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VapeCons: E-cigarette user conventions

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Abstract

Introduction—E-cigarette ‘vaping conventions’ provide a venue for user social networking, parties, and ‘try before you buy’ access to a wide range of e-cigarette products. This study identifies and describes vaping conventions, raising awareness of this potentially problematic practice.

Methods—Conventions were identified via Google searches in April and May 2014 and August 2015. Details captured included location, sponsors, admission cost, event features, and promotions.

Results—41 distinct organizations have planned 90 vaping conventions in 37 different locations since 2010. Conventions promoted access to a wide range of product vendors, seminars, social interactions with other users, parties, gifts, vaping contests, and other events. E-cigarette use at conventions was encouraged.

Conclusions—Vaping conventions promote e-cigarette use and social norms without public health having a voice to educate attendees about negative consequences of use. Future research should focus on the effects of attending these conventions on attendees and on indoor air quality in vapor-filled convention rooms.

Keywords

e-cigarette; tobacco; internet

Introduction

E-cigarettes are a growing concern to the public health community, with the 2014 US e-cigarette market estimated at US\$2.5 billion,¹ and forecast to reach \$10 billion by 2017, and to eclipse cigarette sales by 2023.² In the United States, at least 1 in 10 (or 20.4 million adults) had tried e-cigarettes in 2013, with trends increasing steadily.³ They are currently largely unregulated at the national level in the United States and elsewhere, and there is insufficient research evidence available to fully evaluate their safety.⁴ Concerns over potentially negative health consequences are supplemented by concerns that they may undermine smokers’ efforts to quit, initiate new addictions to nicotine in non-smokers, and that their many flavored varieties have high youth appeal.

E-cigarettes have been heavily promoted online, with social media, Websites, and online forums providing easy ways to promote the hundreds of brands and products available⁵ to a

growing audience.⁴ A new concern to public health is the proliferation of ‘vaping conventions’ for e-cigarette users. Unlike tobacco industry conventions intended for business-to-business promotion of products among manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers, vaping conventions are for e-cigarette *users*, intended to provide a venue to ‘see all the top vendors in the industry and party with all your friends.’⁶ One such convention describes itself ‘like a home or boat show centered around the rapidly growing vaping industry, but with a more social gathering kind of feel to it. There are the standard vendor booths where attendees can purchase “e-liquids” (the nicotine solutions that may contain flavorings and colorings) and the hottest new vaping equipment and then there are tables or areas set up where vapers can sit down and talk with other vapers.’⁷

These conventions, which are growing in popularity and frequency, are likely playing a significant role in the growth of the e-cigarette user community, introducing ‘vapers’ to new friends and social opportunities in a user community that is exploding in size. Furthermore, they expose attendees to a much wider array of products than they can find in local stores, and give them the opportunity to try before buying products they might have otherwise found only online. The conventions are reinforcing social norms around e-cigarette use and heavily promoting use of untested, unregulated products that may have serious health implications.

The purpose of this study is to identify and describe consumer vaping conventions to raise awareness in the public health community of this potentially problematic practice.

Methods

I identified vaping conventions with Google searches on 7 April 2014, 22 May 2014, and 3 August 2015. Initial searches were for the phrases ‘e-cigarette convention’ and ‘vaping convention,’ and the first 100 links in the search results for each phrase were explored to identify convention Websites or articles linking to them. These searches identified North American conventions only (with few convention Websites identified via links 51–100). Aware that there may have been vaping conventions outside North America that were missed by these initial searches, further searches were added using Boolean combinations of [e-cig or ecig or ecigarette or e-cigarette or vaping or vaper] and [convention or conference] and [international or the United Kingdom or Europe]. The first 50 (rather than 100) links for each Boolean combination were explored, because few conventions (2) were identified in even the first 25 search results for international convention searches. No non-English language searches were conducted. E-cigarette conventions with a business-to-business or academic research focus were excluded from the study sample.

