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Heating Up the Debate: E-cigarettes and Instagram

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Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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HEATING UP THE DEBATE: E-CIGARETTES AND INSTAGRAM

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Stephanie Ritter

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
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Abstract

Electronic cigarette (“e-cigarette”) posts on Instagram are increasing daily. Two compelling reasons to investigate e-cigarette content on Instagram are: the large numbers of young people on Instagram and recent research suggesting that e-cigarettes function as tobacco smoking initiation products, especially among teens. For this study, a representative sample of 854 e-cigarette hashtag (“#”) ecig posts were compiled from Instagram in October 2014. A content analysis was then performed on these posts to determine the frequency and composition of such categories as product shots, promotion, event sponsorship, “vape-selfies,” and health-related messages. Noteworthy findings include the preponderance of e-cigarette product shots, “follower giveaway” contests to increase electronic word-of-mouth (“eWOM”), “blowing cloud” contests promoting e-cigarettes and the “vaping lifestyle,” and the near absence of health information concerning e-cigarettes.

Keywords

E-cigarette, Instagram, promotion, health, follower giveaways, vape-selfies, cloud contest

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Introduction

Electronic cigarette (“e-cigarette”) posts on Instagram are increasing daily. Research has confirmed there are likely health risks associated with e-cigarette use (Britton & Bogdanovica, 2014; Hajek, Etter, Benowitz, Eissenberg, & McRobbie, 2014; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014) and Health Canada has advised Canadians not to use them (Health Canada, 2009). Despite this research and this warning, e-cigarettes remain widely available and are promoted through a variety of media outlets. Instagram is a social networking site (“SNS”) that has a large number of young users (Smith, 2014). Given the growing interest of youth in vaping (Tavernise, 2015), it is important to determine what e-cigarette content users are currently viewing on Instagram. As Grana and Ling confirm: “Action must be taken to stop marketing that misleads consumers or entices a new generation of nicotine addicts” (2014).

This chapter is divided into five sections and provides an overview of my examination of e-cigarette content on Instagram. The first section addresses the background to this study that led to the development of my research questions. My use of Instagram to initially search for e-cigarette information provided me with the opportunity to see first-hand the presence of the product on this platform. In first noting the widespread prevalence of e-cigarette promotions on Instagram, I wondered how these marketing practices may encourage youth to try something that could cause potential health problems. The second section defines the term e-cigarette and provides a brief history of its emergence and related controversies. Here, I describe the different generations of e-cigarettes and the variety of designs that make it difficult to arrive at a standard definition of an e-cigarette. The third section is a literature review of research on the online and SNS presence of e-cigarettes. Section four provides a brief overview of Instagram, while section five focuses on the tendency for users to search for health information online and more recently on SNS. This last section links the research and debates on e-cigarettes to my study and I present my guiding research questions in more detail.

1 Background to the Study

I first saw an e-cigarette in October 2013 while dining at a restaurant in downtown Toronto. At that time, I had heard the term e-cigarette, but had never seen one in use. What I remember most from that first contact was how it affected my breathing and how shocked I was that someone was able to “smoke” indoors. I recall being able to taste the fruity flavoured vapour in my mouth shortly after the e-cigarette user exhaled, and I found it uncomfortable to eat dinner since I felt that the air I was breathing was being compromised. The experience made me think about the progress that has been made in non-smoking policies for tobacco (indoors and outdoors) and I wondered how e-cigarettes fit into this paradigm.

I was aware, mainly through school, movies, and television shows, that smoking indoors was the norm in the past. What I didn't know was how uncomfortable I would feel being near someone smoking indoors, even though in my case, it was vapour. Shortly after my restaurant experience, e-cigarettes became a popular news topic and I began to notice a number of new retail stores across Toronto and London popping up, selling the devices. Finally, in December 2013, while I was on a Greyhound bus heading back to Toronto, I decided to do an initial, very informal investigation to understand what e-cigarettes were all about. At this point, I took out my phone, opened my Instagram account, and searched “e-cigarette”. Then, I clicked on the related hashtag, #ecig, which had the most number of posts.

My decision to use Instagram seemed like a logical choice since I find it to be a good resource that provides an insider's report on products, services and general information, and it is something I often use to investigate new things. Instagram is also extremely user-friendly. The posts are in the form of images and videos, and it's my go-to social media platform when I want to initially review something before I decide to do a broader web search. In the case of e-cigarettes, I had no idea what I would find, but I recall that the sheer quantity of e-cigarette posts amazed me. After my initial reaction and almost 10 minutes of scrolling through the posts, I began to think about the relationship between tobacco marketing techniques I had previously studied in an undergraduate

advertising course and the e-cigarette posts. While there were some similarities in using promotions and sex appeal, there was one major difference: on Instagram, retailers and consumers could interact in real-time. Given the long history of “nicotine-delivery” products like tobacco and its devastating impact on global public health, I thought it worthwhile to study novel “tobacco-like” products such as e-cigarettes (both nicotine and non-nicotine variants) and its emerging relationship to the social practices of conventional tobacco smoking.

I developed my study based on my initial search so others could get an idea of what e-cigarette content they may find if they decided to look for information on Instagram. The main objectives I had going into my study were: 1) to see the e-cigarette promotional content on Instagram; and 2) to see the e-cigarette health content. With these initial objectives in mind, I address the following three research questions: 1) what e-cigarette content exists on Instagram and how often do these posts appear? 2) What type of e-cigarette promotions exist and how often do promotional posts appear? 3) What e-cigarette health-themed posts exist and how often do health-themed posts appear?

2 E-cigarettes

Generally speaking, e-cigarettes are personal vaporizers (“PV”) (Polosa, Caponnetto, Maglia, Morjaria, & Russo, 2014). They are battery-operated devices that heat-up a liquid solution (more commonly referred to as e-juice or e-liquid) (Czoli, Reid, Rynard, & Hammond, 2015). E-cigarettes were invented in 2003 by Hon Lik, a pharmacist in China, and have been available for purchase online since 2004 (Solheim, Papa, & Lefton, 2014)¹. The e-cigarette user (often referred to as a vaper) inhales and exhales the vapour in a process that closely resembles conventional tobacco cigarette smoking. E-cigarettes are often marketed as stop-smoking aids (Tan & Bigman, 2014), however research has yet to confirm if they are actually effective cessation devices (Franck, Budlovsky,

¹ Herbert A. Gilbert is credited with patenting a device in 1965 with similar characteristics to today’s e-cigarette (Dautzenberg et al., 2013). At that time, when tobacco smoking was a social norm, attempts to market the product were unsuccessful and the concept was abandoned. Today, the e-cigarette industry has benefited by ‘piggybacking’ on the stigmatization of tobacco smoking.

Windle, Fillion, & Eisenberg, 2014). When e-cigarettes were first introduced, they were made to look like tobacco cigarettes (Goniewicz, Hajek, & McRobbie, 2014). Today, the design of e-cigarettes varies so considerably that the Tobacco Control Legal Consortium (“TCLC”) contends that more than one definition is needed for e-cigarettes. The TCLC argues: “In 2004, when e-cigarettes first entered the market in China, they were shaped like cigarettes, cigars, or pipes and the liquid or gel heated in the cartridge contained nicotine. Over the last decade, however, as the e-cigarette market has expanded, product design and ingredients have evolved, making it difficult to arrive at any standard definition” (2013). The variations of e-cigarettes make creating a standard definition nearly impossible, which may affect the ability of governments to properly regulate them.

For the purpose of my study, I categorize e-cigarettes into three designations: first, second, and third generation e-cigarettes (see Figure 1). First-generation e-cigarettes most closely resemble traditional tobacco cigarettes. Larger e-cigarette companies attached to big tobacco firms often sell this format. Second generation e-cigarettes remain long and narrow like the first generation group, but are longer and sleeker-looking. These e-cigarettes appear to be more of a modern spin on traditional cigarettes, closely resembling the mouthpiece of a hookah in design, but often with exposed metal to give it a more futuristic look. These products are reusable and e-juice consumption is often user-controlled. Third generation e-cigarettes are futuristic looking like the second generation, but come in a range of shapes and sizes. This rendition is the most customizable and is often referred to as tanks, mods, or mechs.



Figure 1: First, Second, and Third Generation E-cigarettes (Respectively)

Given the lack of regulations on manufacturing, plus the multiple manufacturers that exist, even e-cigarettes within the same generation can vary in appearance. They can incorporate different colours, have embossed patterns, and come in different lengths. They not only differ in physical appearance, they contain different ingredients. An e-cigarette that has nicotine is more accurately labelled as an electronic nicotine delivery system (“ENDS”). While e-cigarettes can be used as an alternative or supplementary method for consuming nicotine, they are also used to inhale flavoured e-juices devoid of liquid nicotine. These are often beverage, dessert or fruit-flavoured. The e-juice flavor used at the restaurant I was at, for instance, was cherry. An e-cigarette forum reveals that e-juice mixes are becoming more complex, with names like Mother’s Milk, Hawk Sauce, and Unicorn Blood (Salter, 2014). Mother’s Milk is described as a “creamy custard with a sweet strawberry exhale”, while Hawk Sauce is said to be “a fruity mix of berries and grape with a soft menthol kick” and Unicorn Blood “...tastes like Skittles – every flavour at once” (Salter, 2014).

3 Literature Review

E-cigarettes generate much debate within public health circles. Some argue that e-cigarettes may be effective stop-smoking aids (Bullen et al., 2010; Polosa et al., 2011; Polosa, Rodu, Caponnetto, Maglia, & Raciti, 2013; Brown, Beard, Kotz, Michie, & West, 2014), while others depict them as “gateway” devices that attract youth and non-smokers to tobacco smoking (Trtchounian & Talbot, 2011; Kmietowicz, 2014)². To demonstrate why people should not use these devices, researchers have documented issues with e-cigarettes that include nose, throat and mouth irritation (Britton & Bogdanovica, 2014), cases where e-cigarettes have been toxic (Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health, 2012), and the harm that nicotine can cause to a developing brain (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Researchers have also studied how e-

² In addition to other resources, the following are scholarly journals and databases I consulted: Tobacco Control, BMC Public Health, Addiction, American Journal of Preventative Medicine, Open Journal Respiratory Diseases, JSTOR, Harm Reduction Journal, NIH Public Access, Oxford Journals, Communication Abstracts, Proquest Research Library, Web of Science

cigarettes have become ‘bridge products’ that promote the dual-use of e-cigarettes and tobacco cigarettes (Pearson, Richardson, Niaura, Vallone, & Abrams, 2012; Pepper & Brewer, 2014). For instance, instead of people using e-cigarettes as a stop-smoking aid, they use it in places where tobacco smoking is illegal. Lastly, recent research has shown that vapour from e-cigarettes affects air quality, resulting in passive vaping for unwilling members of the public (Czogala et al., 2014; Schripp, Markewitz, Uhde, & Salthammer, 2013).

For some researchers (Vardavas, 2012; Burstyn, 2014; Hua, Alfi, & Talbot, 2013; Drummond & Upson, 2014;), the health risks of e-cigarettes are central to the controversy surrounding them. The promotion of e-cigarettes as cessation devices has been studied, both among adults (King, Alam, Promoff, Arrazola, & Dube, 2013; Pearson et al., 2012; Pepper & Brewer, 2014; Sutfin, McCoy, Morell, Hoepfner, & Wolfson, 2013) and youths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Dutra & Glantz, 2014; Pepper et al., 2013). Although some research indicates e-cigarettes may work to reduce tobacco smoking (Wagener et al., 2014), the rise in e-cigarette use among adults and youths who are not attempting to quit cigarette smoking suggests that other factors need to be examined to understand the growing popularity of e-cigarettes.

To further investigate the health implications of e-cigarette use, researchers have assessed its chemical components and levels of toxicology (Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health, 2012; Chatham-Stephens et al., 2014; Czogala et al., 2014; Goniewicz et al., 2014; Kosmider et al., 2014; Schripp et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2013). The ability to self-administer nicotine doses in certain e-cigarettes (mainly second and third generation) allows for the possibility of nicotine overdoses. Additionally, there have recently been cases of children locating and unintentionally consuming toxic doses of liquid nicotine (Wise, 2015).

Policy proposals add heat to these health and scientific debates. The lack of legislation or regulations in many Canadian provinces has resulted in uncertainty and confusion among government officials, restaurant owners, businesses, airlines, and schools as to how to properly regulate these devices. In Canada, provinces have the right to regulate the use of e-cigarettes as they see fit. Recently, the Ontario government passed

a bill to prohibit e-cigarettes where current tobacco smoking is banned (Bill 45, 2014). The law also bans anyone under 19 from buying e-cigarettes and increases penalties for selling them to underage youths (Bill 45, 2014). Given the e-cigarette controversy, it is surprising to note that advertisements for them are permitted if a health claim is not made.

Research addressed e-cigarette promotion in various media (Duke et al., 2014; Kim, Arnold, & Makarenko, 2014). For T.V., Duke et al. investigated trends in e-cigarette television advertising exposure among teens and young adults. They conclude that e-cigarette advertisements on television have significantly increased between 2011 and 2013, and that e-cigarette use may lead to tobacco use. They also show that e-cigarette companies are advertising on television to a broad audience that includes some 24 million youths. Advertising strategies include the use of celebrity endorsements and large vapour clouds that closely resemble tobacco cigarette smoke. Kim et al. similarly argue that a dramatic increase in e-cigarette television advertising has occurred. This study examined a variety of media to determine e-cigarette advertising expenses in the U.S in 2011-2012, noting that the highest expenditures occurred in magazines and on TV. Given the popularity of network campaigns for e-cigarette brands such as blu eCigs and NJOY, they argue that TV ads will surpass other modes of marketing (Kim et al., 2014).

Paek, Kim, Hove, and Huh focus on the promotion of e-cigarettes on the Internet. They maintain that: “The Internet is likely to be a dominant source of information about e-cigarettes because they are marketed mostly online through innovative techniques, such as word of mouth on social media sites” (2014). Recent research has begun to document the marketing of e-cigarettes online (Cobb, Brookover, & Cobb, 2013; de Andrade & Hastings, 2013; Kim, Lee, Shafer, Nonnemaker, & Makarenko, 2013; Grana & Ling, 2014; Paek et al., 2014; Richardson, Ganz, & Vallone, 2014; Wagoner et al., 2014). This research, however, studies e-cigarette marketing practices on retail websites, YouTube, and, more recently, Twitter³.

³ The Twitter study was completed by the Ontario Tobacco Research Unit in June 2015, but has not yet been published.

Studies addressing the marketing of e-cigarettes on retail websites include a content analysis of e-cigarette retail sites and notable trends (Grana & Ling, 2014; de Andrade & Hastings, 2013), and a forensic analysis of the online marketing of ENDS (Cobb et al., 2013). These studies reveal how e-cigarettes are advertised and sold online. Grana and Ling's 2014 study investigates common marketing messages that appear on e-cigarette retail websites. Two primary concerns here are how such marketing undermines stop smoking efforts by promoting e-cigarettes with health claims, and the heightened influence that celebrity endorsements may have on encouraging youth to use e-cigarettes. Their content analysis found the main marketing e-cigarettes messages to be: "healthier, cheaper, and cleaner than tobacco cigarettes, can be smoked anywhere, can circumvent smoke-free policies, do not produce second-hand smoke, and are modern" (Grana & Ling, 2014). While they found that 85% of retail sites contained disclaimers (e.g. "may be hazardous for pregnant women or those sensitive to nicotine"), health and lifestyle benefits were more obvious on the webpages (Grana & Ling, 2014). Authors call for more action to be taken to reduce exposure to misleading e-cigarette marketing claims.

Cobb, Brookover, and C. Cobb's 2013 study uses a forensic analysis to examine the relationship between ENDS ads that announce health benefits and its relationship to affiliate and sellers' websites. The results showed that both the ENDS ads and the linked affiliate sites contained health claims: For example "The electronic cigarette has quickly become the #1 choice for smokers looking to lead a healthier lifestyle". However, the seller sites did not include these claims. The study brings more awareness to instances of deceptive marketing used to generate interest in ENDS.

Although television and retail websites have been investigated for their e-cigarette presence, studies analyzing e-cigarette content on SNS are more relevant to my research. Paek et al. state: "The increasing prevalence of e-cigarette products on social media is a concern because such sites play major roles in people's everyday lives around the globe" (2014). Luo, Zheng, Zeng, and Leischow examine e-cigarette promotional messages on YouTube, the most popular video-sharing SNS. In this study, e-cigarette-related keywords were used to find popular e-cigarette videos (2014). The subsequent sample of 196 unique videos was coded as pro-, neutral- or anti-e-cigarettes. The overwhelming

frequency of pro-e-cigarette videos (94%) demonstrated the high prevalence of positive e-cigarette messages on this particular site.

Another study examining e-cigarette messages on YouTube (Paek et al., 2014) consists of a content analysis of 365 e-cigarette-related videos. Paek et al. found that 15.5 million people worldwide and about 1.2 million youths (under 18) viewed the videos. The study also found that YouTube, as a social media platform, may play a significant role in promoting e-cigarette use, and that the videos were often sponsored by e-cigarette marketers or established e-cigarette brands. Paek et al. note: “Videos on YouTube that feature e-cigarettes may make young people, who are already attuned to novel and seemingly deviant behaviours, more curious about those products” (2014). Paek et al. show that the websites of e-cigarette companies direct customers to other social media pages like Facebook and Twitter.

One recent study addressing smoking-related content on Instagram is an analysis of how Snoop Dogg, as the “Ambassador” of Executive Branch cigars, uses his Instagram account to promote tobacco use (Richardson et al., 2014). This study first highlights the influence of Instagram by describing the platform in terms of its image and video-sharing tendencies where “90 million monthly users upload 40 million photos per day”. The study goes on to describe the uploaded posts endorsing Executive Branch cigars and the number of likes (over 10,000) and comments (over 200) that the posts garnered. In addition, the authors point out that Snoop Dogg’s Instagram account is likely to target a demographic that is susceptible to develop long-term tobacco use. This study provides an initial examination of the promotion of potentially unhealthy products on Instagram.

4 Instagram

Instagram is (mainly) a mobile image and video-sharing SNS that was launched in October 2010. A SNS is a type of social media. Social Media is defined by Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet as “ a group of web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible” (forthcoming:2016). Instagram is also accessible through a website, but users predominately use the mobile application from their smart phones. In

2012, Facebook bought Instagram. In September 2013, Instagram reported 150 million active users, 90% of whom were under 35 years old (Sagl, Delmelle, & Delmelle, 2014). Instagram's Terms of Use only requires users to be over 13, but this is easy to circumvent. As of August 2015, Instagram reported over 300 million active users, over a billion uploaded photos, and that more than 70 million photos and videos are shared per day ("Leading social networks worldwide", 2015). Users spend an average of 21 minutes on the application each day (Shontell, 2014). The Instagram accounts with the most followers include: Instagram, 93.9 million followers; Kim Kardashian West, 43.9 million followers; Beyoncé, 43.8 million followers; and Taylor Swift, 43.4 million followers.

Given the relative newness of Instagram, there is not much scholarly attention addressing content on this SNS compared to Facebook and Twitter. Noteworthy Instagram research includes using Instagram to find out more about: citizen journalism (Borges-Rey, 2015), dermatology (Karimkhani, Connett, Boyers, Quest, & Dellavalle, 2014) and feminist imagery (Olszanowski, 2014). Importantly, Karimkhani et al.'s dermatology study explores how Instagram is unique in its ability to reach younger demographics, particularly young females (2014). The influence of image-based tobacco promotions encouraging youth to smoke illustrates the importance of studying the e-cigarette content on Instagram.

Instagram's Explore Tab is a unique feature of the application. Introduced in 2012, the Explore Tab consolidates public images or videos for viewing that are popular amongst one's followers and those one follows. The Explore Tab also allows users to search for public images and/or videos that may be of interest, and connects users to hashtags or other users. I first used the Explore Tab to access #ecigs posts when I originally searched for e-cigarette content on Instagram and I also used it to collect the posts for my study. Instagram uses metadata in the form of hashtags to connect users to uploaded data in the form of images and videos, commonly referred to as posts. Wendt states: "As a form of metadata, the hashtag (#) on Instagram is a tool that allows people to assign words or short phrases to their images and browse for other images. Currently, the most popular hashtags on Instagram are 'love', 'instagood', and 'me'; 'selfie' is the 20th most popular hashtag" (2013). Not only do hashtags work to assemble posts, they also

function as a way to connect users with common interests. As Wendt notes: “In a 2012 study about the Twitter hashtag, researchers observed that the ‘community’ role of a hashtag presents its functionalities to identify a community, form a community, and allows users to join a community” (2013). Users are unable to directly follow a hashtag on Instagram, but the ability to search for posts under the same hashtag grants them access to a variety of accounts that are posting images or videos that align with their topic of interest. In this regard, the hashtag function on Instagram works to foster community by connecting account holders to one another based on common interests (Wendt, 2013).

