Managing nicotine addiction                    |
| Engaged in the “vape cause”          | Managing stigma                                |
| “In the know” on vape-related issues | Perceptions of vaping as stigmatised           |
| Flavours                             | Negative perceptions of vaping versus smoking  |
| Product customisation                | Discrete vaporizers                            |
| The pleasure of vaping               | The pleasure of holding on to a smoking ritual |

## Acknowledgment

Funding: This project has been made possible by the Norwegian ExtraFoundation for Health and Rehabilitation.

## Disclosure

No conflicts of interest.

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