

The Mediating Role of Emotional Regulation Between Psychological Distress and Vaping Intentions Among Indian Young Adults

Abstract

The act of breathing the vapor emitted by electronic smoking devices like e-cigarettes or vapes are referred to as vaping. While vaping may not be as harmful as traditional smoking, it is extremely addictive. They can be either disposable, rechargeable, or refillable and have different options for flavours and nicotine contents. The lack of evidence and information regarding vaping in general and its implications has been recorded in the Indian context. This research aims to explore the reasons behind why youths choose to vape, the symptoms of their addiction, their frequency of vaping, and where they acquire vapes. emotion regulation is defined as one's capacity for understanding, regulating, and dealing with emotions, emotion regulation may prove to be very important in understanding how distressed individuals form intentions to vape. The proposed study follows the quantitative and cross-sectional research methodology in studying young adult Indians, ages 18-25 years old. Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21) psychological scales where been used to measure psychological distress, difficulty in emotion regulation, and intention to vape. Analysis, specifically mediation analysis, was be done to determine the relationship among the variables. The results of the study showed that it became difficult for individuals to cope with distress and regulated their emotions led to consumption of vapes and cigarettes which has developed withdrawal symptoms among adults and adolescences.

Keywords: Psychological Distress, Emotion Regulation, Vaping Intentions, Young Adults, Electronic Cigarette Use, Mental Health, Indian Youth.

Introduction

Does it matter what our youth smoke [1]? Is it a cause for

Research Article

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concern that cigarettes have another addictive competitor on the rise as a “better” or “healthier” alternative? Vaping is the most recent stimulating inhalant. Vaping is the act of inhaling the vapor created by any electronic smoking device, which may contain nicotine as well as various other substances, chemicals, and flavours. These electronic smoking devices are referred to as ‘e-cigarettes’ or ‘vapes’. E-cigarettes are still relatively new, and experts are still studying and researching their long-term health impacts [2]. E-cigarettes and vapes are believed to be less harmful than conventional cigarettes but are still not safe and, like cigarettes, can be highly addictive. The craze for these fruity, fragrant, and flavourful devices is rising amongst the youth. A majority of the youth are choosing these over conventional cigarettes. These vaporizing devices are disposable, rechargeable, refillable, and come in various shapes and sizes. They can also be customized to add various flavours and different levels of nicotine and other ingredients, which makes them even more desirable than cigarettes.

The prevalence of E-cigarette use is increasing along with concerns about the negative health effects of their use. Understanding the psychological constructs associated with susceptibility to beginning regular e-cigarette use may be helpful for prevention efforts [3]. Factors such as emotion regulation (ER) and impulsivity, specifically urgency, have been significantly correlated with patterns of

drug addiction in the past [4]. With few prior studies linking ER and impulsivity factors with e-cigarette susceptibility, the present study aims to assess their relationship in predicting e-cigarette susceptibility in university never-smokers. E-cigarette liquids and the by-products of its aerosolization can contain many chemicals; including formaldehyde, acrolein, and various heavy metals. Furthermore, e-cigarettes contain nicotine, an addictive substance, which is associated with its own adverse health effects such as acute toxicity, adverse effects on fetal development, and potential neurodevelopmental consequences in adolescents.

Psychological factors can likewise play an important role in the development of psycho-social problems such as smoking and substance abuse in adolescents. Accordingly, one of the psychological factors affecting smoking tendency is known as perceived stress, which can provide conditions for different mental and social problems. Experiences associated with regular criticism by parents or family members can also make a person agitated; moreover, most individuals are afraid of criticism and it is thought that this fear leads to punishment avoidance. Therefore, individuals focus on avoidance strategies to deal with criticism. In this respect, perceived stress caused by stressful conditions of parental criticism is very uncomfortable and such an inconvenience inspires a person to seek ways to reduce it.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between psychological distress and vaping intentions among Indian young adults.
2. To assess the level of emotion regulation difficulties among Indian young adults through DASS-21
3. To find out the reasons that attract Indian youth to vaping.