5 Research Questions

My primary research questions for this study are: 1) what kinds of e-cigarette content exists on Instagram? 2) What types and how often e-cigarette promotions appear? 3) What types and how often e-cigarette health-themed posts appear?

RQ1: What content is being posted using #ecig?

This research question provides the opportunity to investigate #ecig posts. Collecting a representative sample of #ecig content allowed me to recognize and categorize prominent visual themes. Chapter Two and Chapter Three explore these themes.

RQ2: What is the type and frequency of #ecig promotions that exist on Instagram?

To classify sales promotions, Paek, Reid, Jeong, Choi, and Krugman divided promotion into three categories: monetary, non-monetary, and event sponsorship (2012). I use these categories to classify promotional #ecigs posts on Instagram. As discussed in Paek et al. 2012, the promotional posts in my study are further defined as: 1) monetary: posts that incorporate one of the following techniques: coupons, refunds, rebates, and cents-off promotions; 2) non-monetary: include contests or sweepstakes, a free gift with purchase, but are not offers of a lower price; 3) event sponsorships: posts promoting e-cigarette sponsored events. Event sponsorships are significant to this study as they support social events promoting vaping such as VapeCon, a vaping conference, that is sponsored in part by vape shops and vaping companies.

Table 1: Summary of Promotion Categories

Promotion Category	Description
Monetary	Coupons, refunds, rebates, and cents-off promotions
Non-Monetary	Contests or sweepstakes, a free gift with purchase, but are not offers of a lower price
Event Sponsorship	An e-cigarette sponsored event

This research question also seeks to determine the number of promotion-related e-cigarette posts found in the study's sample. Previous research suggests that tobacco promotions increased smoking among youths (Paek et al., 2012). In their study that examined 1,113 cigarette advertisements, Paek et al. determined that 85 advertisements were classified as promotions. This number may seem low, but one must consider the documented evidence that shows how promotional marketing techniques influence and encourage people to smoke cigarettes (Paek et al., 2012). Paek et al. (2012) found there was not a statistically significant difference in the number of cigarette promotions throughout the five decades examined. They did find, however, that there was an increase in the use of sponsorships that were being used as a promotional technique.

RQ3: What is the type and frequency of #ecig health-themed posts on Instagram?

In addition to classifying the marketing techniques used to promote e-cigarettes on Instagram, I also investigate health-themed posts in the sample. Studies have found (Etter & Bullen, 2011) that consumers already believe that e-cigarettes are less harmful than tobacco cigarettes and are stop-smoking aids (Paek et al., 2014). Significant to my study is the recognition that when individuals search for e-cigarette content on Instagram, they find product promotions masked as health content. Health communication researchers have begun to understand the implications of the Internet as a source of health information (Richardson & Vallone, 2012). Richardson and Vallone state:

Although increasingly recognized as a source of health information, the Internet remains largely without a global governing body for content control. With over 2 billion Internet users worldwide and 10-year growth in some world regions exceeding 2,000%, it is becoming increasingly critical to monitor health-related information being delivered online. Posts are often anonymous, without a legitimate source, opinion masked as fact, misleading or incorrect. (2012)

More recently Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have received attention from researchers who recognize these platforms as sources to obtain health information. These SNS have also been acknowledged as platforms that can be useful to see how health issues are discussed, as De Brún et al. as, note:

The availability of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and various online message boards creates a virtual social world where users can interact, discuss and share information. Increasingly, people are actively seeking health information online and thus, online fields of social interaction provide an opportunity for researchers to capitalize on a wealth of data relevant to health communication, including online support forums and discussions of various health issues. (2014)

My study intends to build on the usefulness of obtaining health information from Instagram in order to recommend what can be done to better ensure that users encounter factual e-cigarette health information on this site.

1 Chapter One: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the research methods I used to collect data for this study. In doing so, I explain how I used Instagram as a tool for data collection. The objective of my study is to examine the #ecig posts on Instagram to gain a better understanding of e-cigarette content on this specific social networking site (“SNS”). This chapter describes: ethical considerations, the data collection process, the construction of my Instagram sample, my pilot study, the research setting and the advantages and disadvantages of using Instagram as a research tool, my research approach, the research design, and my role as a researcher.

1.1 Ethical Considerations

The three main areas of ethical concern for this study involve anonymity, informed consent, and recording private/public posts. De Brún et al. confirm that the novelty of collecting data online has made it difficult to determine a standard ethical approach (2014). In this study, I only recorded public posts and I employed the following ethical safeguards: 1) the user’s Instagram account information will remain anonymous, 2) the recorded information will be stored in a password protected computer, 3) specific user information will not be discussed, 4) the study will consider Instagram’s privacy policy which informs users that: “By using our Service you understand and agree that we are providing a platform for you to post content, including photos, comments and other materials (User Content), to the Service and to share User Content publicly. This means that other Users may search for, use, or share any of your User Content that you make publicly available through the Service, consistent with the terms and conditions of this Privacy Policy and our Terms of Use” (“Privacy and Safety Centre”, 2015).

1.2 Data Collection Process

I collected the data for this study by taking screenshots of public #ecig posts on Instagram as they occurred during scheduled data collecting hours. This was done to create a database of representative #ecig posts. To avoid ranking algorithms among follower's posts, which may influence what posts users receive based on what their followers like, post, or whom their followers follow, I created a new Instagram account, instead of using my own. I chose to record posts incorporating #ecig because it was the most frequently used e-cigarette related hashtag (see Table 2)⁴. Among #ecig posts, other e-cigarette related hashtags, such as #ecigs or #ecigarette, may also be present. To access the #ecig posts, I typed in ecig as my search term into Instagram's Explore Tab. A hashtag search shows the most recent posts that incorporate that hashtag and users can scroll down through the search results to see what images and videos are being tagged under this search term. Posts are arranged chronologically (based on the time users share them). It was important to examine and make notes on the posts in the hour they occurred to see what content a user searching the ecig hashtag would view at a particular time. I found this to be the most realistic way to gain insight into the array of e-cigarette content a user would encounter if they searched for the ecig hashtag at various times of day.

Table 2: Frequency of E-cigarette-related Hashtags (June 16, 2014)

Instagram Hashtag	Universe of Posts (June 16, 2014)
#ecig	411,294
#e-cigarette	48,854
#e-cigarettes	10,405

⁴ Vape-related hashtags such as #vape, #vapelite, and #vapeporn have more posts on Instagram than #ecig, but given my experience, I thought that someone else who is unfamiliar with e-cigarettes would not use these terms to initially search for e-cigarette related information.

1.3 Construction of Instagram Sample

In order to secure a representative sample of real-time #ecig posts, I designed a data collection schedule for the month of October 2014, during which I recorded the live #ecig posts for one hour every other day. Starting on Thursday, October 2, 2014, I recorded the #ecig posts that were shared from 12:00pmEST to 1:00pmEST. For each scheduled monitoring day (every other day), I changed the start time by three hours. This allowed me to record #ecig posts occurring at different times throughout the day so I would have a representative sample of posts. Following this data collection schedule, the next recording day was Saturday, October 4, 2014 from 3:00pmEST to 4:00pmEST. I continued following this recording method until Thursday, October 30, 2014 (see Figure 2). In total, 15 hours of data collection resulted in a sample of 934 #ecig posts.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			1	2	3	4
				12pm-1pm		3pm-4pm
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	6pm-7pm		9pm-10pm		12am-1am	
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
3am-4am		6am-7am		9am-10am		12pm-1pm
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
	3pm-4pm		6pm-7pm		9pm-10pm	
26	27	28	29	30	31	
12am-1am		3am-4am		6am-7am		

Figure 2: Data Collection Schedule (October 2014)

During each data collection hour, I used my iPad to take a screenshot of each #ecig post uploaded by users. I then transferred the screenshot to iPhoto, a consumer-oriented media manager so that I could code, sort, and manage the posts. Previous studies have also used iPhoto as a tool to manage visual data (Sorapure, 2010; Remillard, 2012). The advantages of using iPhoto include: synchronicity with iPads; the ability to view multiple images simultaneously; and its enhanced zooming and sharing functions. It is also easy to search and retrieve coded images. However, the main drawback of iPhoto is that it does not allow for multi-level statistical analysis. In iPhoto, I set up a #ecig folder that had 15 albums, each titled according to the date I recorded the posts. Although other software tools exist for analyzing images, iPhoto was the most optimal program for transferring, coding, and searching the collected data. About other software programs, Silver and Patashnick confirm: “CAQDAS⁵ packages only allow grouped images to be viewed as lists, whereas photo storage/editing software provide more flexible means of displaying and sequencing images” (2011). iPhoto proved highly flexible and powerful in keeping images in chronological order and there was no cost to use it. These posts were also uploaded to a spreadsheet so that I could document my observations. The Microsoft spreadsheet included date, hour, a screenshot of the post, location of the post (if noted), and an observations category to document my notes and reflections during the recording phase (see Figure 3). At least two screenshots were taken per post in order to include both the image and the text that appeared below the image. Each recording day has a spreadsheet organized according to these headings.

During each hour of data collection, I recorded screenshots of the image and video posts. However, only image posts were included in my study. As Creswell confirms, visual representations are so full of meaning that researchers need to winnow the data (2013). In addition, screenshots do not permit the playback of videos. After removing the video posts, 854 image posts from the original 934 collected, remained in the sample.

⁵ CAQDAS refers to Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis.

October 16, 2014 @ 9:00am - 10:00am

Time	Photo (Top)	Photo (Bottom)	Photo (middle)	Location	Notes
9:04					Vape Meme
9:04					Youth Looking
9:06					Giveaway
9:06					Giveaway, Repost
9:06					Giveaway
9:07					Giveaway, Repost
9:07					Youth Looking
9:10					Giveaway, Repost
9:10					Product
9:12					Product
9:12					Product
9:12					Product in Hand
9:12					Miscellaneous
9:14					Repost
9:14					Store - Vaping room Dominican republic
9:18					Product
9:18					Video, Youth Looking
9:18					Store - Vaping room Dominican republic

Figure 3: Microsoft Spreadsheet Example

As a strategy for increasing the validity of my research results, I purchased a hashtag tracking service called Keyhole.co, for \$129. Keyhole.co is a service that provides hashtag tracking on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and counts MTV, Horizonmedia, and the Huffington Post as clients. Keyhole's services were to provide information that would not be available with my primary data collection method such as the peak times of posts, the most influential poster, the gender of the poster, the country in which the post was made, and a display of a variety of words frequently associated with the posts. However, the information Keyhole provided proved to be of limited value because the service collected far fewer posts per hour than I had recorded.

1.4 Pilot Study

A pilot study was done to test the feasibility of the process I outlined for data collection. Baker (1994) confirms: "A pilot study is often used to pretest or try out" a research approach. My pilot study was a trial run to verify the practicality of recording and coding real-time #ecig posts on Instagram and to estimate how many hours it would take to yield a sample of 800-1,000 posts. The pilot study consisted of taking screenshots of the posts that occurred during a specific data collection hour. This was done in September 2014 for three different days and during three varying hours. My pilot study helped develop the

categories I used to organize the spreadsheet that formed the inventory of recorded #ecig posts. It became apparent that deductive coding would also be necessary as I discovered many unexpected finds.

1.5 Research Setting: Instagram & Data Collection

This study took place on Instagram's mobile application. As previously mentioned, Instagram is a mobile image-sharing (and more recently video-sharing) SNS. It was launched in October 2010. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is based on circulating visual images. When an Instagram user follows other accounts, the home screen can be considered a visual news feed, comparable to a Twitter feed or news feed on Facebook, but with images. As explored in this study, users are able to attach a hashtag to their uploads. Clicking on a hashtag in a post or searching for a hashtag using the Explore Tab leads you to the hashtag 'feed'.

A unique element to this study was capturing the Instagram posts as they occurred. This allowed me to observe each post featuring the ecig hashtag that appeared within the hour of data collection. I chose this particular method of data collection because posts appear chronologically and it is extremely unlikely that users will go through an entire hashtag feed when searching through the #ecig content; to do so would take hours for users. This method of data collection also meant I would be able to capture posts that could have been later deleted by users.

Acquiring posts on Instagram presented a few challenges. First, the quantity of #ecig posts and the inability to later search for archived posts meant I had to obtain the images from Instagram, which I did through screenshots, in order to be able to access them for my future analysis. In addition, in order to follow the live sequence of posts, I had to refresh the search results (the #ecig feed) every few minutes. Unfortunately, collecting data in real-time meant that recording the number of likes and comments that accompany the posts would not be possible as most viewers would not have the opportunity to see and respond to the post right away. This study was further limited because using screenshots to record each post did not allow the inclusion of video posts. Occasionally, some posts would be reposted within the same hour; this happened when

there was a contest that required users to repost in order to be an eligible contestant. The reposts were still recorded since different users posted them.

1.6 Research Approach: Mixed Methods

I employed a mixed methods research framework to collect, organize and code the e-cigarette content on Instagram, combining qualitative (open-ended) and quantitative (closed-ended) research approaches. Since the idea of using social media, and specifically Instagram, as a tool for data collection is still quite new, the study required a qualitative approach through a content analysis of visual images to thematize the e-cigarette posts, along with a quantitative approach to collect numerical data about the posts. This mixed methods approach also supports the further examination of #ecig posts through a cultural studies visual analysis seen in Chapter Three.

The mixed methods approach originated in the late 1980s and has been described using the terms integrative, synthesizing, quantitative and qualitative methods, multi-methods, and mixed methodology (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell, the mixed methods approach has recently grown in popularity and its perceived legitimacy (2013). He notes:

A mixed methods approach is one in which the researcher tends to base knowledge claims on pragmatic grounds. It employed strategies of inquiry that involve collecting data either simultaneously or sequentially to best understand research problems. The collected data also involves gathering both numeric information (e.g., on instruments) as well as text information. (Creswell, 2013)

The benefit of approaching research both qualitatively and quantitatively is that it provides a more inclusive examination of the study's research questions. Creswell also notes, though, that this mixed methods approach can present significant challenges, since it requires an extensive amount of data, time, and familiarity with both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

1.7 Research Design: Content & Cultural Analysis

I used a content analysis for the research study's design following Klaus Krippendorff, who defines content analysis as: "A research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (2004). A content analysis research design has previously been applied in similar e-cigarette marketing research, including Paek et al. (2014). Content analysis is an appropriate research design for this study because it will provide an initial examination of the composition and frequency of e-cigarette posts on Instagram. As Sparks notes: "Content analysis is a logical beginning point for the investigation of media effects because it helps us to discover what content is present that might be bringing about various effects" (2006). The demonstrated impact that tobacco cigarette promotions have on encouraging youth to smoke makes investigating the media effects of e-cigarette promotions on that demographic especially significant.

As well, I use a form of cultural studies analysis guided by van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2008), in order to examine how the #ecig posts on Instagram create meaning. This analysis will consider what #ecig posts articulate in broader social, economic, and cultural contexts. Representations of power and identity will be addressed in both the production of the posts and in the post themselves. Van Leeuwen and Jewitt confirm: "The methodological eclecticism of Cultural Studies allows the analyst to attend to the many moments within the cycle of production, circulation and consumption of the images through which meanings accumulate, slip and shift" (2008).

I first coded the #ecig posts by adopting a deductive approach, using predetermined categories to classify promotional and health-themed posts, and then followed with an inductive approach to determine additional themes and patterns in the remaining posts. As Elo and Kyngas confirm: "A deductive approach is useful if the general aim was to test a previous theory in a different situation or to compare categories at different time periods" (2007). In this study, the e-cigarette promotional posts were coded into categories originally designated by Lichtenstein, Burton, and Netemeyer (1997) and later adopted by Paek et al. (2012) to code tobacco cigarette promotions. I took this same approach to see if similarities and differences existed between previously

studied tobacco promotions and e-cigarette promotions on Instagram. Promotional posts are understood as those “used to maximize the probability that a purchase-related act will be performed” (qtd. in Paek et al., 2012).

As mentioned, the health-themed category was also developed deductively. One of my primary objectives going into the study was to code what health-themed e-cigarette content appeared on Instagram, and how frequently this content was shared. Given the health debates surrounding e-cigarettes, I wondered what sort of health-themed information would be communicated on Instagram. I was not sure what I would come across, but I wanted to be able to code what I found in one category. The classification needed to be inclusive, hence ‘health-themed’.

In addition to coding the #ecig content into promotional and health-themed posts, I also developed codes inductively through open-ended coding (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). To do this, I had to keep an open mind when categorizing the collected data, to make sense of other #ecig themes. A concern in analyzing Instagram posts is that they are both formally and informally a form of advertising. This is important to note as research indicates that cigarette advertisements had a strong influence on youth smoking (Pucci & Siegel, 1999). Whether a post is from an account associated with a company or from an independent user (which is sometimes difficult to discern), it is intended to showcase an object, activity, opinion, lifestyle attribute, etc. As Paek et al. showed (2014), YouTube videos that were not sponsored by a company were actually more influential in promoting e-cigarettes. This suggests that user-driven posts on Instagram may be effective at marketing e-cigarettes. Inductive codes allowed me to approach these advertising #ecig posts without restrictive categories, as I did not know what additional themes would emerge. Given the heightened impact that user-driven posts have, I decided to divide the content in my sample according to merchant-driven⁶ or user-driven posts. Chapter Two explores the mainly merchant-driven content in my sample, while Chapter Three examines user-driven content.

⁶ Merchant driven is a type of user-generated post that has a vape shop (online / offline) affiliation.

1.8 Researcher's Role

As an Instagram user, I am familiar with its operation. As discussed in the Introduction, my initial inclination to search Instagram for e-cigarette information helped to initiate this study. My presence on Instagram provides me with a first-hand perspective of this social network. Although I am familiar with it, analyzing the e-cigarette content on this platform was a new experience. Throughout my study, I was exposed to new terms, images, and methods of communication. As an Instagram user, I have not used the ecig hashtag on my personal account. Prior to this research, I was unaware of this particular social community on Instagram.

2 Chapter Two: #ecig Shop Talk

We know that the general public is now exposed to e-cigarette marketing via a variety of media platforms. According to Emery, Vera, Huang, and Szczypka, television and radio are the most common platforms for e-cigarette advertising (2014). Research also documents that social media has become a popular venue to market e-cigarettes and related products (Emery et al., 2014). However, we know little about what individuals are actually being exposed to on social media and even less about what kind of e-cigarette content exists on Instagram. This chapter provides an overview of the variety of content found, focusing mainly on merchant-driven categories in the #ecig Instagram sample: product shots, promotions, business listings, and health-themed posts. This chapter also illustrates how social media applications extend word-of-mouth marketing (“WOMM”) (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). It also examines the similarities between social coupons and e-cigarette coupons on Instagram.

2.1 Overview of Collected Content

During October 2014, I collected a representative sample of 934 #ecig posts. As previously mentioned, only posted images were analyzed for this study, leaving 854 posts or 91% of the total posts. Videos appeared 80 times, constituting 9% of the collected posts.

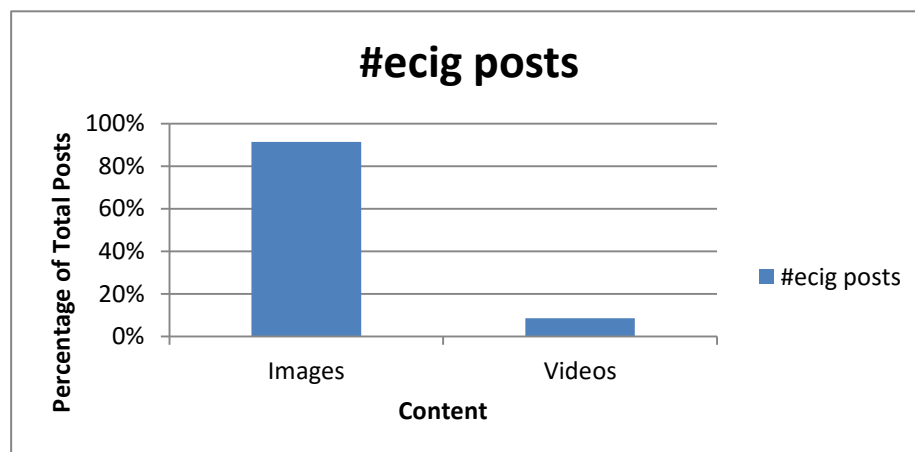


Figure 4: Breakdown of the 934 Collected Posts

After separating the images and videos, the #ecig images were further broken down into the following categories: product shots, promotions, business listings, vape selfies, blowing clouds, events (not sponsored), memes, health-themed, erotic, sale notices, and miscellaneous. First I address product shots, the largest group in the sample. Then I discuss the promotional posts that were coded based on the categories discussed in the Introduction. Next, I discuss business listings. Finally, I explore health-themed e-cigarette content⁷. The chart below, Figure 5, provides an overview of the content of image posts.