I explored each consumer vaping convention Website to capture details, such as when and where previous and upcoming conventions were/will be held. In some cases, where the convention Website lacked basic details (such as location) of previous events, I used Google searches for the convention name to find news articles and blog posts about the convention that provided that information.

For each convention I collected data that included: convention name, Website URL, year and location of conventions, number of sponsors/ vendors, admission cost, promotions, and conference events featured on the conference Website.

Results

In 2014, as shown in Table 1, 22 distinct vaping convention organizations were found to have promoted 46 vaping conventions in 32 different locations as far back as 2010 (including several scheduled into 2015). By 2015, the number of entities organizing vaping conventions had risen to 41 and 90 conventions (including 6 planned for 2016) in 8 countries and 26 states in the United States. Table 1 includes the convention names, Website URLs, number of conventions, and locations. They ranged from smaller local conventions (like 2013's Vapor-Gras in New Orleans) to large conventions rotating among cities, like VapeFest, which has held nine conventions in eight major cities since 2010. Thirty-four of the organizations (82.9 per cent) were located in the United States, the remaining seven were in Belgium, Canada, China, France, Germany, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

In 2014, 17 of the organizations (77.3 per cent) promoted free admission; the remainder charged entry fees ranging from \$10 to \$25. By 2015, there was a trend toward charging admission, with 39.1 per cent of organizations charging for admission, including two that had previously offered free admission charging for entry.

Vaping convention Websites promoted a wide range of features and events to attract visitors. The main goals of a vaping convention are to provide access to e-cigarette product vendors and to provide social networking opportunities for users, but the marketing quality of the convention Websites varied widely. Some did little more than announce the convention, whereas others gave detailed accounts of the planned events and listing vendors or sponsors that would have booths at the convention. (The terms 'vendor' and 'sponsor' seemed to be used interchangeably on convention Websites.) Table 2 shows that 61.0 per cent of conventions actively promoted having a party, live entertainment, and/or a bar for attendees, often free food, raffles, and prize giveaways. The last two of these were promoted by 29.3 and 46.3 per cent of convention Websites respectively.

In addition to the promotions listed in Table 2, several conventions promoted features that appeared to be special at their conventions, including: new product debuts, a 'steampunk' costume contest, a 'take it or leave it table,' a 'Vape Garden bar/lounge,' and a screening of a short film called *Zombies* versus *Vapers*, capitalizing on the modern popularity of zombies. One convention, held by the National Vapers Club, used raffles and silent auctions to help fund research supporting the safety of e-cigarette vapor as compared with traditional cigarette smoke, ultimately raising over \$100 000. This research, also funded by donations from e-cigarette retailers, was eventually published in a peer-reviewed journal (authored, in part, by the owner of an e-cigarette retail company and National Vapers Club employee).⁸

In 2014, vaping contests at these conventions, such as e-liquid flavor contests and competitions to see who can create the biggest vapor cloud, were rare. By 2015, roughly half (48.8 per cent) of vaping convention organizations advertised such contests, including a

‘cloud chasing battle competition,’ and several that included multiple categories for women, men, and different types of devices. One competition even advertised total prize monies of \$17 500.

Another convention, attended by over 18 000 people, included an attempt to set a world record for the most ‘vapers vaping in one building.’⁹ Yet another featured contests to identify flavors of e-juices, to create the biggest vapor clouds, to create and manipulate the best vapor rings (akin to blowing smoke rings), and to compete in a spin on the drinking game ‘Beer Pong’ called ‘Vape Pong’¹⁰

Over a third (39.0 per cent) of the conventions touted instructional seminars for attendees, covering a wide range of topics (see Table 3), some with instructors from large e-cigarette companies like NJoy. Basic seminars were offered about e-cigarettes, e-liquid, and battery safety. Advanced classes were offered on the science of e-cigs and on rebuildable coils and atomizers, allowing users to build their own customized products. Regulatory issues were also covered heavily, including seminar titles such as ‘Legal & Political Education,’ ‘Advocacy & Activism,’ ‘Regulatory & Government Relations Discussions,’ ‘Opening Vapor Shops,’ and ‘Vaping, Your Government, and You.’

