

An Opinion on E-Cigarettes by Dynasty Winters



“In the absence of any regulation, the e-cigarette manufacturers have acted as if it’s the Wild, Wild West, with no rules and no restraints,” said Matthew Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. Although changing daily, there are about 466 brands of e-cigs currently on the market today making them the “hottest” thing out right now. According to researchers from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the number of youth using e-cigs in 2011 was 79,000, but over the course of only two years that number tripled to 263,000 in 2013. How is this possible? “Gateway to Addiction?,” a report composed of survey responses from various e-cig manufacturers, states that all of the eight largest e-cigarette companies use social media, candy flavored products and endorsing events populated by youth as a way to gain their biggest consumers: the youth. As a student at UNC-Charlotte, I’ve noticed an excessive number of students walking around campus smoking their e-cigarettes. With the increase in students using e-cigarettes, sometimes even in the classrooms, the school has added them to its non-smoking policy, restricting students to only the designated smoking areas. As a Public Health major, I feel it is important to promote healthy living and wellness. Electronic-cigarettes, and the related e-hookah, that create and maintain nicotine addiction, among other potential harmful health impacts, do not fit into this equation.

Piña Colada, Cherry Crush, Chocolate Treat, Peach Schnapps, Java Jolt, Grape, Cola and even Cookies & Cream Milkshake are a few flavors of products sold by various e-cigarette companies. What’s most disturbing about these flavors is that these are not only common candy flavors but Icee flavors as well. One spokesperson for an e-cigarette company, stated, “We have taken many steps to limit exposure of individuals under age 18 to our advertising and promotional activities and to prevent them from purchasing our electronic cigarette products.” However, it is no coincidence that these companies are using these sweet and sugary flavors to appeal to youth. One of the large e-cigarette manufacturers has even gone as far as sponsoring motor sports competitions, youth-oriented parties and music festivals.

The tobacco industry has used their manipulative marketing strategies for decades to get in the minds of youth, and now they have a new approach: social media. Teens are constantly on their phones using Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. A recent study conducted by Pew Research

Center showed that 73% of teens are on a social network. E-cigarette companies are using this to their advantage with product placement, and advertising free product samples on the various social media sites. Not to mention the recent advertisement by a well-known e-cig brand in *Sports Illustrated* magazine that pictured women in bikinis. In the past year, a few of the companies have spent more than \$50 million dollars combined on their marketing tactics. Many of the e-cigarette companies has made it their number one priority to make their product “convenient” for their consumers by allowing their products to have “the ability to recharge anytime, anywhere.” After visiting various websites, I found it alarming how easy it was to order as many as five packs of the e-cigarettes. Their way “to prevent them (youth) from purchasing our electronic cigarette products” is by asking the simple question “are you at least 18 years old?” a question that can effortlessly be bypassed by many teens.

The time is now that we take the initiative and stop the proliferation of e-cigarette use among youth through instituting local tobacco-free policies and support regulation of these now un-regulated products. In North Carolina, e-cigarettes are considered a tobacco product, according to youth access laws, so they are included in tobacco-free ordinances and polices. Allowing these e-cigarette manufacturers to influence the minds of our current generation will reverse the successes of the many years of effort in keeping the numbers of teen smokers incredibly low. In the recent study conducted by the CDC, “among non-smoking youth who had tried electronic cigarettes, 43.9 percent said they intended to smoke conventional cigarettes within the next year, compared with 21.5 percent of those who had never used e-cigarettes.” The e-cig industry is working hard to make us believe that their products are safe, but that is precisely the tactic Big Tobacco was using in the 50s with their campaigns around doctors choosing one brand over another because they were "smoother" or "milder." Research shows that e-cig users have not, in fact used them to quit, but are dual-users of cigarettes and e-cigs. It's our job to protect our children from dangers until research can offer us any proof that these products are safe.

Dynasty Winters is a sophomore student at UNC-Charlotte studying Public Health and Spanish. In High school, she was an active youth advocate for social justice in her community. Following college, Dynasty hopes to attend law school.