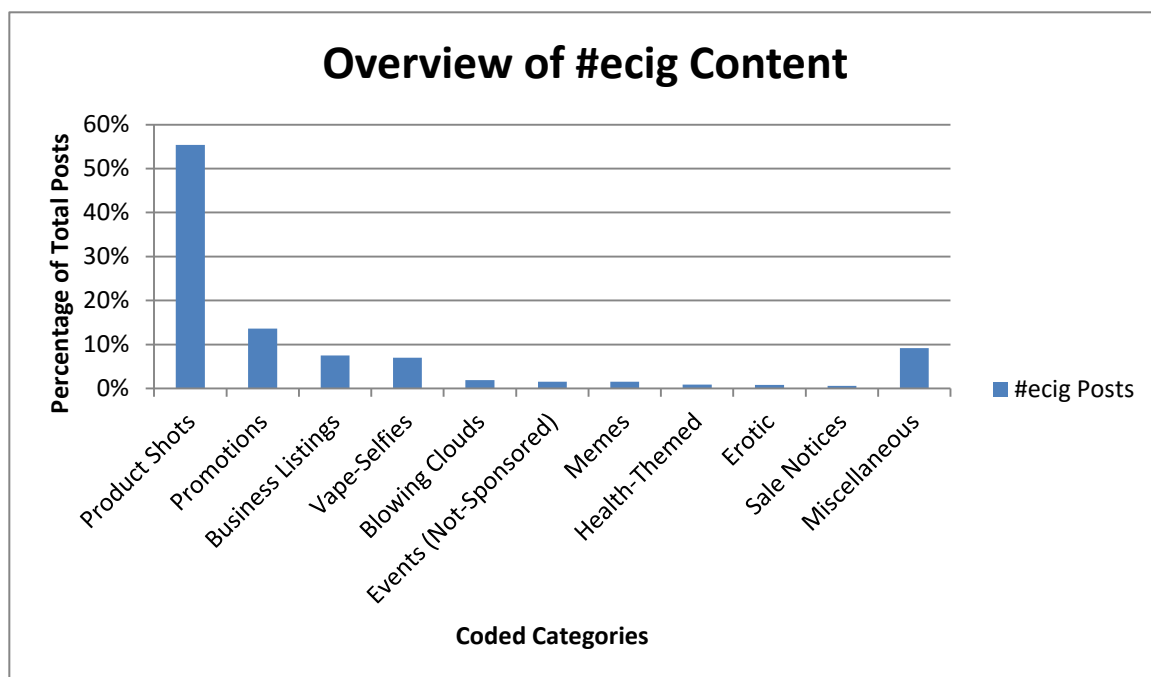


Figure 5: Overview of #ecig Content

2.3 Product Shots

More than half of the images (55%) were product shots. These involved photos of e-cigarettes (various generations), e-juice flavours, batteries, and various e-cigarette accessories. In general, they were simple, low quality images that showed the product without pricing or other information. Product shots were mostly from accounts associated

⁷ The remaining categories will be addressed in the next chapter (Chapter 3).

with vape shops designed to showcase the retailer's merchandise. Others were from users, showing, sometimes flaunting, their gear.

These product shots display items without reference to lifestyle depictions. They do not contain people. Despite mostly appearing as simple photographs, these posts are significant because they reflect the variety and wide range of vaporizer products and accessories that exist, from colours to shapes to brands. E-juice product shots show the assortment of flavours available, many of which are fruit or dessert varieties. Notably, it is difficult to distinguish between e-juices containing nicotine and nicotine-free blends with Propylene Glycol ("PG")⁸ and Vegetable Glycerin ("VG"). This may reflect recent research that found one in five e-cigarette users were unaware if they were consuming an e-juice with nicotine (Czoli et al., 2015). Items used to independently assemble e-cigarettes in order to customize someone's vaping experience included: drip tips, OHM readers, rebuildable dripping atomizers, wires, coils, batteries and battery chargers. Items like these were grouped together in the accessories category. E-cigarette accessories show the options that vapers have to modify their devices to best fit their vaping needs. For instance, using a drip system without a filter makes the e-juice more potent because the e-juice is dripped directly on the battery. Figure 6 is a breakdown of the product shots in the sample.

⁸ Pharmaceutical grade PG is categorized by the FDA as "Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS)", but higher concentrations of PG are the main component in antifreeze, paints, and engine coolants (Sherman, 2008).

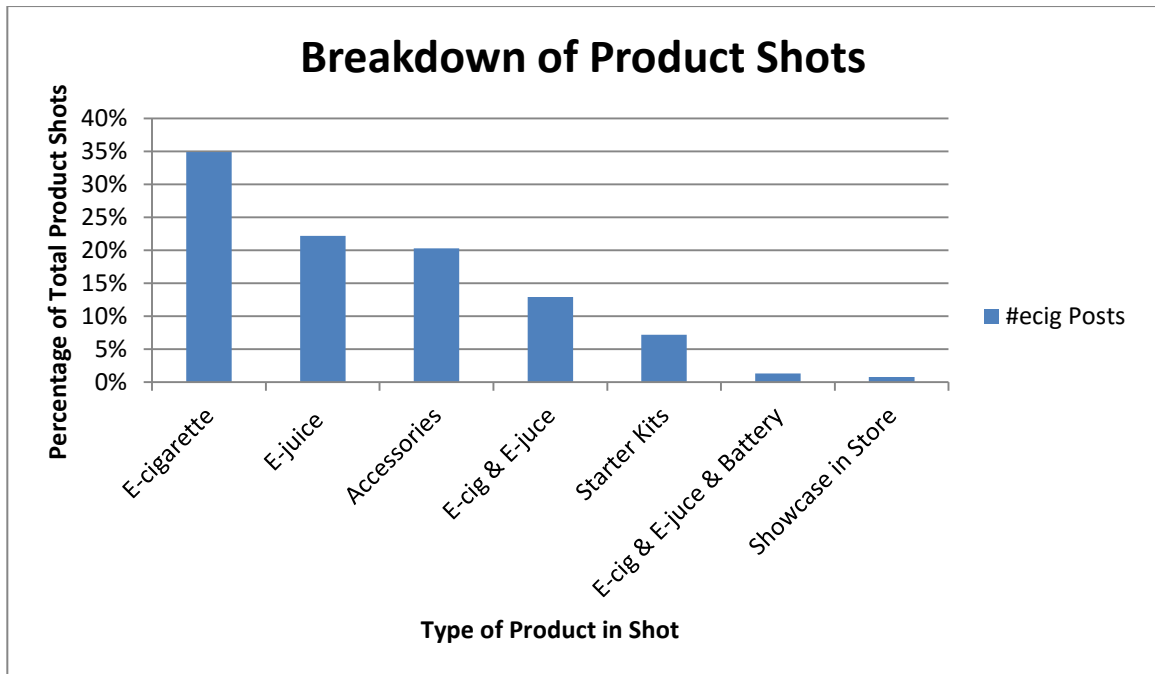


Figure 6: Breakdown of Product Shots

Scrolling through #ecig on Instagram and encountering these product shots revealed a type of digital e-cigarette catalogue. More than just browsing through content on websites, Instagram provides a glimpse into the range of products and flavours that are available – many for purchase, just a few clicks away. Although not manifestly used to buy and sell goods like e-Bay or Kijiji, Instagram enables people to acquaint themselves with a wide variety of products on offer.

Previous communications research depicts mail-order catalogues, like Sears, as a precursor of mass media (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005) and perhaps we can also see how early concepts of the catalogue are reflected in the #ecig Instagram feed. The Sears Catalogue (established in 1888) was described as “an important distribution channel for those goods and contributed to the assembling of a mass national audience” (Leiss et al., 2005) and we can understand how mobile devices and more specifically social media applications, especially Instagram, have become a new distribution channel for e-cigarettes. Although we do not know how influential Instagram is in helping to distribute e-cigarettes, the quantity and variety of #ecig product shots on Instagram creates an international digital e-cigarette catalogue. The #ecig feed mimics the success of the mail-

order catalogue by allowing users the ease of browsing hundreds of e-cigarette related products from businesses around the world. Figure 7 is a collage of #ecig product shot posts.

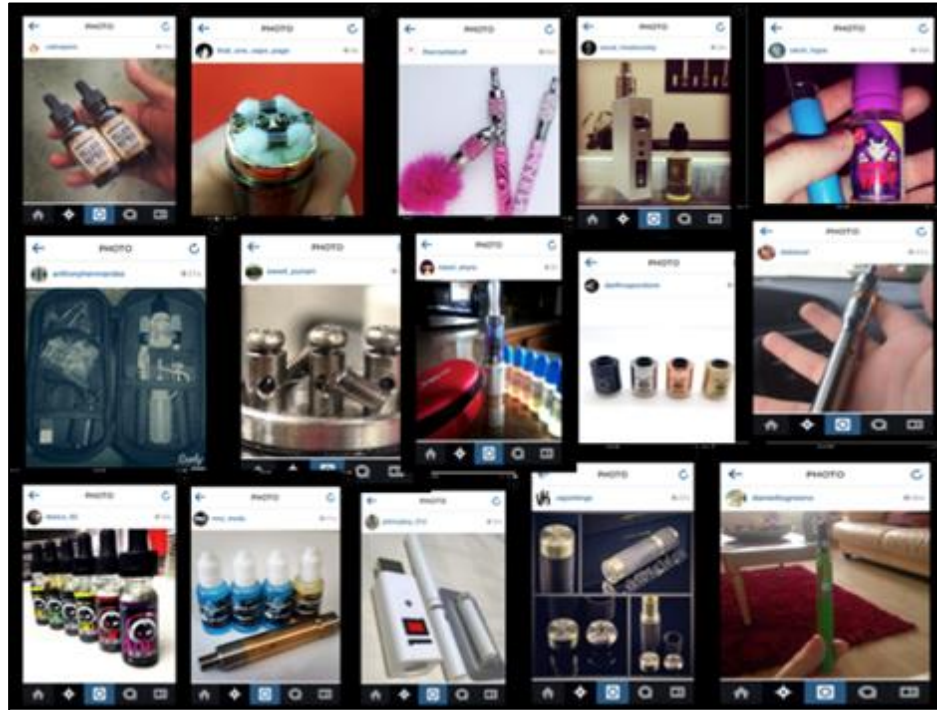


Figure 7: Collage of Product Shot Posts

2.4 Promotion

In this section I address the promotional e-cigarette content. Within this category, I further classified each post as monetary, non-monetary, or event sponsorship. The organizational chart, Figure 8, shows the components of promotion for the purposes of my study.

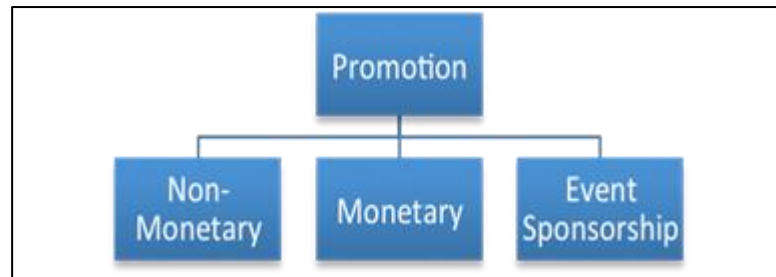


Figure 8: Overview of Promotion

I had two objectives in coding the promotional #ecig posts: 1) to determine the kind of e-cigarette promotional content that exists on Instagram and, 2) to examine how frequently this content appears. In further analyzing these posts, I also discuss how incentives and exclusive offers to Instagram users, two advantages of receiving e-cigarette promotions via Instagram, can influence purchasing behaviour. Additionally, I investigate the general popularity of social coupons and I suggest that e-cigarette coupons on Instagram should be studied alongside social couponing trends.

In total, e-cigarette promotions accounted for 116 or 14% of all the posts. Independent retailers, like the ones I had seen pop up in Toronto and London, and independent online retailers, produced the majority of e-cigarette promotions. I found the production quality of these promotions to be amateurish, sometimes containing spelling mistakes, unappealing graphics or poor lighting. Posts varied in how they communicated a promotional message. Some accounts, mainly independent vape shops, shared digital flyers, which were basic – either a solid colour or images of the merchandise – with accompanying text indicating the promotion, which varied from including discounts on all the merchandise in an entire store to savings on only specific products. The type of merchandise posted includes e-cigarettes (mainly tanks and mods), e-juices or required e-cigarette parts such as batteries and coils. Although promotional posts accounted for a relatively small share of #ecig posts on Instagram, Paek et al. remind us that promotions have a heightened impact in influencing people’s decisions to purchase tobacco cigarettes (2012).

In this section, I discuss how Instagram provides a way to market and promote e-cigarettes at no cost⁹. As Kumar and Rajan note, businesses are increasingly choosing to market their products on social media because it is free and reaches a large number of people (2012). Companies hope that customers will develop a greater sense of connectedness with their brands if these customers receive ‘exclusive’ brand updates via social media (Heller Baird & Paranis, 2011). Research shows that consumers do benefit from businesses using social media because they can access discounts and reviews about products (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Although this may be true, it remains important to note that controversial products like e-cigarettes are being promoted on SNS because of the large number of young people who use social media, especially Instagram. Figure 9 depicts the breakdown of the #ecig promotion category.

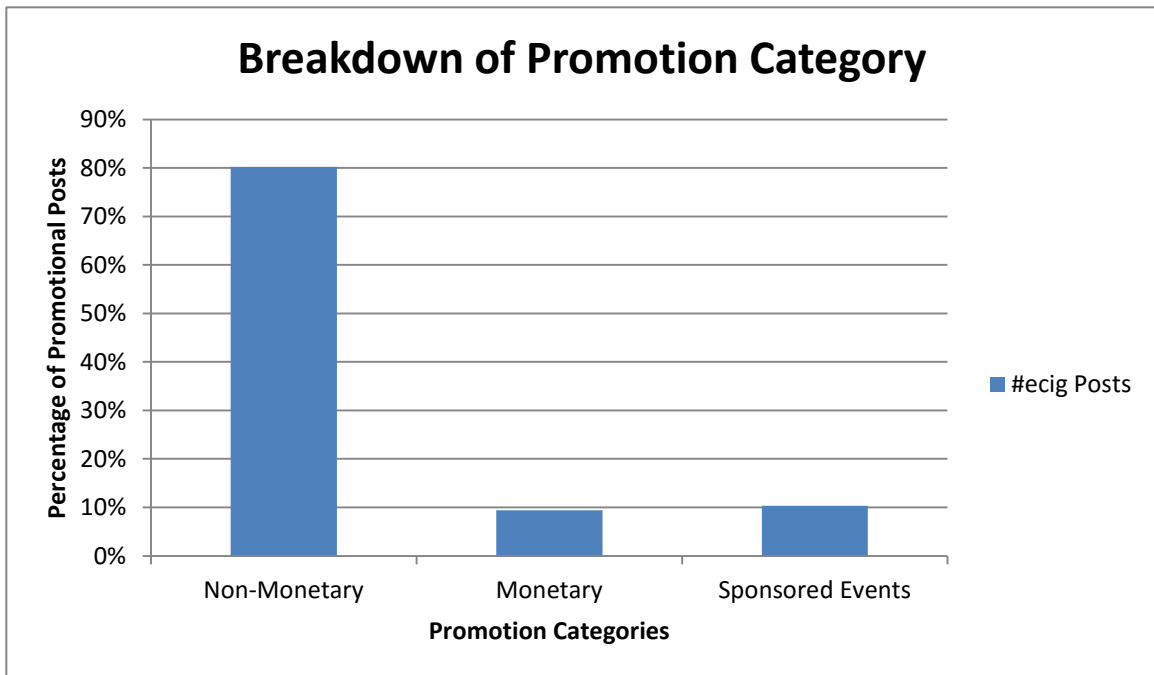


Figure 9: Breakdown of Promotion Category

⁹ The marketing is free, but costs include: the mobile device, network and internet connections.

2.4.1 Non-Monetary

Non-monetary promotions, of which there were 93, are the largest promotional category in my study. These posts account for 80% of the promotion category and 11% of the total posts. I defined a non-monetary promotion as involving contests, sweepstakes or a free gift with purchase, but one that does not offer a lower price. My sample only includes contests and free gifts. Contest promotions include a certain type of contest known as a ‘follower giveaway’ and more general contest notifications that do not provide specific contest details on the image. Figure 10 depicts the breakdown of non-monetary #ecig posts.



Figure 10: Non-Monetary Promotions Chart

There were 79 follower giveaways in the non-monetary promotion category, comprising 85% of the total promotions. These are contests that are marketed as exclusive giveaways for followers and they require users to participate in order to qualify and be considered for the prize. Research indicates that contests can be useful marketing tools to engage with customers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Follower giveaway posts include every time a post appeared, even if it was a repost as it was made by a separate user account.

Follower giveaways require Instagram users to perform a number of steps in order to be entered into the contest. In one instance, a giveaway for a modpowerkit and 150ml e-juice required users to: 1) Repost the image, 2) Follow the account, 3) Tag the accounts, and 4) Include specific hashtags, like the company’s name or the name of the product in the giveaway. Another giveaway for a ‘free’ e-juice required users to: 1) Repost the post, 2) Tag three friends, 3) Follow the e-cigarette account, and 4) Use a specific hashtag. When users ‘perform’ these steps, exposure to the promotion, e-cigarette shops, and e-cigarettes in general increases as the information circulates via tagging and reposting. Other follower giveaways were simpler, requiring only to “Like, Share, and Tag”.



Figure 11: Examples of Follower Giveaway Posts

Tagging friends as a requirement for entering a giveaway is an incentive for existing or hopeful customers to win something and also increases the exposure of products and merchants. On Instagram, when you are tagged in a post, you receive an instant notification, similar to tagging someone in a photo on Facebook. Consequently, if a follower tags you in one of these giveaways, you will also become aware of the contest. Wirtz and Chew confirm: “Incentives for recommending a customer can be seen as a particular case of a deal or a promotion, and it seems likely that more deal-prone customers have a more favourable attitude towards taking advantage of such a promotion than less-deal prone individuals” (2002).

Tagging ‘friends’ in e-cigarette follower giveaways on Instagram also reflects word-of-mouth marketing (“WOMM”) strategies, perhaps more accurately referred to as ‘electronic word-of-mouth’ (“eWOM”) (Buhalis & Law, 2008) since someone who already exists in your social network is referring you to the commodity, brand, or company. WOMM has been acknowledged as a “powerful marketing tool” (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2012) and has been recognized as having a major impact on influencing opinions (Groeger & Buttle, 2014). As Guilford notes: “The goal is to stimulate people to pass along a product message. Marketers feel that their product pitches are more believable coming from a friend, even a Facebook friend you never see in person, than a TV spot” (Guilford, 2012). WOMM has been compared to spreading chain letters (Groeger & Buttle, 2014) and e-cigarette giveaways that require people to tag a certain amount of friends to gain entrance to the contest further validates this comparison. Whether or not you have a prior interest in e-cigarettes, if a friend tags you, you will receive the notification and be encouraged to tag additional friends for a chance to win the prize. Follower giveaways are an innovative method to increase e-cigarette eWOM behaviour on Instagram.

In general, posts without a text description of the rules of the contest on the image were less common than follower giveaways, accounting for 10 posts (11%) of the non-monetary promotions. These promotions provided contest details and generally enticed users with the word “Win”. In the promotion below, Figure 12, we can see that the contest is to win a free rogue dripper¹⁰, but does not include full contest rules on the image.

¹⁰ Drippers are used to tailor someone’s vaping experience. They are often used when people choose to assemble their own e-cigarettes. Drippers can influence the size of clouds produced and can enhance e-juice flavour.



Figure 12: Example of Contest Post

The final grouping consists of offers for free gifts, which totalled four posts or 4% of the non-monetary posts. If you purchased the featured product, you would receive a free gift. This generally meant if you bought an e-cigarette, you would be eligible to receive certain e-juices for free. As we can see in the free gift promotion, Figure 13, it does not specify whether this free juice is nicotine-free. One such promotion reads: “Today Only, Buy an Astro Mod, Get a free juice!” and includes the shop’s address and telephone number.