Every convention features sponsors/vendors that sell their products at the conventions, promoted as a place to see and try e-cigarette products. Use of e-cigarettes at the events is allowed and encouraged, resulting in photo and video footage posted on convention Websites of rooms so filled with e-cigarette vapor that they are indistinguishable from cigarette smoke-filled rooms.

At the 37 convention organizations (90.2 per cent) that listed their sponsors on their Websites, the number of sponsors ranged from 4 to 1200, with an average of 81.6 sponsors per convention. (Conventions that noted they had ‘over’ a certain number of sponsors were included in the average with that number.) Sponsors included manufacturers and retailers of e-cigarettes, e-cigars, e-hookahs, ‘vape pens’, e-liquid, and e-cigarette ‘mods’ – parts to create customized e-cigarette devices.

Discussion

As vaping conventions become more numerous, public health advocates should seek to have a voice, to educate attendees about the health risks, unregulated nature, and lack of evidence supporting the safety of e-cigarettes. From 2014 to 2015, the number of vaping conventions planned-to-date doubled, with approximately as many conventions scheduled for the 2015–2016 period as there were identified in 2014 for the 2010–2015 period. With 90 vaping conventions scheduled in 37 different locations to date, these e-cigarette promotion and social networking party events are becoming widespread. They should receive further public health attention. These conventions bring together e-cigarette manufacturers, sellers, and users, with no public health presence to counter the widely promoted notion that e-cigarettes are a healthy alternative to cigarettes. Conventions offer instructional seminars to help turn attendees into more advanced users and advocates for unrestricted e-cigarette use. The wide array of instructional seminars offered at conventions could be an opportunity for public

health advocates to offer public health evidence-based seminars for attendees, or public health advocates could feature booths to distribute health promotion materials alongside e-cigarette product vendors.

Vaping conventions are mostly free or cost little to attend, with many perceived benefits to the users: free food, drink, prizes, parties, and contests, as well as free samples of products. They also provide the opportunity to explore and try out products attendees would not have otherwise been able to try before buying (as well as giving product manufacturers and retailers the opportunity to make substantial sales and expand their customer base). Furthermore, the conventions facilitate social interaction among e-cigarette users, promoting a sense of community and reinforcing e-cigarette use as normative behavior.

The conventions' alcohol-fueled parties reinforce the connection between drinking and nicotine use that is already deeply engrained in many smokers,¹¹⁻¹³ and reinforces the perception⁴ that e-cigarette use is more socially acceptable than smoking. E-cigarette users who might have otherwise interacted with few other e-cigarette users in their day-to-day lives are at these conventions among e-cigarette users, deep in e-cigarette culture, and breathing e-cigarette vapor.

Photos and videos featured on convention Websites show convention meeting rooms hazy with vapor, visually indistinguishable from a room full of cigarette smokers; attendees at conventions are likely to inhale a much higher dose of secondhand vapor than they would otherwise encounter, even in an e-cigarette store or e-cigarette bar – in some cases for several days straight. This is cause for concern because current research literature on the potential hazards of secondhand e-cigarette vapor exposure has focused on exposure to a single user's e-cigarette vapor, not on exposure to hundreds or thousands of users' vapor at a time. Vapor-filled rooms at convention hotel exhibit halls and parties may expose hotel, convention, and party staff to dangerous levels of e-cigarette vapor, and if so, restrictions on indoor vaping at these conventions may be required to protect staff (as has long been the case with existing smoke-free workplace laws). Furthermore, these vapor clouds may pervasively move through air conditioning systems to affect others unaffiliated with the vaping convention.

