

E-cig companies use cartoon characters as logos, and new study shows it works

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Vaping by teens and other youth is on the rise. Credit: [a class="source" href="https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/vape-teenager-young-cute-girl-casual-1415983061">Alexandr Yu/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/vape-teenager-young-cute-girl-casual-1415983061)

Electronic cigarette use, or vaping, is [unsafe for children, adolescents and young adults](#). Electronic cigarettes often contain nicotine and other harmful substances. [Nicotine](#) is addictive and can curb [adolescent brain development](#), which continues into young adulthood. The leading electronic cigarette company [insists it is not targeting youth](#) as customers.

[I study](#) ways to inform [public health](#) and policy by using [data from social media](#). As part of my research, I monitor the marketing material from tobacco companies, including electronic cigarette companies' posts to Instagram, Twitter and YouTube—all platforms frequently [used by young people](#).

Last year, [my colleagues](#) and I reported that electronic cigarette companies are using [cartoons as a marketing strategy](#), and that many companies' logos are [cartoons](#). This suggests that cartoons are important to their brand identity.

Cartoon marketing for e-cigs is unregulated

Restrictions on cartoon marketing for combustible cigarettes and chewing tobacco [have been in place since 1999](#). However, no such restrictions apply to electronic cigarettes.

In our follow-up study, recently published in [Drug and Alcohol Dependence](#), we examined the relationship between exposure to electronic cigarette marketing with cartoons and susceptibility to use such products in the future among young adults 18 to 25 years of age.

We recruited participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a web-based platform often used for experimental and survey research that has been [shown to provide reliable data](#).

Participants (802 young adults) reported whether they had used electronic cigarettes in their lifetime, in the past six months and in the past 30 days. Those who had not used electronic cigarettes in their lifetime were categorized as "never users" (286 [young adults](#)) and were the focus of the study.

We wanted to determine if participants' susceptibility to use electronic cigarettes in the future increased as a result of their exposure to cartoon-based marketing from electronic cigarette companies. Susceptibility was measured by responses to a series of questions such as, "Do you think that you will try vaping soon?"

Participants were presented with 22 images of electronic cigarette products. Eleven of the product images contained cartoons on the packaging, and 11 contained a noncartoon image. For each image, participants were asked to endorse whether or not they had seen the product before.

Thirty-eight percent of participants in our study recognized at least one cartoon-based marketing image. We found that among never-users, individuals who reported cartoon recognition were four times more likely to be susceptible to using electronic cigarettes in the future compared to those not susceptible.

We did not find a relationship between recognition of noncartoon images and susceptibility to use electronic cigarettes in the future. In other words, among never-users, recognition of actual cartoon-based marketing images—but not recognition of noncartoon-based marketing images—was associated with a greater likelihood of participants reporting susceptibility to use electronic cigarettes.

We controlled for other factors, including demographic characteristics, exposure to other types of marketing, that may be associated with

susceptibility to use electronic cigarettes, allowing us to confidently claim that cartoon recognition is associated with susceptibility.

Our findings are consistent with prior research that examined the impact of cartoon-based marketing on the purchase and use of a range of products from [combustible cigarettes](#) to [sugary foods](#).

The power of a welcoming character

Our study could not explain why cartoon recognition would be associated with susceptibility to use [electronic cigarette use](#) in the future, but earlier research suggests several possible reasons. For one, cartoons may be a simple communication of ideas (fun, exciting, welcoming) that can increase attention to product packaging. This ultimately leads to increased [product recognition and may alter attitudes](#).

Also, MTurk's recruitment is restricted to adults and may not be representative of the general population in the U.S. In the future, we plan to expand this research among samples across age groups including teenagers. Our study design was correlational and could not determine causality, meaning we found a correlation between seeing cartoon-based marketing and participants' susceptibility to using electronic cigarettes, but we can't say the marketing caused that [susceptibility](#).

The Food and Drug Administration is developing ways to best [regulate electronic cigarettes](#). Many experts in the public health community are actively trying to determine if electronic cigarettes help adult smokers quit combustible cigarettes or [serve as a gateway product](#) to smoking among youth.

While research on the public health impact of [electronic cigarettes](#) will continue for some time, it is clear that [nicotine](#) use of any kind is known to be addictive and harmful to young people's brain development.

We believe that our findings could motivate policies aimed at reducing cartoon-based electronic cigarette marketing similar to those for combustible cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

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