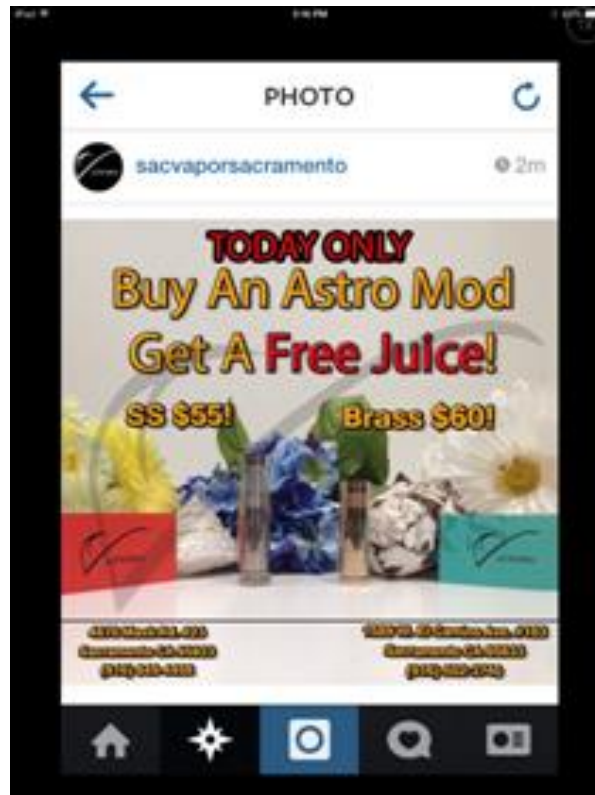


Figure 13: Example of Free Gift Post

2.4.2 Monetary

Monetary promotional posts are defined as posts that incorporated one of the following techniques: coupons, refunds, rebates and cents-off promotions. They comprised 11 posts (10%) within the promotion category. In my Instagram sample, only coupons and cents-off promotions appeared. Coupons and cents-off promotions are what they sound like – monetary discounts, which are used to increase the likelihood of a customer purchasing a product. ‘Deals’ positively affect a purchase evaluation (Lichtenstein et al., 1990). Cents-off promotions are a specific type of coupon that shows the lowered price. Previous research has established the presence of monetary e-cigarette promotions on Facebook and Twitter (de Andrade, Hastings, & Angus, 2013). A Facebook example reads: “V-Shisha sunshine promo!! Save 20%...off our 5-pack of 0% nicotine, fruity and sparkly disposables” (de Andrade et al., 2013). The chart, seen in Figure 14, illustrates the breakdown of #ecig monetary posts.

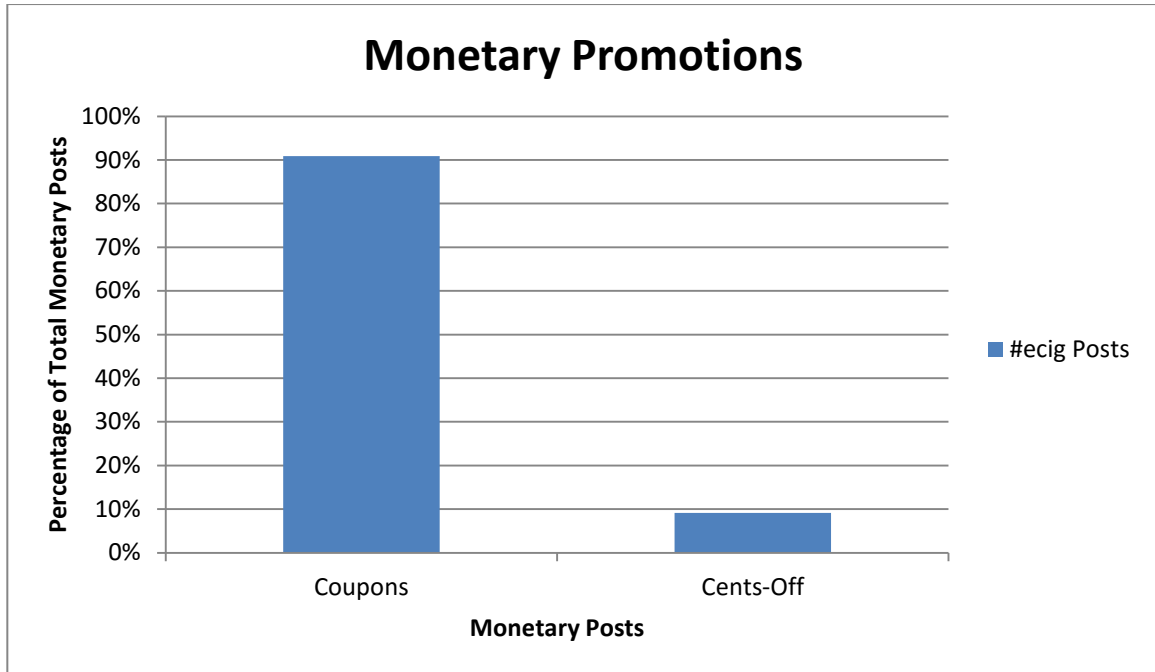


Figure 14: Breakdown of Monetary Promotions

An example of a monetary coupon on Instagram reads: “40% Off All Orders!!! Use code ig40” with the shop’s website noted at the bottom. Another example reads: “End of summer clearance sale up to 75% off on select items *while supplies last”. Research shows that price plays a major role in influencing purchasing behaviour, especially among youth who are more price sensitive than older people (Buhler, 1992; Gupta & Shaw, 1998). It is also indicated that these types of incentives are considered “extrinsic motivators” and that when applied, consumers are increasingly likely to engage in word-of-mouth (“WOM”) promotional behaviour (Wirtz & Chew, 2002).



Figure 15: Examples of Monetary Posts

E-cigarette discounts on Instagram provide another avenue to explore the growing popularity of social coupons (“SC”). Social coupons can be defined as a coupon that “requires some action on a social network for it to be used” (“Social Coupon – Myths and Misunderstandings”, 2013). In general, couponing has become an alluring spectacle in popular culture. For instance, *Extreme Couponing* is a reality-TV show that follows so-called ‘super couponers’ on a grocery trip where they share their tips and tricks for collecting and applying coupons, which saves them hundreds of dollars on their grocery bills. Kumar and Rajan stress that coupons “have taken such a prominent place in American culture” (2012).

The Internet has greatly influenced couponing and the availability of coupons online has been discussed in relation to the decline of newspaper readership. More recently, as research indicates, social coupons have “gained traction” (Kumar & Rajan, 2012). Rueter explains:

Recent years have seen the expansion of couponing into the virtual realm, with social coupons that offer online daily deals gaining significant prominence. For instance, revenue from online daily deals and discount sites including Groupon and Living Social is projected

to top 2.67 billion in 2011, representing an increase of 138% from \$1.12 billion in 2010. (2011)

A search on Groupon for e-cigarette deals in Toronto shows that they are offered on this site. However, e-cigarette monetary discounts on Instagram indicate that social coupons are not limited to established social coupon sites. The availability of them on SNS, which people check often throughout the day, may increase the number of people actually seeing these deals. On Instagram, e-cigarette shops use their social networking accounts to offer exclusive discounts for their Instagram followers. Although these discounts do not state whether they require a certain amount of customers to buy into the deal for it to occur, social media coupons on Instagram are similar to Groupon and Living Social deals in two key ways: they are largely offered by smaller businesses and they are incentives for trying new products.

Small businesses and local retailers are key promoters of social coupons (Nakhata & Kuo, 2014), which allow vape shops and online sellers, like the ones in my study, to reach a large number of potential customers, something that previously only larger companies could afford via more expensive forms of advertising. In addition, local retailers also benefit from offering monetary discounts. As e-cigarettes are a relatively new commodity, discounts may further encourage individuals to try them, as Nakhata and Kuo argue: [Social coupons] “provide incentives for consumers to try new services or products where such intention could be less likely without the presence of a substantive discount” (2014). This can be positive for cigarette smokers who are motivated by cost savings to switch to e-cigarettes, but it may also affect non-smokers to potentially try harmful e-cigarettes. Social media coupons benefit local businesses looking to acquire new customers and entice people to try new products.

Within the category of monetary promotions, there was a single occurrence of a cents-off post. This showed the original price crossed off with a lower price beside it. The promotion here was for Japanese organic cotton. Vapers use Japanese organic cotton as wicks for single or dual coil, third generation e-cigarettes. There are a number of different products other than cotton, such as rayon, and ways vapers can wick a coil, such as the

roller-coaster technique. Wicking is a process of placing the desired material in and around the coil.



Figure 16: Example of Cents-Off Promotional Post

Another five posts carried notices about sales. While they are promotions, these were mainly introducing customers to the idea that a shop is offering a discount without actually stating what the savings are. This is important to note because they are still introducing potential customers to a discount. These notifications resembled product shots, but they also indicated that a sale was happening. Not all of these notifications were done by businesses; as seen in Figure 17, some appeared to be users selling previously owned equipment.

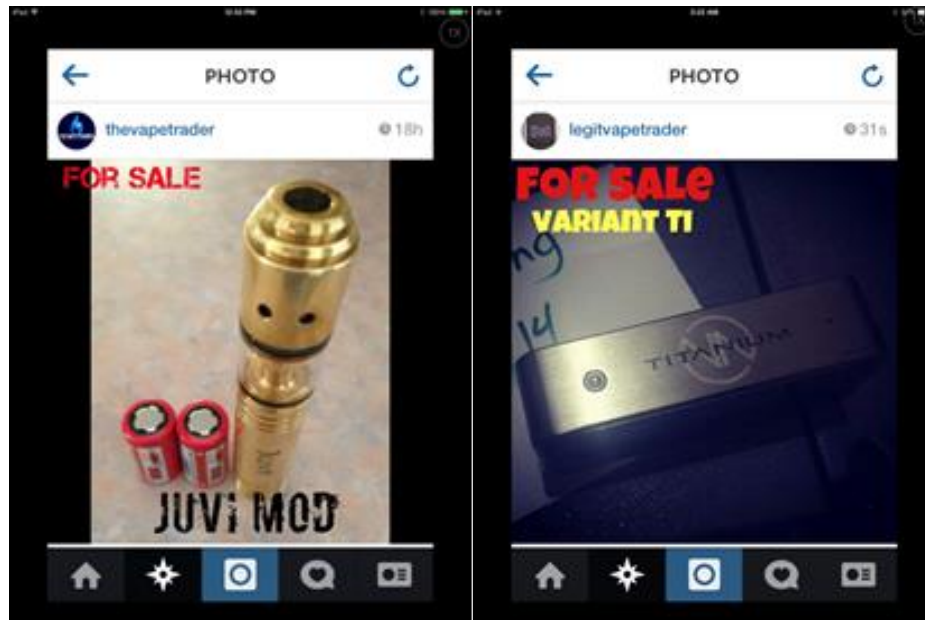


Figure 17: Examples of Sale Notice Posts

Social media has increased the number of channels with which consumers and businesses can interact. It is no surprise that consumers listed ‘getting discounts or coupons’ and ‘purchasing products and services’ as the two top reasons to interact with businesses on social media (Heller Baird & Paranis, 2011). Heller Baird and Paranis confirm: “Consumers are willing to interact with businesses if they believe it is to their benefit, feel they can trust the company and decide social media is the right channel to use to get the value they seek” (2011). Monetary e-cigarette promotions on Instagram increase the channels of interaction among customers and retailers and they can be considered another type of social coupon.

2.4.3 Event Sponsorship

Posts that advertised an e-cigarette-sponsored event accounted for 12 (7%) of the promotions. Previous studies have documented the presence of e-cigarette-event sponsorship. de Andrade et al. note that e-cigarette firms have sponsored sport events where these companies giveaway free samples (2013). An event sponsorship by Nicolites on Facebook announced: “Happy and excited to say we are now the principle [sic] partners for Birmingham City Football Club” (de Andrade, Hastings, & Angus, 2013). This is not a specific event, but a general sponsorship of a team.

Sponsorship promotion has been shown to influence purchasing decisions, especially among youths (“E-cigarettes”, 2014). This same marketing practice can also be seen on Instagram, although there were no examples of sports sponsorships. Rather, there were notifications of store sponsorships for cloud contests and sponsorships for VapeCon, a vaping conference. Event sponsorship posts show the integration of online and offline community involvement as they are online notifications for offline events, which further illustrates that the Internet and, more specifically, social networking applications are extending and enhancing community. In total there were seven cloud contest posts and five VapeCon posts.

2.4.3.1 Cloud Contests

Cloud contests, often with the incentive to win a free gift or cash prize, accounted for seven posts. These posts were online notifications to participate in offline events, similar to news flyers or event announcements. The notifications indicated the date, time, location, and sponsors of the cloud contest and sometimes offered incentives to participate, such as money or merchandise. Notably, none of the promotions I saw for cloud contests mentioned a minimum age requirement. The cloud contest notifications made me aware of how offline community associations are promoted through online posts.

Cloud contest notifications did not describe the contests, nor did they mention specific contest rules. An Internet search reveals that cloud contests have rules, judges, and restrictions on the products competitors can use, and are opportunities for e-cigarette users to compete in exhaling large amounts of vapour. There is also a variety of judging criteria, including, but not limited to, the reach and size of the vapour when exhaled in cloud formation. The following Reddit post describes a cloud contest: “They had rules in place, and judges checking all the builds before they went up to make sure everything was within the safe zone of the rules. They had restrictions on the coils, batteries, mods etc. even down to making them all use the same juice” (ebrake, 2014). Another Reddit post noted: “There were actually two shops holding competitions that day. They both had rules limiting the builds to dual coils on a mech and they all had to use the same juice. The

\$2,500 cash prize was at Pantheon in Denton TX, and Wycked Vapor in Lake Dallas gave away ~\$600 in hardware” (Dingus_Khann, 2014).



Figure 18: Example of Cloud Contest Post

A web promotion for a cloud contest at VapeCon provided additional details, including the judging criteria. These were based on three measures: the build, density, and distance. The build is based on how complex of a build participants produce using a dual coil e-cigarette; the density refers to the thickness of the cloud; and the distance refers to the reach of the cloud. First place was \$2,000, with \$1,000 and \$500 for second and third places, respectively. The VapeConUSA Cloud Competition contest outlines that Round 1 requires participants to build their e-cigarettes in 10 minutes. Here, materials to assemble the devices are provided, but tools are not. Round 2 is an elimination round. Competitors are expected to exhale a cloud, which is judged based on its density and reach, leading to the quarter, semi-final, and final round. The site also mentions safety concerns for the competitors, noting that judges “will check all atty [atomizer] and mods [third generation e-cigarette] that will be used” and that the competitors “Must use a Sony or LG 3.7 volt

battery” (“Events”, 2014). This is the result of concerns that the devices may malfunction and cause harm to the vaper. These safety concerns were echoed on the Reddit site that noted the tanks have to be checked so the devices won’t explode in a competitor’s face. The website for VapeCon also refers to a ‘Miss VapeCon’ competition. After searching for information on this, I found a YouTube video of an adult woman wearing lingerie who was campaigning to be the next Miss Vape Con. Among a number of other sexualized shots, the video shows her vaping on top of a pool table blowing vapour clouds (“Miss Vapecon USA Model – Farah”, 2014).

Cloud contests turn certain aspects of vaping into a competitive game. In this game, the process of building the device to use in the competition and then exhaling vapour in line with the contest rules, which vary by competition, determines the winner. In spite of glorifying e-cigarettes as stop-smoking aids, these contests show it is evident they are not solely used for this purpose. In fact, a recent *New York Times* article documented the appeal of ‘smoking’ tricks that make e-cigarettes attractive, especially among youth. The article quotes James, a 17-year old boy from Virginia who said: “It was something for us to do that was edgy and exciting.” James especially “liked the smoke tricks that his friends had become good at, like blowing out the vapour so that it spun like a tornado” (Tavernise, 2015). A vape shop owner stated in 2015 that cloud competitions give people “more awareness of the actual products” and that it was most popular among “the younger crowds” (Sheppard, 2015). Mastering tricks and competing in cloud contests for prize money are some of the less discussed recreational uses of e-cigarettes and will be furthered examined in the blowing clouds section in Chapter Three.



Figure 19: Example 2 of Cloud Contest Post

2.4.3.2 VapeCon

There were five posts promoting sponsorships for VapeCon, a vaping conference and e-cigarette trade show, representing 42% of the posts in the event sponsorship category. These posts were notices promoting the event, conveying a partnership between a store and the conference, or highlighting a shop's involvement with VapeCon. At the VapeCon website, I was able to find a full list of vape shops that sponsored VapeCon (<http://vapeconusa.com/sponsors/>). On the website there was also a link to their Instagram feed (but not Twitter or Facebook), suggesting that Instagram is the main social network application used to promote the event.

VapeCon-related posts, as seen in Figure 20, had higher production values than most others. The images generally had the VapeCon logo, the dates of the event (October 31, 2014 – November 2, 2014), the location (Ontario, CA, USA), and various activities that would be happening during the conference. These included live performances,

raffles, giveaways, a Miss VapeCon USA competition, a model search, a VIP after party, a \$500 Halloween Costume Contest, and a VapeCon Cloud Master Competition.



Figure 20: Example of VapeCon Post

Notably, the VapeCon website states that all proceeds from these events will go to support the Tennessee Smoke Free Association (“TSFA”). The TSFA is an advocacy group and trade organization formed in 2014 with a mandate to reduce tobacco harm “through the use of personal vaporizers (electronic cigarettes) and other smokeless tobacco products shown to reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with smoking” (TSFA, 2014). The TSFA website (<http://tnsmokefree.org/about-tsfa/>) also claims that in response to “failed attempts” by public health agencies to reduce smoking rates in their area, this organization aimed to provide more information on alternative methods of tobacco harm reduction (“THR”). The mandate of the TSFA appears to be laudable. However, it is interesting to note how TSFA frames its mandate in health terms for public

relation purposes, but then is involved in marketing the organization in a very different way. The TFSA appears to be self-serving in that it is generating revenue through sales of e-cigarettes and likely reinvesting this revenue into its association, thereby allowing it to continue to promote vaping and generate more revenue without detailing how VapeCon events work to reduce tobacco harm.

2.4.3.3 Events – Non-sponsored

In total, there were 13 posts indicating a vaping-related event, but did not indicate whether it was sponsored by an organization or company. Although this only accounts for 2% of the total posts, it shows that Instagram is used to promote vaping events and is therefore helping to advertise specific vaping-related activities, whether or not they are fully sponsored by vaping companies or vaping stores. This event category included notices for vape store launch parties, customer appreciation events, store openings, and social mixers such as the Art & Vape social mixer notification seen in Figure 21. Here we see once again that Instagram is being used to extend the realms of interaction for vapers.



Figure 21: Example of Event Post

2.4.3.4 Vaping Events & Community

Promotions for sponsored events like cloud contests and Vape Con, as well as promotions for vaping events without clear sponsorship, are prominent examples of the interplay between online and offline participation among the vaping community. We can see how these online notifications are invitations to join in offline vaping events, where people can meet and socialize with those who have similar interests. Some suggest that this integration could possibly be the “greatest social and economic trend of our time” (“Americans are integrating their offline, online lives”, 2003). These online notifications for offline social events are indicative of using social media to enhance or amplify participation, confirming what Wellman, Boase and Chen argue: “Rather than increasing or destroying community, the Internet can best be seen as integrated into rhythms of daily life, with life online intertwined with offline activities” (Wellman et al., 2002; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001).

2.5 Business Listings

Business listings, or notices advertising vape shops and e-cigarette merchants, appeared 64 times in the sample and were 8% of the total posts. Similar in form to product shots, business-listing posts were simple images, often pictures of business cards, the outside of vape shops, or simply just the business name displayed in some way or another (see Figure 22). Business notification posts are an extension of business advertising and allow independent retailers to reach a large audience in an inexpensive way. Business listings, like product shots, are important because they reflect the number of retailers and businesses within the e-cigarette market. More specifically, they provide evidence of the number of vaping-related companies which use Instagram to interact with customers.

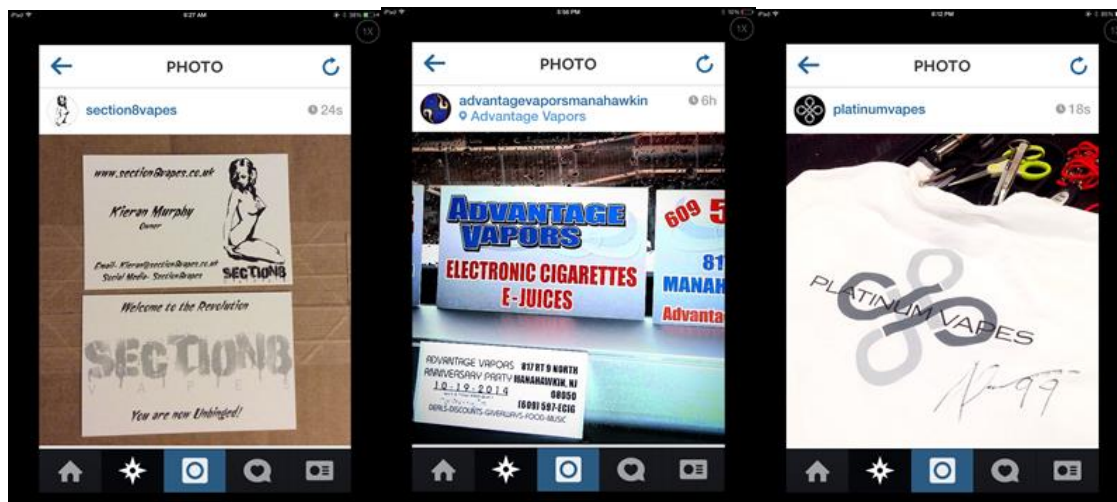


Figure 22: Examples of Business Listing Posts

2.6 Health-Themed Posts

In total, eight posts were classified as health-themed, accounting for only 1% of all the posts in the sample. As mentioned in the Introduction, one of my objectives for this study was to examine what e-cigarette health-themed content was on Instagram. All of these posts were made by vape shops; none were from federal, state/provincial, or regional health-care agencies or NGO organizations. Six posts encouraged smokers to quit smoking tobacco products by switching to e-cigarettes, although research to date on e-cigarettes is inconclusive. In the U.S and Canada, e-cigarettes are not approved as

cessation aids or as a form of nicotine replacement therapy (“NRT”). The other two health-themed claims included posts promoting the benefits of marijuana, and thus were not relevant.