In July 2015, a New Jersey vaping convention was the first to be penalized by local and county health officials, who fined the expo hall manager, the event promoters, and nearly 70 vendors about \$50 000 for violating the state's first of its kind 2010 indoor smoke-free air law banning e-cigarette use indoors, leaving convention promoters scrambling to do damage control and reimburse vendors for fines they paid.¹⁴ As more laws like New Jersey's are passed *and enforced* around the country, vaping conventions may find it more difficult to find venues to work with them; however, some conventions like Vaperoo (hosted at the site of the Bonaroo music festival) and UK Vapefest offer camping and other benefits of outdoor 'music festival' or 'burning man' style venues, bypassing the need for concerns about smoke-free indoor air laws. As legislation and enforcement makes it more difficult to hold vaping conventions in convention centers, the conventions may increasingly follow this path.

Because it included only English language Internet searches, this study may have missed an unknown number of e-cigarette conventions in non-English speaking countries worldwide. Some conventions in non-English speaking countries were found linked on English Websites, but there are likely more that were not captured, and considering the growing popularity of e-cigarettes around the world, it is likely that e-cigarette user conventions are proliferating in non-English speaking countries as well. I recommend a more in-depth multi-language international study to identify the extent to which these conventions are taking place around the world and how they may differ from the conventions, primarily American, that made up this study.

More research is needed on vaping conventions to determine the extent to which they affect perceptions of risks and benefits of e-cigarette use among attendees. Future investigations should examine whether attending a vaping convention prompts individuals to start, increase, or change the nature of their e-cigarette use. Do the social interactions at these conventions affect e-cigarette use, behavior, and perceived norms?

Two previous studies^{15,16} recruited and interviewed e-cigarette users at vaping conventions, but they investigated participants' general use of e-cigarettes, not the effects that attending the conventions had on their e-cigarette use and perceptions. Future research should expand upon interview topics as described above, and include control samples of e-cigarette users recruited outside the convention environment to see whether convention attendance is associated with different outcomes on e-cigarette users who do not attend vaping conventions.

It is also of critical importance to conduct air quality tests in convention rooms where there is heavy e-cigarette use, to determine the extent to which the air, thick with nicotine vapor, may be hazardous. User conventions are an opportunity to study further exposures to high levels of e-cigarette vapor, beyond that which has been included in previous studies.^{8,17-19} Although being exposed to a single e-cigarette user in the same room *may* not be enough to cause negative health effects, a hazy room with hundreds of users all vaping at once for extended periods may pose important and unanticipated health risks to attendees, as well as to convention and hotel staff working at the events. If that is the case, it may be advisable for federal, state, and local governments to restrict vaping conventions, at least by prohibiting indoor e-cigarette use at such events and/or including e-cigarettes in indoor smoking bans. Further research in this area can help to inform the United States Food and Drug Administration plus state, local, and international legislators' efforts to understand and regulate e-cigarette use.

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Biography

Rebecca S. Williams, PhD, MHS is a research associate at the University of North Carolina Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center and Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention. As the Principal Investigator of the NCI-funded Internet Tobacco Vendors Study, much of her research pertains to the marketing and sale of tobacco products online.

