

Examining the impact of applicant smoking and vaping habits in job interviews

September 10 2021



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Legally protected characteristics such as race, gender, or sexual orientation cannot be used by companies to discriminate against job applicants. However, regardless of the presence or absence of formal

protections, many biases seep through based on hiring managers' personal subjectivity—indeed, surface level cues like body piercings, tattoos, and smoking can negatively impact applicants' job prospects.

Dr. Namita Bhatnagar, Professor and F. Ross Johnson Fellow of Marketing at the Asper School of Business and co-author Dr. Nicolas Roulin, Saint Mary's University, conducted two studies in Canada and the U.S. to examine interviewer reactions to cigarette and electronic-cigarette [smokers](#). Their work titled Examining the impact of [applicant](#) smoking and vaping habits in job interviews was recently published in *Human Relations*.

The authors used video-based interview simulations (with actors portraying [job applicants](#) and study participants enacting the role of interviewers) paired with eye tracking technology to look for "smokerism" and "vaperism" biases through various interview stages. They further investigated whether potential biases intensify when an applicant is not only a smoker but also belongs to an ethnic minority group.

Study results showed that applicants classified as smokers were deemed as less qualified on unrelated attributes as soon as the interview started. While both cigarette smokers and vapers received discriminatory initial assessments, this phenomenon was more pronounced for [cigarette smokers](#). These early impressions served as "anchors" and persisted through the interview to impact final assessments. Final assessments are key to ultimate job offers. While a strong interview benefited applicants, this was not enough to wash away smoking related biases. On an encouraging note, however, participants within a broad U.S. sample (many with hiring experience) did not judge the minority community applicant (portrayed by an East Indian actor) any differently than the majority ethnicity one (portrayed by a Caucasian actor).

"These findings are a product of the public conversations surrounding cigarette and [e-cigarette use](#)," said Professor Namita Bhatnagar.

"Historically, [public health](#) messaging has relied on stigmatization and shame-based dissuasion. For instance, public anti-smoking sentiments gained traction as evidence for the dangers of second-hand cigarette smoke emerged and public health campaigns successfully framed smokers as killers of non-smokers. A consequence has been the creation of a stigmatized group that faces biases and discrimination in spheres as far reaching as healthcare provision, professional and interpersonal interactions, and as shown in this research, access to employment. Questions have recently arisen around the ethics of stigma-based campaigns given the threats to [human rights](#), creation of societal divides, "othering," and associated communication breakdowns, and the possibility of push back or intensification of stigmatized behaviors."

Findings of this research carry real world implications for many affected parties. A significant portion of the population continues to smoke cigarettes, and vaping has gained popularity amongst both adults and (worryingly) youths. There are also many avenues for smoking status disclosure in the real and virtual worlds, and especially so given the prevalence of social media use and cyber vetting by recruiters. In addition to making personal health related assessments, smokers and vapers need to be aware of the impact of their leisure-based activities in important contexts such as employment access. Recruiters would benefit from [bias](#) awareness and de-stigmatization training. And importantly, public health marketers can explore alternative non-stigma tactics that balance the need for dissuasion with that of unfounded bias mitigation.

More information: Nicolas Roulin et al, Examining the impact of applicant smoking and vaping habits in job interviews, *Human Relations* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0018726720912320](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720912320)

Provided by University of Manitoba

Citation: Examining the impact of applicant smoking and vaping habits in job interviews (2021, September 10) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-09-impact-applicant-vaping-habits-job.html>

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