Perhaps the paucity of health claims is positive in that vape shops are generally not promoting e-cigarettes as healthier options. But it is troubling that there is a dearth of messages from health specialists to balance the predominately promotional e-cigarette content on Instagram. The health-themed posts consist of promotions marketing e-cigarettes as a replacement for tobacco cigarettes. E-cigarettes are often defended as tools to help smokers quit, but the relatively small number of these posts suggests that there are perhaps larger social and community influences at work that make vaping appealing among Instagram users. The health-themed posts in my study best reflect tobacco cessation-related messages (Grana & Ling, 2014). The two ‘quit’ examples in Figure 23 do not make explicit stop smoking statements, but they do convey a message that smokers should switch from tobacco smoking to vaping.

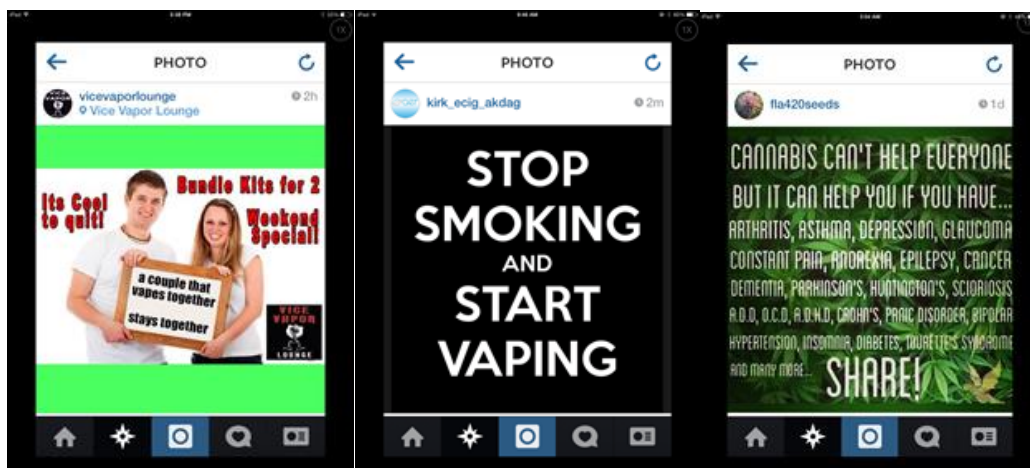


Figure 23: Examples of Health-Themed Posts

To date, e-cigarettes have not been proven to help smokers quit; using data from Adkison et al. 2013 study Grana and Ling confirm: “A longitudinal analysis using data from four countries demonstrated that although users reported using e-cigarettes to quit conventional cigarettes, there was no difference in quit rates between e-cigarette users and non-users” (2014). Dual-use rates among smokers are also high, providing evidence

that e-cigarettes are less effective as cessation devices. Research documents: “The majority of ever users (63.6%) and past 30 users (77.7%) of e-cigarettes were current smokers, suggesting that dual use of cigarettes is high” (Czoli et al., 2015). In addition, although e-cigarettes do not involve the combustion of tobacco and do not have the same toxins, there is still not enough known about the long-term effects of e-cigarette use and the impact of this form of nicotine consumption. As a result, the comparisons made between e-cigarettes to tobacco smoking, rather than considering the potential health hazards of e-cigarettes on their own, is problematic. Harmful metals have been found in e-cigarettes (Williams, Villarreal, Bozhilov, Lin, & Talbot, 2013) and nicotine absorption in some e-cigarettes is comparable to that of cigarettes. E-cigarette users have also reported experiencing irritation in the mouth, throat, and lungs (Grana, Benowitz, & Glantz, 2014). A Canadian study found that approximately half of e-juices labelled as nicotine-free did in fact contain nicotine (Geller, 2014).

Lastly, there is a concern that e-cigarette use may lead to tobacco use, instead of the reverse. de Andrade and Hastings argue this as well, since e-cigarette use undermines “social norms about tobacco, and delay cessation among cigarette smokers”. Since one in five past or current users of e-cigarettes had never been a smoker, this would indicate the interest of non-smokers in e-cigarettes. In addition, we know that regardless of restrictions and the lack of research supporting e-cigarettes as a way to quit smoking, people still accept them as smoking cessation devices. Czoli et al., confirm: “Regular e-cigarette users report various reasons for using these products including: use as a less harmful alternative to tobacco cigarettes, use to reduce and/or quit smoking, and in places where smoking is prohibited” (2015).

This chapter demonstrates that most e-cigarette Instagram posts are very different from national brand ads. Instagram posts are from small businesses. As such, they differ from TV and radio ads for national e-cigarette brands like blu. On Instagram, the companies are able to provide more of an update of what they offer and it seems to be easier for consumers to find out where to get certain products, both online and offline. Instagram is a way for e-cigarette merchants to actually interact with potential and existing customers, compared to traditional advertising. These posts by merchants are

complemented by user-driven content that also works to promote e-cigarettes. As we know, user-driven content is important because of its arguably greater impact in influencing youth to try e-cigarettes. The next chapter explores the user-driven e-cigarette content in my sample and employs a cultural studies lens to interpret the profound significance and meanings contained in these posts.

3 Chapter Three: #ecig Shoot & Share

In this chapter, I analyze the additional prominent themes found in the #ecig sample: vape-selfies, blowing clouds, memes, miscellaneous, and erotic imagery posts. The vape-selfie section examines the relationship of these posts to the selfie trend, identity construction online, and prosumers at work. It defines the people who share e-cigarette content as cultural workers, and explores the possibility of them being exploited as they share this content without receiving financial compensation. The blowing clouds posts are examined by looking at the significance of vapour clouds within the vaping community and, in doing so, refers to the cloud contests discussed in Chapter Two. In the memes section, I investigate the e-cigarette ‘inside jokes’ that are being shared and I discuss their significance. The miscellaneous posts are then explored and I examine how they fit into the #ecig sample. Finally, the erotic posts reveal gender stereotyping and I explore how they serve to disempower women.

Ultimately, the user-generated e-cigarette content, described below, demonstrate how Instagram users are not passively consuming e-cigarette content, but are actively involved in producing and sharing it. The user-generated content is also analyzed by discussing what impact these digital footprints may have in the future.

3.1 Vape-selfies

Vape-selfies are photos a person takes of him or herself while using an e-cigarette. There are 60 such posts, or 7% of the #ecig sample. Like selfies in general, vape-selfies form part of a mobile photography trend. Technically speaking, they are self-portraits that either show the extension of the person’s arm in the picture as they are holding out their photography device to capture themselves, or they are a ‘mirror shot’ that shows a person’s phone in their hand capturing their reflection in a mirror, with an e-cigarette in their mouth or blowing out vapour (see Figure 24). These photos typically appear to be casual shots, but are often well-rehearsed (Marwick, 2015). As viewers of these selfies, we do not know how the e-cigarette users are connected to the vaping community, but the posts appear to be user-generated from individual accounts unrelated to vaping retailers. However, as explored later in this chapter, people who post these vape-selfies could

possibly be involved with e-cigarette companies. Selfies mainly capture the user’s face, but you can often see part of the background in the photo as well. These selfies are mostly taken in homes, outside, or in cars. None of the vape-selfies had backgrounds resembling restaurants, bars, or other environments that have banned tobacco smoking. Perhaps, among other implications, this may imply people choose to use e-cigarettes to: look ‘cool’, enjoy e-juice flavour or reduce tobacco smoking.

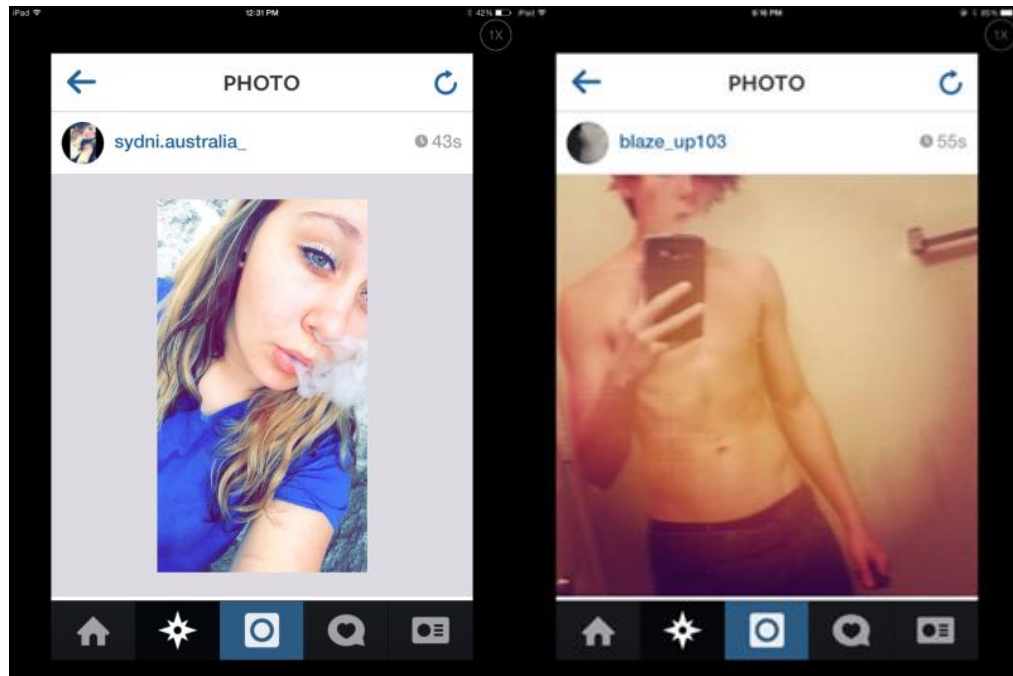


Figure 24: Examples of Vape-Selfie Posts

Selfies have become a widespread trend in popular culture. Celebrities, with the help of social media, have propelled the selfie photography trend forward by offering followers a behind-the-scenes, ‘real’ glimpse into what they are doing on a daily basis. More specifically, as Marwick reveals: “Instagram selfies allow the platform’s users, whether celebrities or not, to show glimpses of their lives to others, connect with audiences, and receive instant feedback on their self-images” (2015). The popularity of selfies can be seen in the recent release of Kim Kardashian-West’s book *Selfish*, which is entirely dedicated to providing her fans with hardcopies of her selfies. A review of the book acknowledges Kardashian-West as being a “trail-blazer in the selfie movement” (MTV News, 2015). Popular ‘tools’ to take selfies, like the Selfie Stick, also demonstrate

the appeal of this photography trend. The term ‘selfie’ is so widely used in popular vernacular that it became the Oxford Dictionary’s word for 2013 (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Coincidentally, ‘vape’ is the Oxford Dictionary’s word for 2014 (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014).

The widespread selfie trend in popular culture has spawned intriguing social media research. Some rightfully assert that selfies have created a new visual genre (Saltz, 2014), while others declare the trend is merely a reflection of a society of narcissists (Sorokowski et al., 2015; Weiser, 2015). The popularity of selfies has Saltz proclaiming that we are in the “age of the selfie” (2014). Saltz argues that selfies represent more than a popular photography method or display of vanity. Rather they are: “An instant visual communication of where we are, what we’re doing, who we think we are, and who we think is watching” (2014).

Vape-selfies, then, can be said to offer information about everyday life. They are visual records of the social phenomenon of vaping. Saltz confirms: “The mass of selfies will be an incredible record of the fine details of everyday life. Imagine what we could see if we had millions of these from the streets of imperial Rome” (2014). Reflecting on this, especially given the controversy surrounding e-cigarettes, I cannot help but imagine what information these vape-selfies may offer in 50 years. Perhaps they will exhibit a harmless trend that quickly passed, a solution to reduce tobacco harm, or maybe they will depict a population health risk that should have been addressed with more vigour.

Saltz traces the concept of selfies back to the idea of *methexis* in Greek theatre (2014). *Methexis* is when a performer speaks directly to the audience, comparable to when a television or movie actor acknowledges and then addresses the camera directly in a scene. As technology has advanced and become increasingly widespread, the method has extended beyond actors to a style that ‘regular people’ use to address their social network audience. As Saltz notes, selfies are significant because they are deliberately taken and purposefully shared (2014). Although we may jump to conclusions that vape-selfies are reflections of narcissism, there are other factors at play. For instance, the intent behind taking and sharing a selfie of someone using their e-cigarette on a social network communicates certain identity and community desires likely motivated by social and

cultural influences rather than narcissistic tendencies. Bianco confirms: “Social networking is often criticized as providing ‘space’ for unfettered narcissism – a criticism that misses the powerful ‘networked’ aspect of this sort of self-making and self-articulation in the world and its ‘ground up’ capacities for social action, productivity, collaboration, and interaction” (2009). Vape-selfies on Instagram need to be considered as more than illustrations of admiration for oneself; these vape-selfies are examples of cultural work where people are choosing to ‘write themselves into being’ (Sundén, 2003) online as e-cigarette users.

3.1.1 Vape-selfies and Identity Construction

In this section, I discuss vape-selfies and online identity construction. More specifically, this section explores vape-selfies in relation to: gender, impression management research, writing oneself into being on Instagram, self-branding, micro-celebrity culture, and how vape-selfies may exploit consumers.

I begin my analysis of vape-selfies and identity construction by looking at the gender of vape-selfie posters¹¹. As illustrated in the chart (Figure 25), near equal numbers of women and men posted vape-selfies. Out of the 60 posts, 33 women posted vape-selfies (55%), compared to 26 men (43%).

¹¹ For the purpose of my study, gender refers to the socially constructed categories of “men” and “women”. These categories reflect the minimum age for Instagram users (13+).

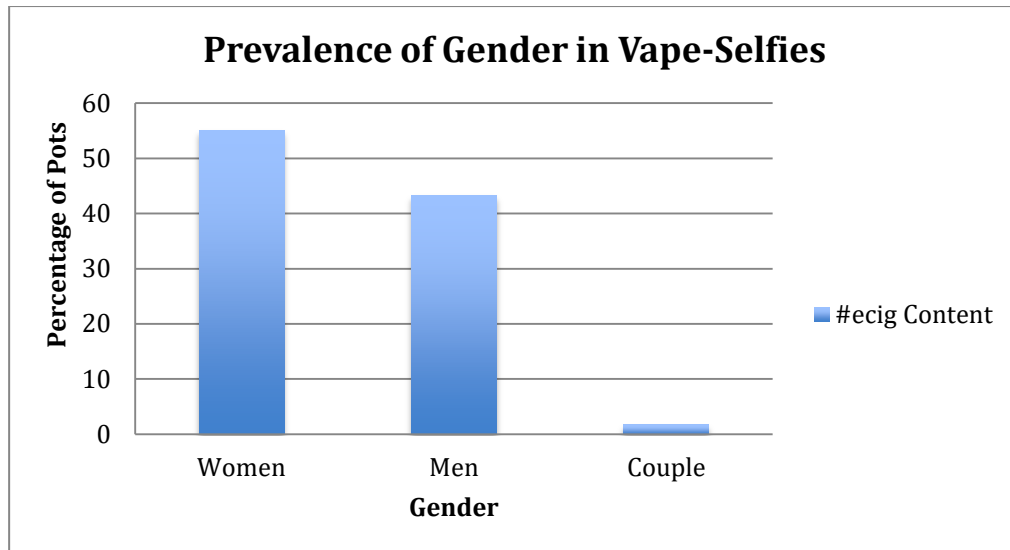


Figure 25: Gender of Vape-selfie Posters

With most Instagram posts you do not necessarily know the gender of the poster, but with vape-selfies, we are able to determine that the gender gap is slim. These near equal numbers of women and men using e-cigarettes in these posts correspond to Czoli et al., who found that 8.9% of males and 8.1% of females had used e-cigarettes (2015). Although the difference between women and men posting vape-selfies is small and not statistically significant, I found it interesting that women posted more vape-selfies than men. Given that research documents that slightly more men vape (Czoli et al., 2015), perhaps the small difference reflects research that women tend to post more selfies than men (Sorokowski et al., 2015). As evident in Figure 26, there was also one couple posing for a vape-selfie.



Figure 26: Example of a Couple Vape-Selfie Post

Breaking down gender in these posts provides an initial look at the identity of the individuals posting vape-selfies. As we can see, women and men are both posting vape-selfies, confirming that both genders have an interest in vaping. These vape-selfies also show that both women and men wish to share this interest with their personal followers and the Instagram community. As Saltz mentioned, an important component of selfies is that they are shared with an understanding of whom the poster thinks is in their audience (2014). With this in mind, it seems apparent that vape-selfies communicate the person posting wants spectators to realize a connection between their identity and vaping.

3.1.2 Vape-selfies: 'Writing Ourselves into Being' & Impression Management

Impression management research is useful for understanding identity online. Early impression management research noted that a person makes a conscious effort to present

themselves in a certain way when they are with other people (Goffman, 1959). Applying this research, Jenny Sundén notes that we must ‘write ourselves into being’ to have a presence online (2003). With this in mind, it is interesting to consider how a vape-selfie is a way a person chooses to represent him or herself within their social network and how they use these images to write themselves into being on Instagram.

Building on Sundén’s concept, boyd argues that people write community into being online by inviting others to be friends, referring to this process as friending (boyd, 2006). In my opinion, selfies are a more powerful method for someone to write herself or himself *and* the community in which they belong into being online. Vape-selfies place one’s physical identity online and connects that identity to the sub-culture surrounding e-cigarettes. Goffman (1959) supports the inclination to gather meaning from how individuals choose to present themselves by noting that we: “can rely on what the individual says about himself or on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is” (1959). In vape-selfies, the documentary evidence is an e-cigarette. Goffman’s thought is echoed by actor James Franco, who confirms that we can look to selfies as: “tools of communication more than marks of vanity...Mini-Mes that we send out to give others a sense of who we are” (qtd. in Saltz, 2014). Vape-selfies are a way people choose to establish their identity in their online networks and effectively ‘write themselves into being’ on Instagram as an e-cigarette user.

Self-branding literature also illuminates a connection between vape-selfies and online identity. Self-branding refers to: “The self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries” (Hearn, 2008). Hearn confirms that self-branding is not new and refers to self-help gurus and their resources as vehicles to capitalize on people’s desire to brand themselves in a certain light. By using a vape-selfie, a person is choosing to develop their self-brand by building on the culturally implicit constructs of e-cigarettes. As Chen notes, the selfie: “...allows a person to create and market himself as a personal brand identity” (Chen, 2013). Arguably, the choice to include an e-cigarette in a selfie to establish a self-brand says something about e-cigarettes as a product. As we know, people tend to construct their identities to

make themselves appear favourably to others (Goffman, 1959). With this in mind, e-cigarettes convey certain meanings that selfie-sharers hope will transfer to their desired personae. Vape-selfies might suggest that these posters are early adopters of technology and up on the latest trends. Vape-selfies might also imply these selfie-sharers are rebellious for using a controversial product, especially if they are underage. They may also portray users as part of a ‘hip’ sub-culture, or perhaps they are attempting to distance themselves from the stigmatization of being a tobacco smoker.

Using vape-selfies to enhance one’s self-concept can also be explored by considering the influence of the micro-celebrity culture that characterizes Instagram (Marwick, 2015). Marwick describes micro-celebrity as: “a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status” (Marwick, 2015). Compared to Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is described as more of an “open-ended social media tool” (Marwick, 2015) where users can better manipulate how they represent themselves. The selfie, therefore, is one post a user can make to express a desired self-image. Within this type of post on Instagram, users can choose the backdrop, the filters, the products, and whatever they wish to incorporate with their face to develop their self-concept.

If one takes the notion of self-branding together with the micro-celebrity culture defining Instagram, vape-selfies are then transformed from simply a mode of self-presentation to a micro-celebrity e-cigarette product endorsement. As Marwick points out, Instagram allows regular people to reach a mass audience in a way that was once only granted to celebrities and political figures via traditional media channels (2015). Vape-selfies demonstrate that ‘regular people’ who like a certain e-cigarette product or feel attached to the cultural constructs of e-cigarettes are endorsing these devices among their social network. Below, in Figure 27, the picture on the left-hand side shows the vaper is clearly displaying the brand name on his e-cigarette while using the device. Similarly, on the right-hand side, the girl appears to have thoughtfully positioned her chosen e-cigarette adjacent to the plume of vapour. While looking directly into the camera, it appears as if she is purposefully blowing the vapour in a downward direction to not obstruct her face.