Table 1

Vaping conventions

Name	URL	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total conventions	Locations
Arizona Vape Expo	azvapeexpo.com/	0	0	1	1	2	AZ
China International Vapor Expo	expoent.cccmol.com/	0	1	1	1	3	China
E-Cig Show	www.e-cigshow.com/	0	2	2	0	4	Belgium, France
Electronic Cigarette Convention	ecc-expo.com/	1	1	1	0	3	CA (3 locations)
Midwest Vapers Convention	www.midwestvapersconvention.com/	0	1	0	0	1	NE
Oregon Vape Festival	oregonvapefestival.com/	0	0	1	0	1	OR
PA Vape Expo	www.pavapeexpo.com/	0	0	1	0	1	PA
PA Vape Off	l9ves.com/pa-vape-off/	1	1	1	0	3	PA
The Vape League	mecshow.com/	0	0	1	0	1	IL
The Vaper's Exhibit	www.thevapersexhibit.com/	0	0	2	0	2	LA, NY
UK Vapefest	ukvapefest.com/	1	1	1	0	6	UK
Vape Bash	www.vapebash.com/	1	1	1	0	3	IL
Vape Blast	www.vapeblast.com/	1	1	1	0	3	TX (2 locations)
Vape Collective	vapecollective.co.uk/	0	0	0	1	1	UK
Vape Expo France	vapeexpo-france.com/en	0	2	1	0	3	France
Vape Expo NJ	www.vapeexponj.com/	0	0	1	0	1	NJ
Vape in the Fort	vapeinthefort.com/	0	1	1	0	2	IN
Vape N' Ville	www.vapenville.com/	0	0	1	0	1	TN
Vape on the Bay	vapeonthebay.com/	0	0	1	0	1	WI
Vape UK Jam	www.vapejamuk.co.uk/	0	0	1	0	1	UK
Vape-A-Palooza	www.peachstatevapors.com/	1	0	0	0	1	GA
Vapecan	www.vapecan.ca/	1	1	1	0	3	Canada
VapeCon South Africa	www.vapecon.co.za/	0	0	1	0	1	South Africa
VapeFest	vapefest.com/	2	1	1	0	9	VA, MO, PA, NV, IL, NY, DC, FL
VapeMania	vapemaniacon.com/	1	1	1	0	3	NC
VaperCon	vapev.com/vapercon	1	0	1	0	2	VA
VaperCon West	www.vaperconwest.com/	0	1	1	0	2	NV
Vaperoo	vaperoommeetup.com/	1	1	1	0	3	TN

Name	URL	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total conventions	Locations
Vapers United	www.vapersunite.net/	0	1	0	0	1	WA
Vaperslam	vaperslam.com	0	0	1	0	1	NC
Vapestock	vapestock.us/	1	0	0	0	1	FL
Vapetoberfest	www.vapetoberfest.com/	1	0	0	0	1	CA
VapeXpo	www.vapexpo.com/	1	1	1	0	3	CA, MI
Vaping Convention Circuit	www.vapingcc.com/event/vccne2014/	0	3	2	1	6	FL, MA, PA, OK
Vaping the Coast	vapethesouth.com/	0	0	1	0	1	AL
Vapor Dynasty Expo	www.vapordynastyexpo.com/	0	1	1	0	2	AZ
Vapor Gras	www.facebook.com/events/158834774298282/	1	0	0	0	1	LA
VaporFair	vaporfair.eu/	0	0	0	1	1	Germany
VIP Vape Street	vipvapestreet.com/	0	1	1	1	2	UT, FL
West Michigan Vaperfest	westmichiganvaperfest.wordpress.com/	0	0	1	0	1	MI
World Vapor Expo	worldvaporexpo.com/	0	0	1	1	2	FL
Totals:	41 Organizations	16	24	36	6	90 ^a	58 ^b

^a Some vaping conventions started as early as 2010.

^b Vaping conventions were held in 37 different locations, some organizations held conventions at multiple locations in the same state.

Table 2

Features promoted on e-cigarette convention Websites

Feature	Number	Percent
Raffle	12	29.3
Prize Giveaways	19	46.3
Instructional seminars	16	39.0
Vaping Contests	20	48.8
Celebratory event	25	61.0
Party	20	48.8
Live Entertainment	14	34.1
Bar	25	31.7

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Table 3

Instructional seminars offered at vaping conventions

Category	Topic
Basics	Beginner's basics about e-cigs
	E-liquid information
	Battery safety
Advanced	Science of e-cigs
	Rebuildable coils
	Rebuildable atomizers
Regulation	Regulatory issues
	Legal & political education
	Advocacy & activism
	Regulatory & government relations discussions
	Opening vapor shops
	Vaping, your government, and you

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