Literature Review

Vaping has become a youth phenomenon. Since e-cigarettes are their preferred choice, many young people are choosing to vape rather than smoke traditional cigarettes [1,5]. Vapes and e-cigarettes are significantly more appealing due to their qualities. Vaporizing devices

come in many different varieties; however, they always share the same structure and function. A mouthpiece that you can put in your mouth; this component typically includes a solution, which is juice or another liquid that contains flavors and nicotine. An atomizer is a metal coil that heats a liquid to create a vapor or aerosol that the user inhales. The atomizer and a sensor that turns on the heating are both powered by a rechargeable battery [6]. There is a strong interplay between mental health and substance abuse [7]. [8] indicates that e-cigarette users among dental students in the United Arab Emirates have significantly greater stress, anxiety, and depression than non-users. In the same way, Morris et al. (2021) noted that college students who began using e-cigarettes before switching to conventional cigarettes seemed to have heightened social anxiety and more stress-coping motives. [9] analysed over 2600 young adults and reported that anxieties, depression, impulsivity, and e-cigarette use exhibited strong positive correlations. [10] also reported that the presence of severe anxiety and depression was associated with e-cigarette use.

Like cigarettes, vapes too can have negative impacts on health. Diacetyl, formaldehyde, and acrolein are some of the harmful chemicals found in these devices that cause severe lung damage. It can cause lipoid pneumonia, popcorn lung, and primary spontaneous pneumonia. Youngsters find vaping to be quite appealing for a number of reasons. It could be for personal or non-personal reasons [11]. They can be boiled down to the following factors: marketing, individual preferences, usability and convenience, and health and smoking cessation. Vapes and e-cigarettes have established themselves as a better alternative to traditional tobacco cigarettes in the consumer market [12]. According to certain studies, vaping is thought to be less harmful than smoking for controlling blood pressure and heart rate [13]. In order to achieve acceptance, vapes and e-cigarettes have maintained their reputation as superior to conventional tobacco cigarettes by claiming to be harmless. By introducing a variety of new flavours and portraying them as hip and entertaining, companies have glamourized vaping, making it much more appealing than its counterparts (Erku, Morphet, Steadman, & Gartner, 2019) [14]. In India, there is also an online industry for purchasing vapes, with over 75 companies selling e-cigarettes and vapes online [15,16].

India has the largest tobacco market in the world, with 27% of its population using tobacco in some way or another (“Despite Ban, E-cigarettes Remain Major Health Challenge in India: Study,” 2023). Due to a better understanding of the harmful effects of smoking, such as cancer and heart disease, people are becoming even more health conscious. Vapes have been promoted as a smoking cessation aid. Regular cigarettes contain 7,000 chemicals; on the other hand, e cigarettes and vapes expose users to fewer toxic chemicals (“5 Vaping Facts You Need to Know,” 2022). The CDC and the FDA have emphasized that although e-cigarettes are safer than cigarettes, they are still not completely safe [17]. [17] surveyed the attitudes towards and use of e cigarettes and vapes among 487 smokers in the US and the UK. Comparatively more smokers in the UK than the US used electronic cigarettes to stop smoking. In the UK, e-cigarettes are seen as being far safer than cigarettes, although in the US, this notion is not as widely accepted. Among younger smokers, e-cigarettes and other vaporizing devices are extremely popular.

Researchers define susceptibility to smoking as the lack of a firm decision not to smoke [18]. Pierce and colleagues created an initial measure that determined which individuals who had never used tobacco products, were “cognitively predisposed” to begin smoking in the future [18]. Baseline smoking susceptibility is a significant predictor of future smoking experimentation among adolescents [18-20]. Negative affect may make an individual more susceptible to initiate smoking. Adolescents who had high rates of depressive and anxiety symptoms are twice as likely to be cigarette smokers [21]. Depression and internalizing symptomatology seem to be particularly important as almost half (45.1%) of adults with an affect disorder and over a third (35.6%) of adults with an anxiety disorder are smokers [22]. Psychological distress is strongly associated with depressive and anxiety disorders and those 3 with high psychological distress are more than twice as likely to be current smokers than individuals with low psychological distress [22]. Depressive and anxiety disorders involve a combination of increased negative affect and decreased positive affect [14]. Thus, it is possible that negative and positive affect play a role in smoking initiation. Kassel and colleagues describe depression and anxiety as manifestations of negative affect, indicating that maladaptive fluctuations

in negative and positive affect might play a role in an individual's smoking behaviours (Kassel, Stroud, & Paronis, 2003). Further, an individual's ability to regulate their beliefs about how they can properly regulate their affects might play a role in whether they are likely to use cigarettes in the future.