She is making sure to clearly attach her personal physical image to the product she is using. Since we can assume the majority of these users are not being paid for these product endorsements, we can see them as more ‘authentic’ endorsements because a celebrity may not necessarily have an affinity towards the product to which they are attaching their name and image. The two vape-selfie examples in Figure 27 of user-generated e-cigarette endorsements showcase two different products and their functions.



Figure 27: Examples of Vape-Selfie Product Endorsement Posts

We must consider who benefits from these e-cigarette micro-celebrity product endorsements. Arvidsson discusses how forms of self-branding can potentially exploit consumers (2005). It is important to highlight the immaterial labour involved when someone chooses an e-cigarette as an identity marker in a selfie. People who post vape-selfie probably do not realize how taking and sharing these images are a form of labour. But their contribution is a type of cultural work, as they are providing updates of what they are doing and what products they are adopting, benefiting Instagram and potentially the e-cigarette industry. As Hearn states: “The flexible, visible, culturally meaningful branded self trades on the very stuff of lived experience in the service of promotion and possible profit. Even when it might be argued that Facebookers and partiers on 2night.com are not consciously self-branding, they remain (as we all do) global value subjects. They are product, producers, and consumer, but they do not control the means of

their own distribution” (2008). Self-branding using a vape-selfie reveals that it is unlikely these users are consciously self-branding, but nonetheless they are producing value. Moving forward with this in mind, the next section addresses vape-selfies as a form of cultural work and examines how these posts are reflective of the “prosumer age”.

3.1.3 Vape-Selfies & Prosumers

Vape-selfies affirm the notion that we are currently in the “prosumer age” (Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012). The prosumer is a concept coined by Alvin Toffler in the 1980s that, at a rudimentary level, describes people who both produce and consume cultural content without receiving monetary compensation for their contributions (Toffler, 1980). Toffler defines a prosumer as: “A person that creates goods, services or experiences for his own use or satisfaction, rather than for sale or exchange” (Toffler & Toffler, 2006). Although the concept was formally identified in the 1980s, the act of prosumption has been present for centuries (Ritzer et al., 2012). Ahluwalia and Miller write: “From jazz musicians to street artists, cultural workers have long laboured without regular compensation and security” (2014). While Ahluwalia and Miller confirm that the prosumer is not a new concept, they illustrate that what is new are the number of platforms on which this work takes place and the growing research on prosumption (2014). Ritzer et al. point to the widespread use of the Internet and the popularity of social media as two of the social changes that have increased attention to prosumption activities, stating that: “Facebook and Twitter simply could not exist without prosumers” (2012). Vape-selfies on Instagram show that Instagram is another social network that would not exist without the help of prosumers, since prosumers are constantly uploading and increasing the content on the site.

Seran and Izvercian’s definition of prosumer better characterizes the work of vape-selfie sharers on Instagram. They describe a prosumer as: “Individuals (consumers) that make a contribution (provide work to produce / create value) by being engaged in a process for one’s own use or for the use of others” (2014). This definition acknowledges the cultural work that goes into posts on Instagram, but does not recognize that while a person benefits from posting a vape-selfie, so does Instagram and the e-cigarette industry.

I believe vape-selfies make apparent that the ‘or’ in Seran and Izvercian’s definition should be changed to ‘and’.

Emphasizing this combination and drawing attention to the pleasure derived from prosumption activity, Miller’s understanding of prosumption, informed by Foucault, best reflects vape-selfies on Instagram. Miller states: “Internally divided – but happily so – each person is, as Foucault put it, ‘a consumer on the one hand, but...also a producer” (qtd. in Miller, 2010; Foucault, 2008). The insight from this definition presents us with an internal divide that I think is essential to understanding vape-selfies. This divide is where individuals arguably benefit from producing vape-selfies, but at the same time, ignores others who end up consuming and profiting from the work they produced. This brings attention to the economic benefits accrued for Instagram or the e-cigarette industry with vape-selfies. Pybus notes: “Thus, the relationship between producer and consumption is being rearticulated based on the immaterial labour of one very specific manifestation of the cultural worker, that is, the prosumer” (2013). As we can see in the three images in Figure 28, vape-selfies epitomize prosumers at work. These Instagram users are choosing to do the necessary labour to capture, upload, and share their selfies, thereby promoting vaping for free. Interestingly, the three vape-selfie posts below work to depict different stages of the vaping experience. In the first image, it appears that she is beginning to inhale. The second image shows the vapour in his mouth, while the third image depicts the e-cigarette user performing a trick of blowing vapour rings when exhaling.

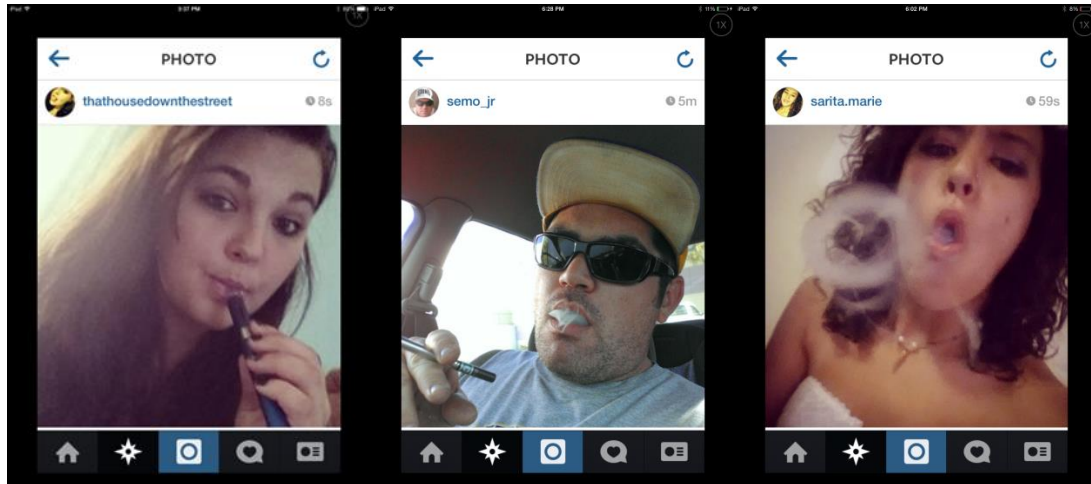


Figure 28: Examples of E-cigarette Prosumers at Work Posts

In considering whether vape-selfies are exploiting the people posting them, I first explore why people producing these images may not see this type of labour as work. For this I adopt: 1) rationale from the Marxist concept of alienation; 2) uses and gratification theory; and 3) social rewards, creativity, and future gains. I explain why users are likely happy to produce this content and how these rewards may distract them from recognizing aspects of exploitation.

A closer look at vape-selfies reveals that contributors are unable to recognize their own alienation for the following reasons: 1) People are able to revisit images on Instagram and as such, they are not alienated from the end result; 2) People are involved in the entire process – they control the post from start to finish. A person takes their selfie, navigates the app, chooses the desired artistic elements, posts the picture, and then is able to revisit the image on their profile whenever they wish; 3) The platform allows the user to contribute to their interests and allows them to see what other people take interest in, thereby nourishing their ‘species-being’¹²; 4) Posts appear as updates among followers, so a person is exposed to what other people are posting, thereby uniting workers on this platform. These aspects of labour seem to result in prosumers who are happy to produce this content. Ritzer et al. confirm: “Most prosumers, online and offline,

¹² Species-being can be understood as your human essence (Wartenberg, 1982).

often seem quite happy about prosuming; further, it is quite clear that not only do they gain emotionally, but they also gain in a wide variety of quite material ways” (2012). On this fundamental level, Ritzer et al. remind us that social media contributors are not alienated “because they are not disconnected from the content they produce on the site and they are free to create what they choose” (Ritzer et al., 2012).

Uses and gratification theory may also help to explain why users find fulfillment in sharing their vape-selfies. Uses and gratification theory is premised on the idea that people use media to satisfy their needs and when applied, the theory explains how media benefits users (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Whiting and Williams state: “The application of uses and gratification theory to social media helps explain the many and varied reasons why individuals use and like social media” (2013). Their study lists the main reasons why people use social media: social interaction (88%), information seeking (80%), pastime (76%), entertainment (64%), relaxation (60%), expression of opinions (54%), community utility (56%), convenience utility (52%), information sharing (40%), and surveillance/knowledge about others (32%) (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Given that social interaction was listed as the top reason why people engage with social media (88%) and taking into consideration Quan-Haase and Young who found that there are different forms of gratification associated with different types of social media (2010), I suggest that social rewards, social creativity, and the potential for future gains are the more immediate social interaction gratifications users are likely to receive from posting vape-selfies on Instagram.

Personal fulfillment from posting vape-selfies may be linked to receiving social rewards, a concept that was formally discussed in relation to the unpaid work that bloggers characteristically perform (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Vapers are rewarded by receiving likes and comments on their photos, often deemed the social currency of Web 2.0 (Mason & Rennie, 2007). On Instagram, the ‘likes’ shows up as a heart, further connoting positive emotions that people receive in real-time, likely as a notification to the home screen of their mobile device. This highlights how we have entered into an attention economy where likes, comments, and followers become payments that users seek to acquire. Before the existence of Web 2.0, Goldhaber predicted: “The attention economy

brings with it its own kind of wealth, its own class divisions – stars vs. fans – and its own forms of property, all of which make it incompatible with the industrial money-market-based economy it bids fair to replace. Success will come to those who best accommodate to this new reality” (1997). This early interpretation of the attention economy proves to be a valuable way to understand social rewards on Instagram with the top reward being Instafame (Marwick, 2015). Marwick explains: “Instafame demonstrates that while micro-celebrity is widely practiced, those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity that depend on the availability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture” (2015). Although we do not know the Instafame status of these vape-selfie posters, we can assume that a potential goal in posting these images is to increase their followers, photo likes and comments.

More so than Facebook and Twitter, an appealing feature of Instagram is that it is a platform to express oneself creatively within one’s social network. That being said, the fulfillment people feel in producing vape-selfies may be due to the fact that they enjoy the opportunity to act on ‘artistic’ impulses on a platform that makes it easy and fun to do so. With this in mind, Instagram encourages everyone to be their own photographer, documenting the happenings of their day-to-day life, and then provides the space to digitally share this ‘hobby’ with followers or with an entire platform (if one chooses to include a hashtag or to have an open account). With Instagram, it is not just taking and posting pictures that encourages creativity; it’s also the photo editing and captioning involved. As Marwick notes: “Previous studies have found that people who share online photos spend a great amount of time ‘selecting, modifying, editing, storing, or uploading” (2015).

As we can see in the vape-selfie example in Figure 29, there are a variety of ways that people can edit their photos. There are general filters that uniformly change the tone of a picture (Lark, Reyes, Juno, Slumber, Crema, etc); one can modify the LUX, and adjust (straighten out), brighten, increase / decrease contrast, structure, increase / decrease warm tones, increase / decrease saturation, add a certain colour (as a shadow or highlight), fade, highlight, and enhance an image all within the Instagram app.

Additionally, a person can download other applications to further edit their photos, allowing them to add graphics like creative borders and cartoon art. In this vape-selfie example, the user chose to add a black and white filter to her image and to resize the photo so that the white frame around the photo is larger. The user has personalized the style of this post, similar to what you may see in professionally framed black and white photography. The black and white contrast draws the viewer's eye to the centre of the image, which in this case is the e-cigarette. By allowing users to express themselves creatively, Instagram may increase the happiness users feel when producing and sharing vape-selfies for free.

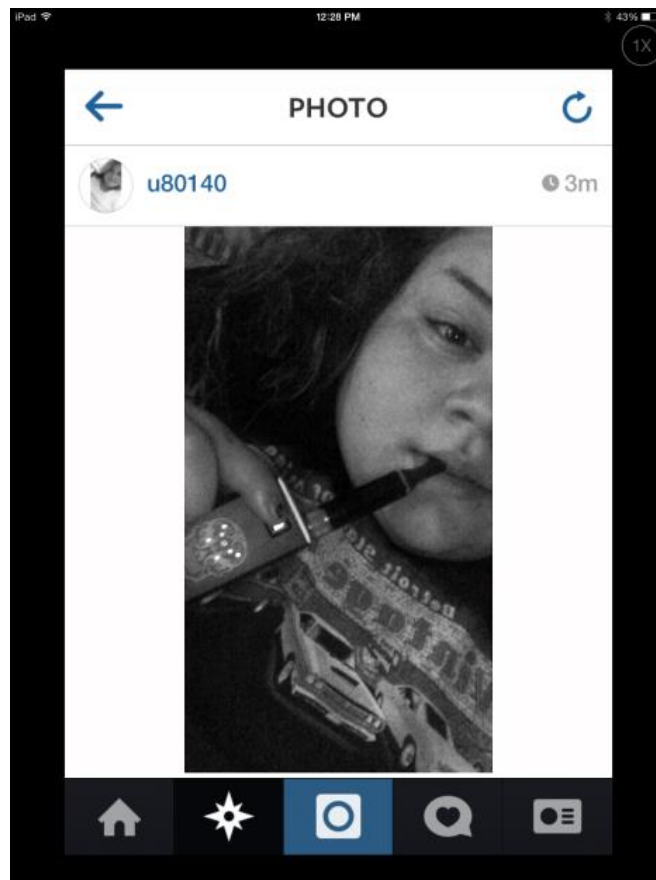


Figure 29: Example of a Black and White Vape-Selfie Post

The third aspect of social interaction that may increase someone's desire to post a vape-selfie is the potential for future gains. In the past, people have used SNS to build their personal brand. For example Miranda Sings' comedic videos on YouTube, and

Shawn Mendes' song recordings on Vine, garnered such large followings, the two ended up propelling their careers forward. Additionally, we also see people who have a large following being compensated to create a post endorsing a particular product. In 2014, Reelseo: The Video Marketer's Guide shared an article entitled "How to Identify YouTube Influencers to Endorse your Brand" ("How to Identify YouTube Influencers", 2014). The article notes that companies no longer have to rely on big stars, but can receive considerable attention by using social media influencers. For a business, we can see why this may be an attractive way to spread brand awareness, acting as another form of electronic word-of-mouth ("eWOM"). With respect to vape-selfies, it is possible that people do this work on behalf of e-cigarette companies with the hopes of receiving an offer to work for them in the future as an influencer.

3.1.4 Vape-Selfies & Marxist Notions of Exploitation

Regardless of the benefits that Instagram users may receive, we can assume that the majority of vape-selfie posters are not monetarily compensated for their work. As such, these users are exploited. Rey acknowledges: "Social media users are indeed exploited in the Marxian sense because they produce value for the various sites without being directly compensated with wages" (2012). I believe this exploitation is occurring with vape-selfies in two ways: 1) the labour of the vape-selfie cultural worker directly benefits Instagram, because it adds content to the site, and 2) it benefits the e-cigarette industry, as the posts are personal visual testimonials for the product. In considering other possible benefits for the e-cigarette industry derived from vape-selfies, we can explore how these selfies are also a form of product feedback. Vape-selfies reveal a wide range of vaping devices *actually* being used (compared to just the product-shots discussed in Chapter 2) and therefore showcase a variety of peoples' vaping paraphernalia preferences. Based on this knowledge, companies and retailers could then change their merchandise to better serve customers. We can also understand from the variety of products in these vape-selfies that people enjoy being able to personalize their devices. This suggests the wide range of e-cigarettes allow users to feel they are able to articulate more personalized consumption. This seems to confirm that: "Consumers have developed a culture of self-awareness, and standardized products have become an unsuitable option for all people" (Seran & Izvercian, 2014). In this way, vape-selfies may act as a form of product feedback for

retailers as they demonstrate which devices people are choosing to adopt. Overall, we must consider how vape-selfies and the other user-generated content discussed later in this chapter (blowing clouds, vaping memes, and miscellaneous) may serve the vaping industry because, as Paek et al. noted (2014), user-generated content has a heightened impact to persuade people to use e-cigarettes.

3.2 Blowing Clouds

Of the 854 image posts, 16 (2%) involved people exhaling vapour clouds. These photos were taken by a third party, unlike vape-selfies which are taken by the person in the picture. These posts form a user-generated promotional category because as user-generated content they highlight a potential appeal to e-cigarettes and show an aspect of vaping that may entice others. Although representing only a small percentage of the sample, blowing cloud posts illuminate aspects of vaping that I had not considered. Some vape shops even have classes that teach you how to build your e-cigarette so that they produce big clouds (Balen, 2014). A web search revealed that there is an etiquette attached to blowing clouds. A Reddit post confirms: “That guy is a super douche. He thinks that anyone who isn't okay with blowing huge clouds in stores and public places is ashamed of vaping. Apparently the only way to spread the word is to vape like a dick. He epitomizes the type of person that is completely detrimental to our community” (my_pets_are_rednecks, 2014). Blowing large clouds in public spaces seems to be frowned upon by certain vapers. However, in private places this act seems to be enjoyed. As seen in Figure 30, the post on the left of the two men vaping appears to be taken in a casual home environment. It is assumed that they are acquaintances – who are hanging out and comparing the size of their plumes. In the second image, the post appears to be taken perhaps in the back of a vape shop where the vaper is experimenting with various e-cigarettes and surrounding himself with large vapour clouds. Vapers may be blowing large clouds to test the capabilities of the products, to demonstrate their proficiency with new technology, to intensify e-juice flavours, or maybe to prepare for cloud competitions.



Figure 30: Examples of Blowing Clouds Posts

In chapter two, I discussed the notifications for sponsored cloud contests, outlining the requirements, rules, and incentives to participate in these competitions. In this section, the blowing cloud posts build on that to highlight the interest of this component of vaping. A 2014 *The Huffington Post* article stated that: “Vaping has apparently become a sport,” suggesting that the activity I categorized as blowing clouds is more accurately referred to as “cloud-chasing” (Mosbergen, 2014). The article links to a video of e-cigarette aficionados talking about vaping and making claims that vaping today is what skateboarding was 10 years ago. The article claims that competitive vapour blowing contests are not actually new and that these competitions have emerged across the United States (Mosbergen, 2014). The term cloud-chasing is candidly described by Haynes in an article published in *The Guardian*: “Cloud-chasing. It suggests Wordsworth and Scandinavian lovers scrabbling up hilltops, bespectacled nimbus-spotters in red socks and hiking boots consulting logbooks, not a bunch of scraggly twentysomethings with flesh tunnels and beards in an e-cigarette shop, whopping at a bro who has just blown a plume of smoke longer than his leg” (2015). As discussed in Chapter Two, cloud competitions are gaining in popularity and participation. Haynes confirms: “Born out of the growth of the \$1billion-a-year vaping business, what you might call the Red Bull-

ification of a fiery competitive market is starting to take shape: there are now sponsorship deals between e-cig manufacturers and the sport’s heroes, decent prize money of up to \$2,000, and already two rival championships – the International Cloud Championships in California, and the World Series of Vape, due to be held in December in Las Vegas” (2015). These competitions are also occurring in Canada. VapeCan 2015, for instance, occurred in Toronto, Ontario in July 2015 and hosted a cloud competition as part of the conference (VapeCan, 2015). Figure 31 is an example of cloud contest post from my sample. Competitors are standing back-to-back and their plume is measured for distance and density.

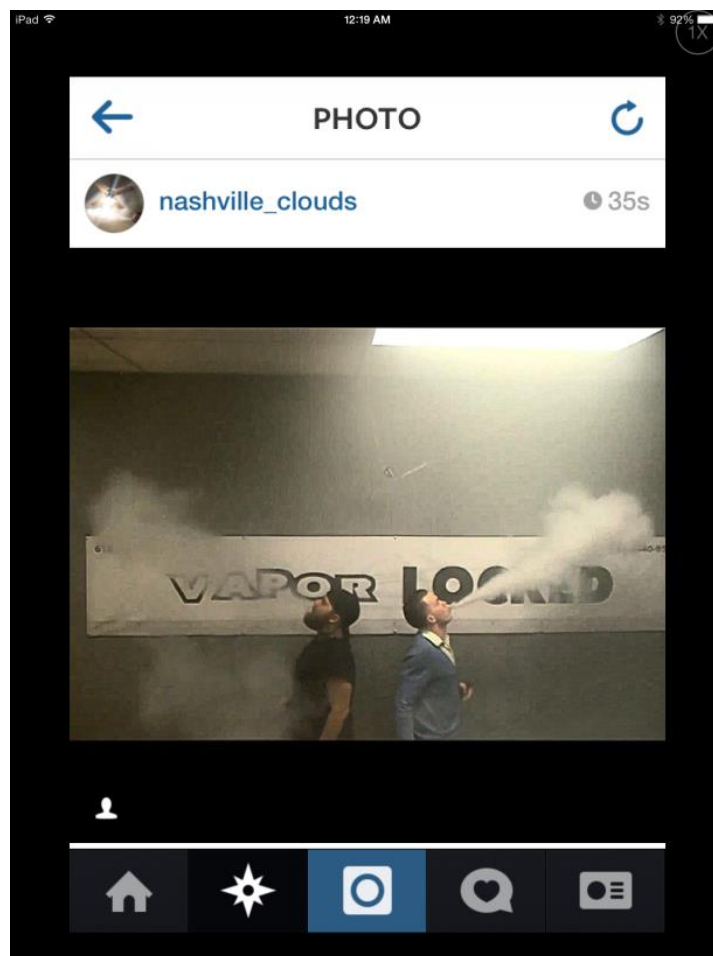


Figure 31: Example of Cloud Competition Post

Cloud competitions bring out the competitive spirit of some vapers and also create an e-cigarette spectacle reflecting a carnivalesque atmosphere. Haynes’ description of cloud competitions illuminates these aspects: “Yet in America, where the market for

hotdog-eating and dwarf-tossing is already saturated, cloud-chasing is already turning pro” (2015). According to Bakhtin (1998), there are four categories that define the world of carnivalesque: 1) Familiar and free interaction between people; 2) Eccentric behaviour; 3) Carnivalistic misalliances; and 4) Sacrilegious. Carnavalesque elements are present in cloud competitions in that they encourage excess and they invert the social norms of smoking-related behaviour. Cloud contest competitors inhale and then exhale the most amount of vapour possible. The premise of the competition emphasizes excess and turns the stigmatization of smoking into a reward, turning the “world-upside-down” (Stallybrass & White, 1986). Haynes notes: “It’s easy to master the basics. Contestants stand back-to-back, double over to expel every drop of air from their lungs, then suck on a modified vaper until they’ve filled their chest cavity with enough vaporized nicotine ‘e-juice’ to shoot out a belch of white smoke upwards of four feet long. The contestant with the longest plume wins, officiated by a pair of judges looking at a measuring tape against the wall” (2015). The winners of the competition are those who can freakishly contort their mouth in such a way to “keep the plume flying in one solid cloud” and who have mastered the dexterity to “soup-up” their device (Haynes, 2015).

The immaterial labour of participating in cloud competitions is another example of how some e-cigarette users may face exploitation. People participating in cloud contests are promoting vaping and certain brands, but they are likely not receiving financial compensation for their work. Interestingly, the linked video on *The Huffington Post* article mentions that modifying e-cigarettes so they produce large and dense clouds for these competitions drives e-cigarette innovation and product development. Pybus states: [Marketers] “harbour a deep understanding that by increasing the involvement of those they wish to target, the status of the brand can be augmented and thus perceived as being more authentic and hence more saleable” (2013). Although winners of the cloud competitions often receive financial rewards, the majority of the competitors leave empty handed. Cloud contests are alluring. They create a spectacle around vaping that may entice others to participate. Cloud competitions are yet another example of how some e-cigarette users are being exploited by the e-cigarette industry.

3.3 Vaping Memes

Thirteen posts (2%) in the sample were Internet memes. The term meme was originally coined by Richard Dawkins (an evolutionary biologist) in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Derived from the word ‘mimema’ meaning “something which is imitated”, Dawkins uses the term meme to describe small-scale cultural pieces that are shared from one person to another (Dawkins, 1976). Based on this definition, Chen confirms: “A meme can technically be any transferable form of information, but due to the mechanisms of digital and Internet technology, it is now commonly conceived of as an extremely contagious and often humorous part of Internet culture that can sometimes generate enough hype to break into mainstream popular culture” (2012). It is best understood, in my mind, as a type of inside joke that reveals itself to a targeted community. Memes generally do not have high quality production values. They consist of text conjoined with an image, which evokes different forms of humour. Vaping memes follow the same techniques as popular and widely circulated memes like LOLCats, which displays funny images of cats with text on top in broken English as if to imitate how a cat would speak (Chen, 2012).

Mememes are effective because of their ability to create meanings between the text and the image. Mememes generally require some knowledge of the subject to understand the joke. When attempting to interpret the vaping memes in my sample, I became aware of how much of an outsider I am in the vaping community; deciphering the memes proved difficult at times. For example, as seen in the meme on the left of Figure 32, I have never tried menthol e-liquid, but I was able to determine that it provides users with a chilling experience. In the adjacent post, I did not understand the “OHMS” and curly fry reference. Now, I am more aware that this meme refers to modifying an e-cigarette to change the electrical resistance of a device to suit the vaper’s desires. An e-cigarette forum confirmed: “In layman terms, OHMS is a measure of electrical resistance or how freely electricity is able to travel through something” (“Ecigarette Parts: Ohms Explained”, 2011). A YouTube video explaining OHMS described how changing the coil of an e-cigarette impacts the resistance, which in turn influences the vaping experience. Deciphering this vaping meme illuminated the needed technical skills to build and modify

e-cigarettes (“Watts Amps Ohms and Volts”, 2014). Through my research, I became aware of the electrical knowledge required to modify e-cigarettes.

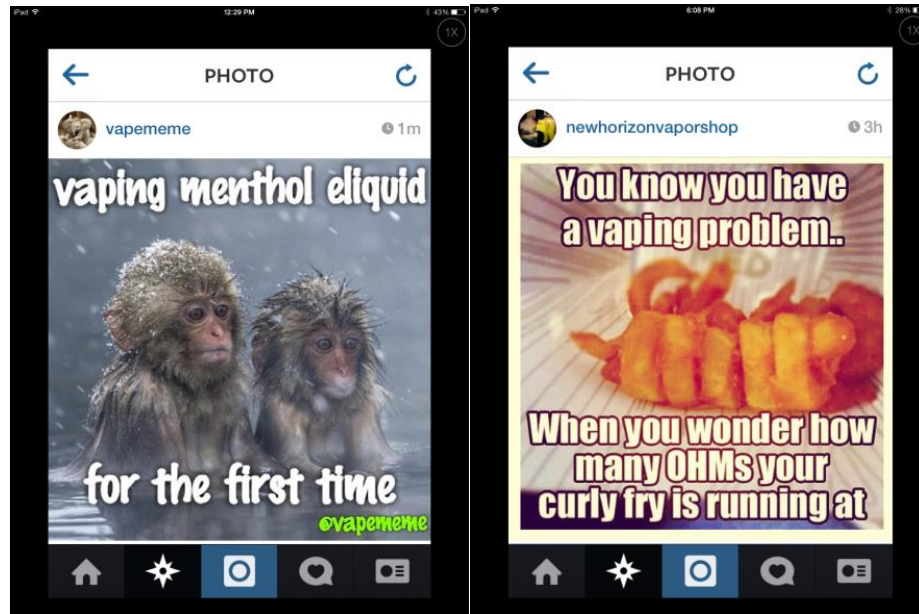


Figure 32: Examples of Vaping Meme Posts

Vaping memes, analogous to political cartoons, have the ability to communicate so-called underground knowledge. Through humour, they share personal experiences within the vaping community. Bauckhage notes: “Put in simple terms, Internet memes are inside jokes or pieces of hip underground knowledge that many people are in on” (2011). In my experience, I found that not being in on the joke provided me with the opportunity to learn about the nuances of vaping through the first-hand experiences of those in the vaping community. Vaping memes are a unique and informative way to become familiar with the underground knowledge being shared among vapers.

Chen’s (2012) application of Jürgen Habermas’ theorizations of the public sphere to explore Internet memes is extremely relevant to some memes within my sample. According to Habermas, the public sphere describes a public space where people come together and can exchange ideas to stimulate public interest to question policy-makers. Instagram can be considered a public sphere where people gather and, as the meme in Figure 33 shows, it is also a place to garner support to influence policy.

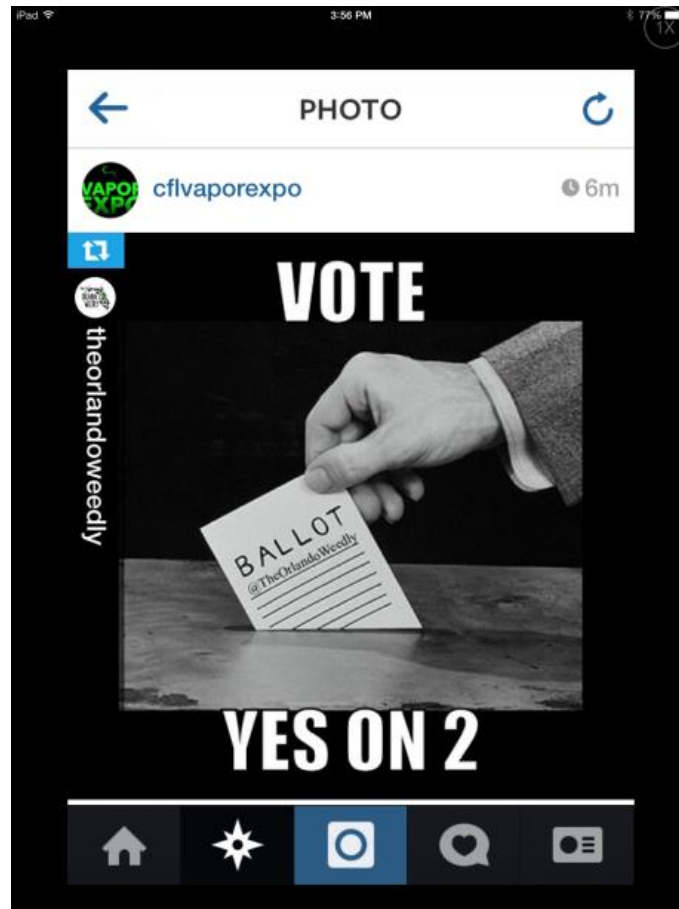


Figure 33: Example 2 of Vaping Meme Post

This meme contains elements of humour in how it satires modern-day voting. With the use of black and white filters, the stereotype of a white-collar male voter, and the old-school ballot, this meme is poking fun at the past and communicates that it is time to move into the future. “Yes on 2” is a reference to voting for Amendment 2 to change medical-related marijuana use in Florida. Although this is not a vaping specific meme, I think the fact that it included #ecig shows the overlap that exists between communities with similar interests. Furthermore, I believe the presence of a hand in the meme, without the rest of a person’s body, reflects the desire that both e-cigarette users and pro-Amendment 2 supporters have to take their health concerns into their own hands.

The production and circulation of vaping memes should be considered with the discussion of presumption, alienation and exploitation applied to vape-selfies and participation in cloud contests. With vaping memes, users likely benefit from creating the

joke and having others relate to their experience, but are not financially compensated for their work. Marwick notes: “But media scholars believe memes typify the shift from a culture of consumption to one of production. While teenagers might once have spent their free time watching television, a young person today may get creative, using their laptop and wifi to overlay witty text on a photo of a cat” (2013). I would imagine for vapers, these memes cultivate feelings of inclusion and community. This creation of community on Instagram is significant because it extends physical and geographic constraints. We must ask who else is benefiting from these memes. On the surface, it seems the individual users and the vaping communities are benefiting, but the e-cigarette industry also benefits from the formation of a community and sub-culture based on these products. Memes may foster feelings of connectedness among those already involved in the community (current vapers), but it may also entice new membership for those who wish to understand and be a part of the joke, thereby increasing revenue for the e-cigarette industry.

3.4 Miscellaneous

To account for every post in my sample, I created a miscellaneous category. There were 77 miscellaneous posts. These posts accounted for 9% of the total images. Even though Holsti (1969) confirms that it is not unusual to have many miscellaneous items, I was taken aback when I realized this was the third largest category in my sample. This unexpected finding had me stumped. These posts did not fit into my other categories and it was not obvious how the posts were related to each other. Broadly speaking, there were a few posts of food, social events, pets, landscapes, tattoos, screenshots of un-related text message conversations, and objects such as guns, flags, and cars. I went back to a few of the miscellaneous posts to see if the caption on the post would explain the connection to e-cigarettes; this search did not help to further clarify why these posts incorporated #ecig. I kept revisiting this category to make sense of the posts. It was not until months after my data collection when I was making an Instagram post on my personal account that it struck me that these ‘miscellaneous posts’ are related. They are the updates, the everyday happenings, of those within the vaping community on Instagram. This relates to previously discussed concepts of uses and gratification theory, social rewards, social

creativity, and social gains to explain why people post these kinds of updates on Instagram. Figure 34 is a collage of the ‘not-so’ miscellaneous posts in my sample.

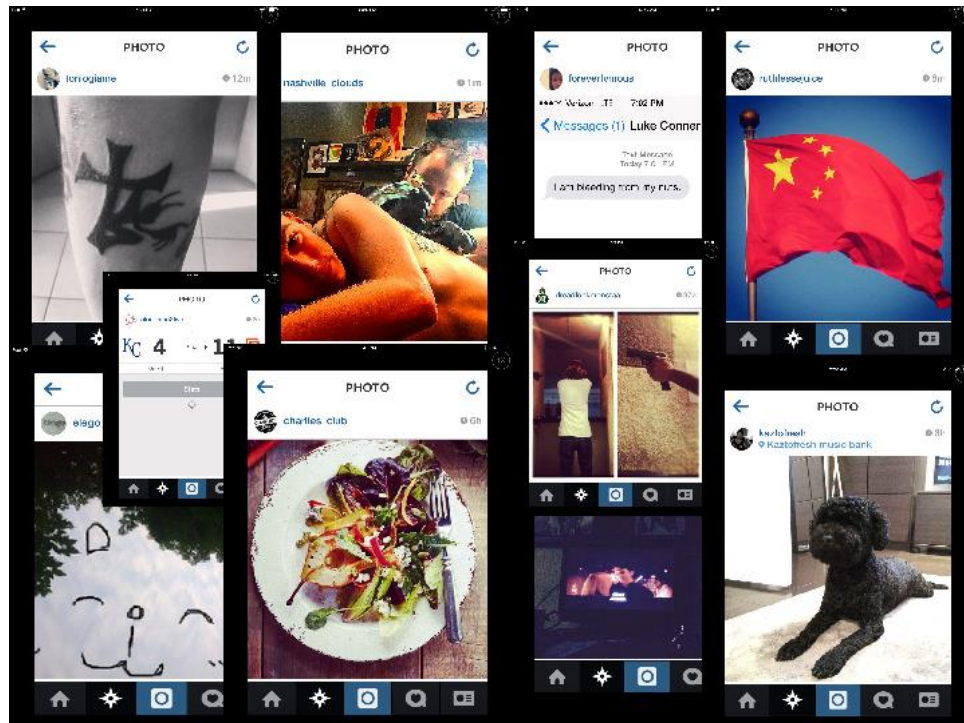


Figure 34: Collage of Miscellaneous Posts

Within this miscellaneous category, there were two posts asking questions about e-cigarettes that are worth highlighting. These questions show that users are using Instagram, and specifically #ecig, to seek e-cigarette-related information. These queries are not directed to a single user, but at the community of vapers on this SNS. Those asking the questions trust that those ‘in the know’ will provide them with accurate information. As explored in uses and gratification theory, information seeking is the second most common use of social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Whiting and Williams inform that 80% of respondents reported using social media to seek out information. The participants in this study reported that they use social media to: “...find information about sales, deals, or products; find information on events, birthdays, and parties; and look at information about businesses. Respondents also mentioned that they use social media for self-education. Respondents stated that they use social media to get how-to-instruction, to get help with math, and to learn new things” (Whiting & Williams 2013). These two posts show that people are not just looking for general e-cigarette-

related information on Instagram but they are also looking for answers to specific questions. The first question: “Looking for a nice dual 18650 box mod. Any suggestion [sic]?” is looking to the community for some advice based on their personal vaping experience. The second question reads: “Fellow vapers! I’m thinking about getting a box-mod soon and have NO IDEA where to start! I want to chuck massive clouds, and my current mod doesn’t cut it. Suggestions? Thanks.” These posts show how people are able to use Instagram’s comment feature to gain direct knowledge and feedback about various e-cigarette products.

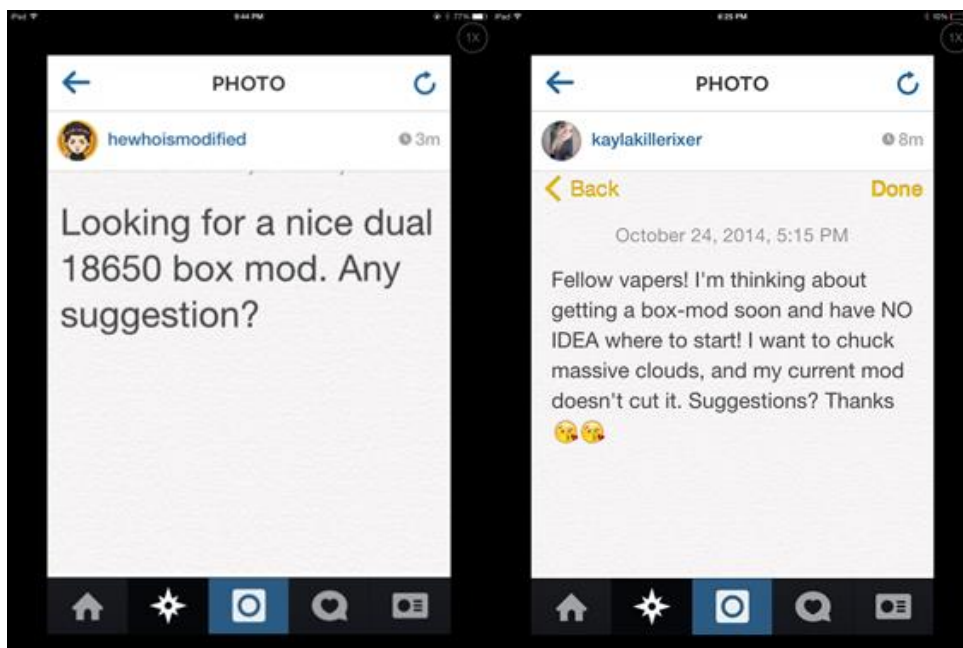


Figure 35: Examples of E-cigarette Question Posts

3.4.1 Active Producers of E-cigarette Content & Digital Footprint

The user-generated content in my study (vape-selfies, blowing clouds, and vaping memes) show that people are not just passive recipients of e-cigarette content but they actively produce content for free that may help to promote e-cigarettes. Ritzer et al. recall: “This involves a long-term rejection in media studies of the audience as a passive consumer of the largely immaterial content produced by the media” (2012). The user-generated content shows that people are producing potentially persuasive e-cigarette content independent of direct marketing influences, typifying that we have gone from a “culture of consumption to one of prosumption” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Marketing

teams are no longer immediately needed to foster an affinity towards a product: instead, individual users are able and willing to promote a product and develop a surrounding community without receiving compensation.

The fact that these posts create a digital footprint establishing an affiliation between these users and e-cigarettes is important to discuss. The term digital footprint refers to the ‘data’ that Internet users contribute, marking their presence in a digital landscape. Pybus confirms: “In other words, we cannot get away from our present historical moment and we need ways to theorize both the construction and circulating of digital bodies, which exist in these extremely dynamic platforms” (2013). Although e-cigarettes may just be a passing phase in these users’ lives, their vape-selfies and memes record this interest, unless these users make a conscious attempt to delete these posts. This is significant to note because in the future, the poster may not want their identity linked to this product, especially in the case of vape-selfies. For example, if national health agencies or insurance companies find that people have used e-cigarettes despite warnings and have developed related health problems, perhaps they may choose to limit health coverage for these individuals.

3.5 Erotic Posts

There were seven posts classified as erotic (1%) in the #ecig sample. The erotic category in this study involved posts that contained provocative displays of sexuality in combination with e-cigarette use, as seen in Figure 36. These posts are different from the user-generated posts examined in this chapter because they are posted by e-cigarette merchants and the photographic quality of these erotic posts appears to be at a professional level, compared to other user-generated posts. All of these erotic posts were of adult women.

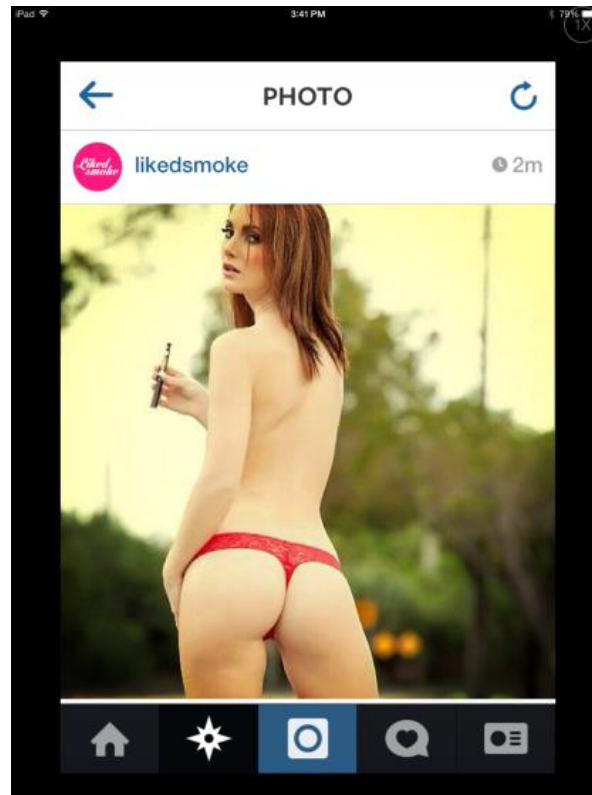


Figure 36: Example of Erotic Post

The women-only presence in these erotic e-cigarette ads suggests that these posts are intended to encourage men to vape. The women in these photos were either partially nude or wearing lingerie, without frontal nudity. This is interesting, given that Instagram’s Terms of Service state: “You may not post violent, nude, partially nude, discriminatory, unlawful, infringing, hateful, pornographic or sexually suggestive photos or other content via the Service” (“Terms of Service”, 2015). Clearly, these posts do not comply with the regulations. Recently, I went back and searched for one of the erotic images from my sample and it was still present on the vape shop’s account. I have to wonder if these rules are enforced. The depiction of women in these posts as passive sexual objects and the forged relationship between sex and e-cigarette use is explored in the analysis below.