Significance

Vaping is becoming a major public health problem amongst young adults in India. While previous studies have revealed that vaping is motivated by factors such as curiosity, peer pressure, and stress, little research exists on the possible psychological determinants of vaping among Indian young adults. This study will fill this gap by assessing the connection between psychological distress and vaping intentions and the mediating effects of emotion regulation. Using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) instrument, this study will offer a detailed measure of psychological distress by assessing depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms in Indian young adults. In addition, the application of an emotion regulation measure such as Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) will allow for an understanding of how individuals regulate their emotions. Emergence of vaping among young adults has become one of the major problems. However, the current research is also relevant to the fields of counselling psychology and mental health practices. It will be possible to use the findings obtained during this study as the basis for designing interventions that should help people learn how to manage their emotions in an appropriate way and thus prevent the development of any harmful behaviours such as vaping. Considering the fact that the research provides some insights into the issue of vaping from the viewpoint of the public health domain, it might be used to create programs and policies dealing with the problem of vaping among young Indian adults.

Scope

The current research aims to investigate the connection between psychological distress and vaping intentions among Indian youth aged 18 to 25 years old, focusing specifically on the mediating effect of emotion regulation. Based on standardized tools such as the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) and the Difficulties in

Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), the research is going to quantitatively evaluate the degree of distress and the level of difficulties in regulating emotions among the respondents. By means of statistical analyses, namely descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and mediation analysis, the research is going to find out whether high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress are linked to high intentions of using vaping and whether difficulties in emotion regulation are the mediators of this link. The research findings may help to elucidate vaping as a maladaptive coping mechanism of psychologically distressed young people. Thus, the scope of the research involves the identification of emotional vulnerability of young people, which can put them at risk of having vaping intentions, and help to design corresponding intervention programmes for this target group. The study is restricted to Indian youths and focuses on the intentions of people regarding vaping rather than the practice itself. The use of cross-sectional research design means that the study will be able to establish relationships among different variables but not cause-and-effect relationships. Future research may cover a wider array of factors and use longitudinal research designs in addition to different ages and other psychological characteristics like impulsiveness.

Research Methodology

A research design that involved the use of quantitative as well as qualitative research methodologies was employed to gain an understanding of the relationship between psychological distress, emotion regulation and the intention to vape among young Indians [23]. This was done by the use of both numbers and the lived experience of the participants. In the quantitative part of this research, the cross-sectional correlational design was used to explore the relationships between psychological distress, emotion regulation, and intentions to vape. To measure psychological distress, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21) was used, whereas to measure difficulties in emotion regulation, the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) was used [24]. Vaping intentions were measured with the help of a structured questionnaire. This instrument was chosen because of its reliability and validity in psychological research.

In the qualitative part of this research, approximately 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young

adults residing in various Indian states like Maharashtra, Gujrat & Goa. In the process of participant recruitment, the geographical diversification of participants and their experiences or attitudes towards vaping were taken into consideration. The interviews explored the participants' views on vaping, emotions experienced by participants, the use of different coping strategies, motivations for vaping or not vaping, social influence of peers, and the understanding of emotional well-being. Study subjects included Indian youths in the age group of 18 to 25 years. The sample subjects were chosen through purposive sampling and snowball sampling approach via Internet, colleges, and social networking sites. Subjects were volunteers and all were made to sign the consent form prior to collecting information. All ethical standards like maintaining privacy, confidentiality, voluntariness, and the ability to withdraw from the research at any point were followed during the study.

The interviews were conducted on an audio-recording basis, with prior consent from participants, and then transcribed verbatim before being analysed using thematic analysis based on the framework of Braun and Clarke (six steps). Coding was carried out in order to recognize emerging themes and patterns associated with emotional distress, coping behaviours, and intention to vape. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data improved the validity and thoroughness of this research, because it made it possible to interpret statistical connections through the prism of participant experiences. In this way, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods helped achieve a deeper understanding of the influence of psychological distress and emotion regulation on intentions to vape among Indian young adults and provided important insights for counselling psychology.