Since the 1970s, feminist researchers have examined how advertisements over simplified women’s role in society, reducing them to being mothers, homemakers or sex objects (Lindner, 2004). In 1979, Erving Goffman wrote about the impact that advertisements had on communicating gender roles and in 1989, research confirmed that

“exposure to gender role stereotypes in advertising often influences gender stereotyped attitudes” (Goffman, 1979; Lindner, 2004). It is widely known that provocative images are frequently used to sell products. The research suggests that a main reason for this is because sexually explicit advertisements increase the likelihood of viewers remembering the ad (Blair, Stephenson, Hill, & Green, 2006; Dudley, 1999). Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson state: “Advertising research reveals that sexual appeals are attention getting, arousing, affect inducing, and memorable” (2001). These e-cigarette ads, however, go one step further by not simply using sex to sell the products, but by integrating e-cigarettes and related products in the post as phallic symbols. Poses included having e-cigarettes in the model’s mouth, underwear, and e-cigarettes wedged between a woman’s breasts. They employ visual strategies to endorse vaping and e-cigarette use for men. The erotic post on the left in Figure 37 shows a woman lying down in black and red lingerie with an e-cigarette in her mouth, encircled in a plume of vapour. The choice of colours, how the woman is positioned, and the angle of the camera create a sultry image, attempting to stimulate the imagination of the viewer. The second image is not as overtly sexual as the first. However, the use of sexual innuendos with the text and illustration on top of the image create a sexualized ad. The text reading: “Happy Hump Day” is evidently not only referencing Wednesday, but given the focus on the exposed body part, is suggesting a sexual act using this female body as an idealized prop. In addition, the illustration in the bottom right-hand corner (likely an e-cigarette brand or company) can be interpreted as a phallic symbol, especially given the text so close to the model’s bottom reading: “Twist and Drip”.



Figure 37: Examples 2 and 3 of Erotic Posts

The images above demonstrate the presence of Laura Mulvey’s concept of the Male Gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Laura Mulvey introduced this concept in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). In the essay, Mulvey argues that men filming women in movies objectified the women as they were stories told by men and intended for the pleasure of men. The development of the story and presence of women was entirely based on a male point of view. The female bodies in these erotic e-cigarette posts are examples of the male gaze. They are likely taken by men and intended for heterosexual men. I assume that men are behind the camera and that men are deriving the most sexual pleasure from seeing women in this manner. Mulvey states: “The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film” (Mulvey, 1975).

Interestingly, five of these erotic posts of women involve a model laying on a bed, not only suggesting these women are sex objects, but placing women back in the home, further engaging with common female stereotypes. The sexual nature of the women on beds, in lingerie, and not acknowledging the camera, are posted so that third parties can

look in on an intimate moment, an act referred to as voyeurism. Discussed by Freud as the scopophilic instinct, voyeurism refers to the pleasure one receives from “looking at another person as an erotic object” (Mulvey, 1975). Today, the term ‘Peeping Tom’ is often used to explain the act of voyeurism. In Figure 35, the woman is acknowledging the camera. However, the model seems surprised – as if she was not aware that an explicit image of her was about to be captured. In the erotic post in Figure 38, the viewer looks to be peeping through a window, especially given the set-up of Instagram’s application. The model seems to be relaxing in the privacy of her bedroom, on an unmade bed, wearing lingerie, using her e-cigarette. The camera angle and the positioning of the person taking the photo are important to note. The photo shows the model in a vulnerable position. The viewer is behind and can look in on this moment without her noticing. The vapour clouds in these erotic posts further sexualizes the nature of these images.

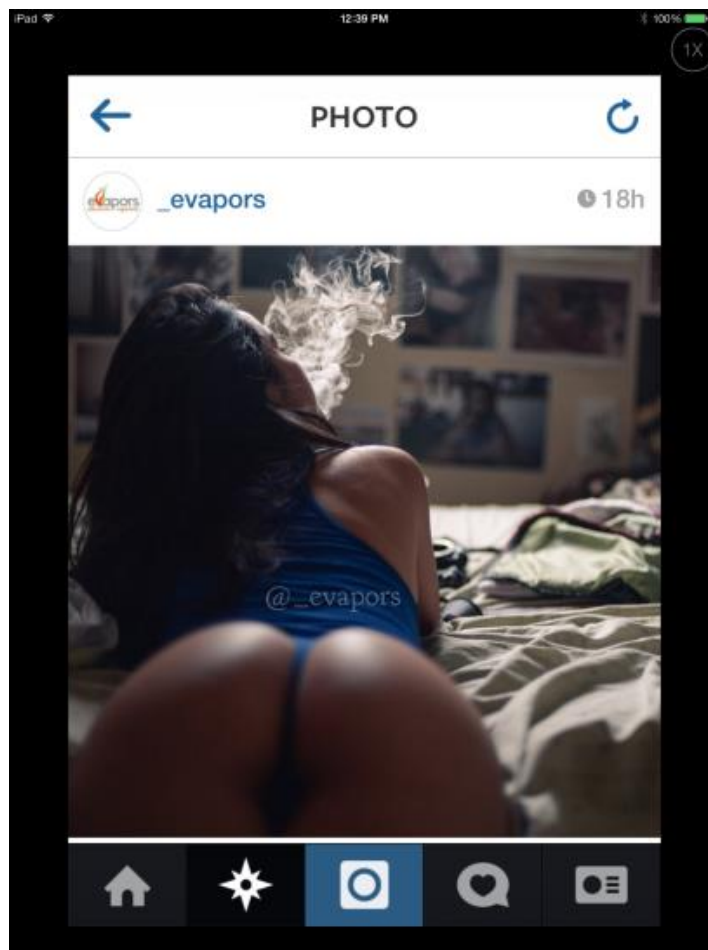


Figure 38: Example 4 of Erotic Post

Research suggests that the way women are portrayed in ads influences how some people may expect women to behave, and depictions of women in this way may elevate sexual aggressiveness towards women (Lanis & Covell, 1995). The overuse of women in these types of ads, combined with the general submissiveness of women in other forms of advertising, shows how important it is to see this cycle is continuing with new products like e-cigarettes and on a relatively new platform like Instagram. These ads are a reminder that we must continue to pay attention to gender representations, especially in social media advertisements that work to reinforce existing gender stereotypes that disempower women.

Conclusion

E-cigarette content on Instagram increases every hour. As of August 25, 2015, 1,128,735 public #ecig posts have been shared. Because of the growing number of e-cigarette posts on Instagram, my study was driven by three guiding research questions: 1) What e-cigarette content exists on Instagram; 2) How often and what kind of e-cigarette promotional posts exist?; and 3) How often and what kind of health-themed e-cigarette posts appear? In the first chapter, Methodology, I explore the research methods that guided my study. In the second chapter, #ecig Shop Talk, I examine merchant-driven posts including: product shots, promotions, business listings, and health-themed posts. Finally, in Chapter Three, #ecig Shoot & Share, I analyze the user-generated content comprised of: vape selfies, blowing clouds, vaping memes, miscellaneous, and erotic imagery posts.

In Chapter One, I explore the methodology I chose to complete this study. Given the novelty of collecting e-cigarette posts on Instagram, it was necessary to gather qualitative and quantitative data in the form of visual #ecig posts and to record the frequency of these posts. Therefore, I employed a mixed methods research approach. Since Instagram is a relatively new platform, there is very limited research that addresses this SNS. Consequently, the availability of information on how to collect data from this site is scarce, so I had to think carefully about choosing the best approach that would be relevant to my work. I decided to collect the data in the same way I originally searched for e-cigarette content on Instagram. In this way, it mirrors how most people use Instagram as they navigate the application to find e-cigarette information or connect with the e-cigarette community. In this chapter, I also examine the advantages and disadvantages of using Instagram as a research tool. I highlight the importance of collecting posts in real-time to effectively mimic a typical user's experience of scrolling through #ecig. While it took some time to find a compatible image-based software program to organize and code the posts, I decided the best option for my study was iPhoto. iPhoto is compatible with the iPad I used to take screenshots of posts and it recorded the time the photo was captured on the iPad, automatically keeping every image in chronological order when I transferred the images to my laptop. As a method of triangulation, I paid for Keyhole's monitoring service to record the posts during the same

time period in which I was recording them. I discovered that Keyhole's data collection ability was limited compared to mine, as I collected a minimum of 20 posts an hour compared to times the service only recorded six posts per hour. As a result of these discrepancies and in line with my initial objective to collect posts in the same manner as an Instagram user navigates the app, I decided to abandon this method of triangulation.

In general, I had a positive experience collecting data using Instagram. However, upon reflecting, as a tool for collecting data, I encountered three challenges with Instagram that future researchers may find helpful to consider: 1) There are limited software analysis programs useful for visual SNS; 2) Unlike Facebook and Twitter that generally grant the same access on both mobile and web interfaces, Instagram is predominately a mobile application. In order to get a sense of the intricacies of Instagram, it is more relevant to collect data from the actual mobile application. However, this presents a challenge because researchers must transfer the collected data to a computer in order to categorize and analyze it; 3) The vast amount of data— images, videos, captions as well as likes, comments, and reposts – makes it necessary for researchers to define their purpose and winnow data. Although Instagram is in the infant stages of being used as a research tool, as research possibilities are realized and the popularity of Instagram grows, this SNS has the potential to provide a wealth of information worth consulting.

In Chapter Two, #ecig Shop Talk, I focus on: product shots, promotions, business listings, and health-themed posts. Within these larger categories, I discuss sale notices and non-sponsored event posts. Product shots appeared most frequently in my sample and I realized that the large number of them, compared to the other categories, created a type of e-cigarette catalogue on Instagram. This catalogue transcends geographic boundaries and forms an international resource for anyone to peruse e-cigarette products.

The second largest category in the sample was e-cigarette promotions. As mentioned, one of my primary objectives with this study was to code e-cigarette promotions on Instagram. In order to do this, I adopted three sub-categories of promotion from Paek et. al. (2012) that analyzed tobacco promotions over five years: monetary, non-monetary, and event sponsorship promotions. Non-monetary posts were the largest sub-category and follower giveaways, which require users to perform a number of steps before they are eligible for a prize, appeared most frequently. This form of marketing

increases the reach of e-cigarette promotions through electronic word-of-mouth (“eWOM”). Monetary promotions were the second largest promotion sub-category. Here, coupons and a cents-off promotion appeared. I compared these daily social media discounts to ones offered on social coupon sites. Similar to established discount sites like Groupon, the coupons in my data collection entice new customers by offering them lower prices. The last promotion category discussed was event sponsorships, which highlights the use of Cloud Competitions and VapeCon (e-cigarette conference) to promote vaping. These events gather a large number of vaping aficionados, fostering and increasing awareness of vaping. VapeCon and Cloud Competition posts demonstrate how Instagram is used to create a ‘buzz’ around these vaping events.

The last category I addressed in this chapter was health-themed posts. I was surprised by how few posts appeared in this category, with none coming from health-care professionals or government-funded agencies. The health-themed posts that did appear were cessation-related messages from vape shops. These posts suggested viewers of the post should switch from tobacco cigarettes to e-cigarettes, and while they did not directly state that e-cigarettes were a successful way to stop smoking, it was clearly implied. None of the posts referred to any possible health ramifications associated with e-cigarettes.

This chapter makes clear that vape shops are using Instagram to showcase their products, of which there are many, and to promote their business. At the onset of my study, I was aware there were a lot of different e-cigarettes, but after my data collection, I was truly amazed at the number and range of products and accessories available. I also learned the extent to which someone can customize his or her vaping experience. Given the number of steps that a user would have to take in order to be entered into a contest, I found it interesting that follower giveaways were a popular non-monetary promotion. It is unlikely that I would take the time to follow the necessary steps just for a *chance* to win, but it seems like many in the vaping community are eager to participate nonetheless. The Cloud Competition notifications illuminated aspects of the vaping culture that I had not previously come across in researching e-cigarettes. I was surprised that these notifications encourage competitive vaping.

In the third chapter, #ecig Shoot & Share, I explore the remaining categories in the sample: vape-selfies, blowing clouds, vaping memes, miscellaneous, and erotic posts.

These posts were predominately user-generated. In the vape-selfies section, I examined identity construction online, prosumers at work, and resulting exploitation. I was fascinated by how people chose to represent themselves online while using e-cigarettes. I also did not realize how much information vape-selfies convey, since unlike the product shots discussed in Chapter Two, vape-selfies reveal which e-cigarette products vapers are actually using. In this section, I also focused on the micro-celebrity culture that arguably drives Instagram and influences the implication of selfies containing e-cigarettes. Echoing Marshall McLuhan's "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964) this illuminates that sharing vape-selfies on a micro-celebrity-driven platform transforms vape-selfies into product endorsements. To further understand the implications, I used rationale adopted from Marxist concepts of alienation, uses and gratification theory, social rewards, social creativity, and network gains to evaluate why people are sharing these posts for free. In addition to examining the elements of exploitation often used to identify prosumers on SNS, in this section I discuss how vape-selfies are a form of product feedback for e-cigarette businesses.

The blowing cloud section suggests proper etiquette is a contested topic among the vaping community. Whereas some vapers see blowing large clouds in public as a 'right', others see this as a negative portrayal of their community. I found it interesting to learn that some vape shops actually teach classes on how to modify e-cigarette gadgetry to produce large vapour clouds. In reflecting upon the cloud contests discussed in the event sponsorship promotion category in Chapter Two, I became aware of the growing involvement of vapers in cloud competitions. Learning more about these competitions revealed the role of excess and showed that inverting social smoking norms resembles themes of the carnivalesque. Manipulating e-cigarettes to produce large clouds brought to light how product development in this industry is driven by cloud contests.

In the next section, I explored vaping memes and how they communicate 'inside jokes'. Vaping memes transfer underground e-cigarette knowledge and establish community inclusiveness. Being on the 'outside' of these 'inside' jokes made me realize how removed I am from this community. Unlike those who find humour in these posts, I was more confused. I realize now that part of the reason I did not understand these jokes was because I did not understand the language being used. Through researching the

terms, it became clear that similar to sports slang and idioms, *vape jargon* conveys vaping-related messages to community members. In decoding and ‘translating’ these posts, I learned about the effects of e-juices, the intricacies of modifying e-cigarettes, and how to angle one’s mouth to increase the reach of a cloud. In Chapter Three I addressed the user-generated content in vape-selfies, blowing clouds, and vaping memes, which show Instagram users are not passive e-cigarette content consumers; they actively produce e-cigarette content. That being said, this section suggests that the digital footprint resulting from producing this content may have future ramifications.

Finally, in the last section in this chapter, I discussed the erotic imagery posts. The women in these posts are in sexually suggestive poses wearing risqué lingerie. The majority of the provocative posts included women exhaling vapour clouds. The e-cigarettes in these posts are strategically placed on the woman’s body as phallic symbols. Compared to user-generated posts, these posts had a higher production value and seemed to have been edited and colour adjusted. These posts reflect 1970s feminist research asserting that women’s social roles in advertisements are often problematic. In these posts, women are presented as sex objects. These posts also reflect Laura Mulvey’s “Male Gaze” and encourage acts of voyeurism. This stereotype objectifies women and increases the likelihood of sexual aggression towards them. The erotic posts demonstrate how objectifying women to advertise products continues with new commodities and on new SNS.

In an attempt to understand the user-generated content in this chapter, I began to think about my own Instagram activity. Past experiences using Facebook and Twitter, along with undergraduate course studies, shaped how I adopted Instagram. I realize that I have consciously made an effort to develop my identity on this platform. I recognize how the photos I choose to post build on that identity, how my updates reinforce that projected life, and how I communicate to reflect a desired persona. It made me realize that even though my posts look unplanned, in reality, they are carefully crafted to portray a desired image. That being said, I think it is beneficial to look at the fruit of the content user’s labour, especially with controversial products like e-cigarettes, as this gives us another way to monitor the direction and wave of the interest in these products.

I recognize that my study is limited to the extent that I only incorporated posts using #ecig and not others like #vapelifelife. Also, my findings are specific to Instagram and not social media in general. Even though these limitations existed, I was able to demonstrate the overwhelming amount of promotional e-cigarette content on Instagram. Both vape shop posts and user-generated content produces persuasive e-cigarette messages. Moving forward, I suggest the promotional e-cigarette environment on Instagram be balanced by posts that inform users of the potential complications that may arise from e-cigarette use. As noted: “It is critical to develop appropriate health campaigns to inform e-cigarette consumers of potential harms associated with e-cigarette use” (Luo et al., 2014). With this in mind, an initial step might be to post summaries of peer-reviewed e-cigarette research to balance the promotional messages that currently exist. Posts of this nature would ideally include information reflecting current research, such as that some e-juices claim to be nicotine-free but actually contain nicotine; e-cigarettes are not a proven stop-smoking tool; and e-cigarettes can contain metals and other products that could be harmful. An effective method would be to incorporate e-cigarette related hashtags already frequently in use, like #ecig. These posts should also incorporate elements of photographic and graphic creativity to reflect the appeals of Instagram.

Instagram has been a very useful tool to learn about e-cigarettes. Having a visual reference for different products, various types of promotions, looking at the faces of the users, and understanding memes added a deeper context to the e-cigarette debate. Instagram is said to be a platform that allows a person to tell his or her story. With this in mind, I have to ask: How is the e-cigarette story being told? As evidenced in my study, the current e-cigarette story on Instagram is one-sided. Posts characterize the allure and pleasures of using e-cigarettes, but, as we know, every story has at least two sides. It is important to share the other side of the e-cigarette story, especially in view of mounting health concerns.

I revisited #ecig a few months after collecting my data. One of the first posts that appeared, a vaping meme, caught my attention. The post reads: “You Know E-Cigs Are Bad For You? What Am I Gonna Get, E-Cancer?”.

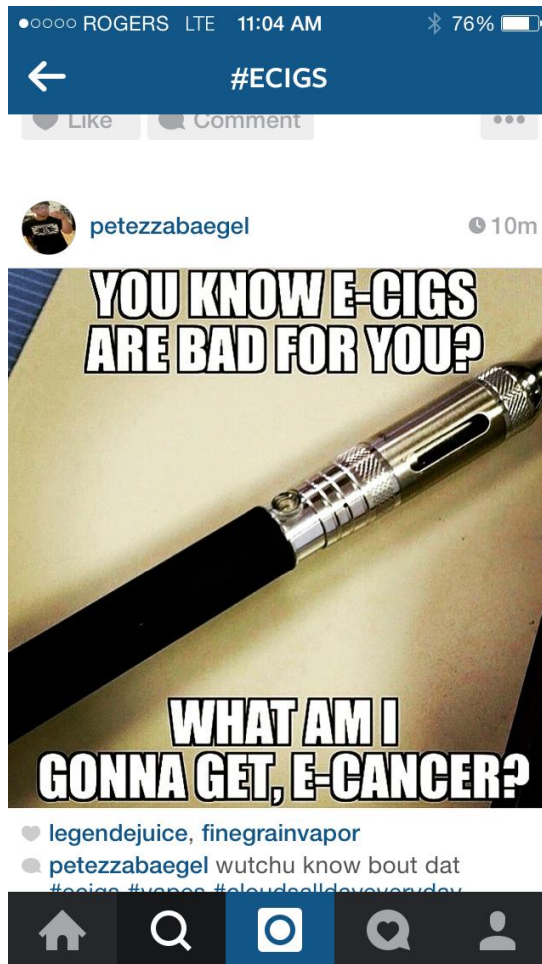


Figure 39: Example of Vaping Meme ‘E-Cancer’ Post

This meme is disturbing in its insensitivity and in what it implies in terms of the denial or lack of knowledge pertaining to the potential health risks associated with e-cigarettes. To see someone post a joke about a disease that has killed tens of millions underscores the need to continue the discussion to learn the truths about e-cigarettes and their health implications to ensure the legacy left behind by the generation of tobacco producers and consumers is not repeated. In this respect, the debate surrounding e-cigarette content on Instagram is only just beginning to heat up.

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