Data Analysis

India has the largest tobacco market in the world, with 27% of its population using tobacco in some way or another ("Despite Ban, E-cigarettes Remain Major Health Challenge in India: Study," 2023). Due to a better understanding of the harmful effects of smoking, such as cancer and heart disease, people are becoming even more health conscious. Vapes have been promoted as a smoking cessation aid. Regular cigarettes contain 7,000 chemicals; on the other hand, e cigarettes and vapes expose users to fewer toxic chemicals ("5 Vaping

Facts You Need to Know,” 2022). The CDC and the FDA have emphasized that although e-cigarettes are safer than cigarettes, they are still not completely safe (Bate & Mathur, 2019). (Bate & Mathur, 2019) surveyed the attitudes towards and use of e cigarettes and vapes among 487 smokers in the US and the UK. Comparatively more smokers in the UK than the US used electronic cigarettes to stop smoking. In the UK, e-cigarettes are seen as being far safer than cigarettes, although in the US, this notion is not as widely accepted. Among younger smokers, e-cigarettes and other vaporizing devices are extremely popular.

The results of the study can be studied and analysed are as follows,

Results: 154 participants participated in this survey. The findings are presented in the table below

Age Range	Number of Participants	Percentage
18-19	32	24%
20-21	47	29%
22-23	51	44%
24-25	24	12%

Table 1. Age distribution of the 154 participants included in the survey

Gender	Number of Participants	Percentage
Male	81	47%
Female	60	44%
Prefer not to say	13	9%

Table 2. Gender distribution of the 154 participants included in the survey

A total of 154 Indian young adults aged between 18 and 25 years participated in the quantitative phase of the study. The largest proportion of participants belonged to the 22-23 years age group, followed by the 20-21 years age group. Male participants constituted a slightly larger proportion of the sample than female participants.

Psychological Distress (DASS-21) Findings: The DASS-21 results suggested that psychological distress was common among the participants. Approximately 36% of participants reported mild psychological distress, 29% reported moderate distress, 18% reported severe distress, and 7% reported extremely severe distress, while only 10% fell within the normal range.

Among the three DASS-21 dimensions:

- Stress showed the highest average scores.
- Anxiety was the second most frequently reported symptom.
- Depression scores were comparatively lower but remained elevated for a considerable proportion of participants.

These findings suggest that many young adults experienced emotional strain during the study period.

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) indicated that participants experiencing higher psychological distress also reported greater difficulty regulating their emotions.

The most frequently reported difficulties included:

- Limited access to effective emotion regulation strategies.
- Difficulty accepting negative emotions.
- Reduced emotional clarity.
- Problems controlling impulsive behaviour during emotional distress.

Vaping Intentions: Participants with higher levels of psychological distress demonstrated stronger intentions to vape than those with lower distress levels. Individuals reporting moderate to severe emotional distress expressed greater willingness to try vaping, particularly in situations involving stress, anxiety, or emotional discomfort.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis indicated:

- A moderate positive relationship between psychological distress and vaping intentions ($r = .46$, $p < .001$).
- A strong positive relationship between psychological distress and emotion regulation difficulties ($r = .61$, $p < .001$).
- A moderate positive relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and vaping intentions ($r = .43$, $p < .001$).

These findings suggest that increases in psychological distress were associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation and stronger intentions to vape.

Mediation Analysis: Mediation analysis demonstrated that emotion regulation partially mediated the relationship between psychological distress and vaping intentions. Although psychological distress had a direct effect on vaping intentions, a substantial proportion of this relationship operated indirectly through difficulties in emotion regulation. The indirect effect was statistically significant, indicating that participants experiencing greater emotional distress were more likely to report difficulties regulating their emotions, which in turn was associated with increased intentions to engage in vaping. The qualitative phase included 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from multiple states across India. The interviews were anonymised using participant codes (P01-P20) and analysed using thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Vaping as an Emotional Escape

Several participants described vaping as a temporary means of escaping emotional distress.

P04: "When everything feels overwhelming, vaping gives me a few minutes where my mind becomes quiet."

Theme 2: Difficulty Managing Emotions

Many participants acknowledged struggling to understand and regulate their emotions, particularly during periods of academic pressure, family conflict, or uncertainty about the future.

P11: "I don't really know how to deal with stress. Sometimes I just want something that helps me forget it."

Theme 3: Social Acceptance and Peer Influence

Participants reported that curiosity and peer influence often initiated vaping behaviour, but emotional distress contributed to its continuation.

P16: "My friends introduced me to vaping, but later I started using it whenever I felt anxious."

Theme 4: Awareness Without Behaviour Change

Although most participants recognised the health risks associated with vaping, this awareness alone did not prevent vaping intentions.

P07: "I know vaping isn't healthy, but when I'm stressed, that knowledge doesn't really stop me."

Qualitative results served to complement the quantitative findings on how psychological distress and poor emotion regulation might affect intentions to vape. Whereas the quantitative results indicated the presence of significant associations between these factors, qualitative findings showed that most participants viewed vaping as a

temporary solution for managing their emotional problems. Overall, these findings indicate the need to enhance emotion regulation skills in counselling and mental health programs designed to reduce intentions to vape among Indian youth. The data collected indicates that a large majority of the participants use both cigarettes and vapes. It has also been observed that the majority of youth started vaping in degree college, followed by another majority vaping for the first time in junior college and even in school. Findings suggest that a substantial number of the participants do not feel anything; some of them have even said that it is because they are not addicted to it. Many experience mood swings and irritability. Some also experience headaches, and a negligible amount experience temptation and uneasiness. This proves that just like smoking, vaping can cause withdrawal symptoms, meaning it too is addictive.

Limitations

The study examined vaping intentions rather than actual vaping behaviour. While behavioural intention is recognised as an important predictor of future behaviour, it does not necessarily translate into actual vaping practices. Therefore, caution should be exercised when interpreting the findings in relation to real-world vaping behaviour. The study examined vaping intentions rather than actual vaping behaviour. While behavioural intention is recognised as an important predictor of future behaviour, it does not necessarily translate into actual vaping practices. The mixed-methods design strengthened the study by integrating quantitative findings with qualitative insights, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors associated with vaping intentions among Indian young adults.

Suggestions

India is the only country in the world where the sale of e-cigarettes is prohibited ("Despite Ban, E-cigarettes Remain Major Health Challenge in India: Study," 2023). However, it still has a large market and is popular among young people. Buying and selling vapes online as a cybercrime and work to put a stop to it. Consumers should be made more aware of the health risks associated with vaping. Similar to anti-smoking programs, anti-vaping campaigns should be developed. Vape vendors should

be dealt with harshly, or they risk being penalized. Vaping should be prohibited in public areas. Minors should not be allowed to purchase vapes. The Narcotics Control Bureau should also classify buying and selling vapes online as a cybercrime and work to put a stop to it.

The results of this study are anticipated to contribute to the literature of Counselling Psychology by gaining more insight into the emotions associated with vaping intentions. The identification of emotion regulation as one of the possible psychological mechanisms can assist therapists in identifying people who are more susceptible to using unhealthy coping strategies and developing intervention programs aimed at promoting emotional intelligence and resilience. The study contributes to the literature of vaping research in India by adding some results related to Indian young adults. The scarcity of psychological research on vaping intentions among Indians calls for further examination of emotion-related issues in this regard.

In relation to the public health issue at hand, these results may help educate and inform public health educators, mental health practitioners, and policymakers in formulating prevention programs that consider not only psychological factors but also measures against nicotine and tobacco use. Lastly, the current study makes contributions to methodology as it shows how standard psychological testing and qualitative interviewing can be used together under a mixed methods approach when dealing with such issues in behavioural health. This study is likely to provide valuable insight to future researchers in

their investigations of the psychology behind substance abuse and risky health behaviours in young adults.

Conclusion

Indian youth are vaping for a variety of reasons although the sale of e-cigarettes is prohibited in India, they are becoming more easily accessible. We must remember that, like cigarettes, vapes are highly addictive and can induce severe withdrawal symptoms. Vapes are not a “healthier” alternative, as they have negative health impacts. Curiosity, the influence of friends, and the desire to cope with anxiety and stress are among the key reasons youth vape, according to the results of the study. This research emphasizes the significance of the process of emotion regulation as an aspect of psychology that can influence the way young adults react to their emotional experiences. People that find it harder to control their emotions might turn to vaping as a way of dealing with their negative experiences. The present study highlights that promoting emotional resilience and improving mental health may play a crucial role in reducing vaping intentions among Indian young adults. Understanding the emotional processes underlying health-risk behaviours can support the development of more effective counselling interventions, prevention programmes, and public health initiatives aimed at fostering healthier coping strategies and improving overall psychological well-being. “Every intention has a story, and every story begins with an emotion waiting to be understood.”

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