

Behavioural determinants of vaping among young people in North Yorkshire: Insights for effective intervention

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Introduction

Youth vaping is of concern due to its association with smoking, addiction to nicotine, and exposure to unnecessary health risks due to the unknown long-term impact of vaping¹.

The proportion of young people (aged 11-17) who have ever vaped has remained stable from 2023-2024². However, regular use of vapes (i.e., more than once a week) has increased among young people in the UK from 2.1% in 2021 to 4.2% in 2024². Additionally, the current rate of regular vaping among 11-15-year-olds in North Yorkshire (9%) is higher than the national average (4.6%)³.

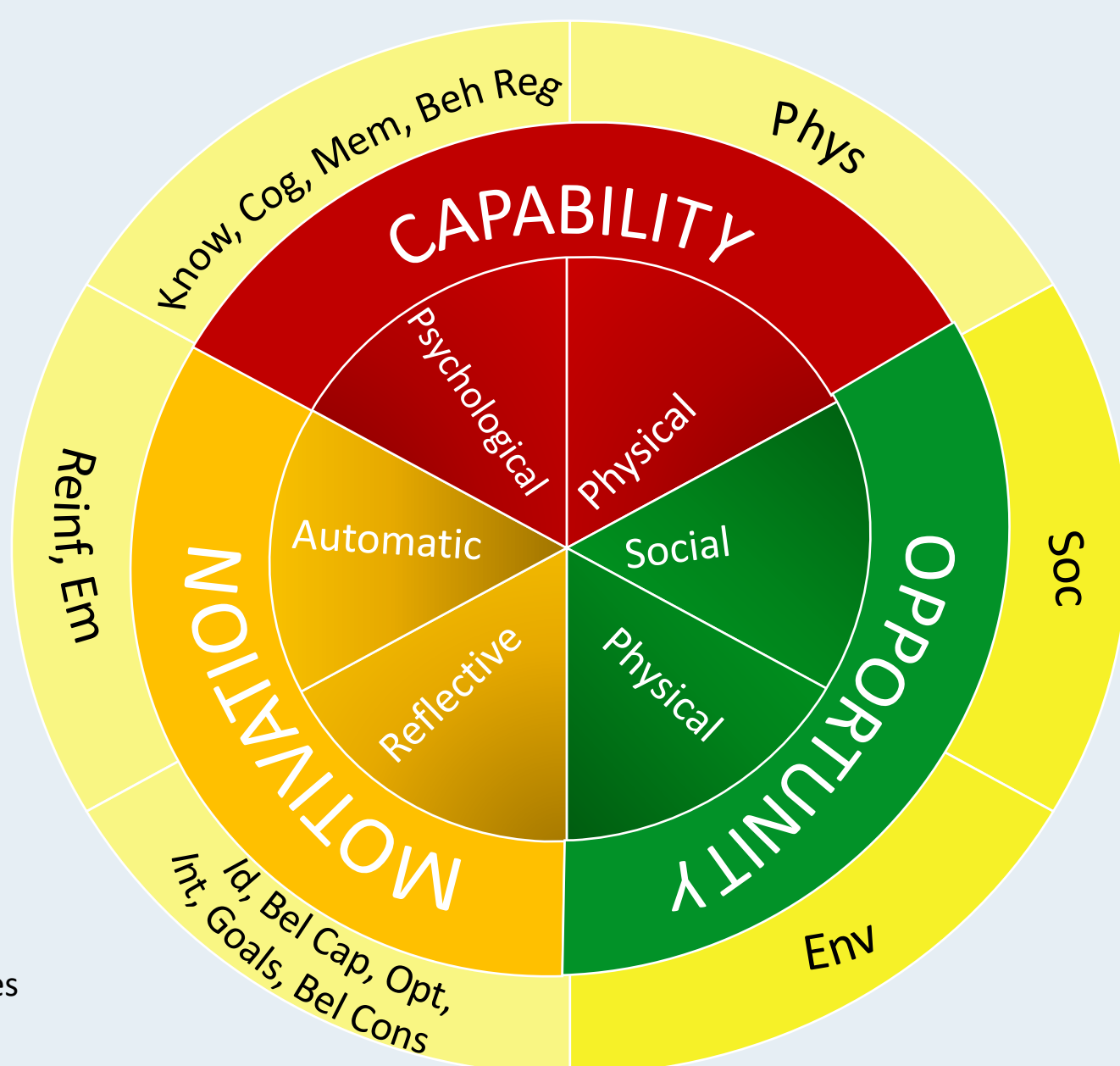
Objectives

This work sought to identify opportunities for intervention to reduce youth vaping in North Yorkshire through understanding the behavioural determinants of regular vaping among this population.

Methods

A behavioural science informed methodology was used to gather insights from 64 boys and girls (aged 11-16) in North Yorkshire. Focus groups discussions identified barriers to and facilitators of the regular use of vapes.

Data were thematically analysed using the Capability, Opportunity, Motivation, and Behaviour (COM-B) model and Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF)⁴.



Soc – Social Influences
Env – Environmental Context and Resources
Id – Social/Professional Role and Identity
Bel Cap – Beliefs and Capabilities
Opt – Optimism
Int – Intentions
Goals – Goals
Bel Con – Beliefs about Consequences
Reinf – Reinforcement
Em – Emotion
Know – Knowledge
Cog – Cognitive and Interpersonal Skills
Mem – Memory, Attention, and Decision Processes
Beh Reg – Behavioural Regulation
Phys – Physical Skills

Findings

CAPABILITY

Knowledge: Health implications

Vaping is generally understood to be harmful to health, but some misconceptions are held, for example, “*The nicotine (in vapes) doesn’t actually do anything to you*” and “*it causes black lungs*.” There is also worry about the unknown long-term impact, for example “*(...) it took, what, 30 or 40 years to realise how bad cigarettes were? So, no one knows how bad they are.*”

Skills: Managing nicotine addiction

Nicotine is recognised as highly addictive. “*It’s just not a thing that you can control...*” It is difficult for users to stop, especially with support. “*(...) if someone is so addicted, they will do anything and everything to get a hold of nicotine (...) unless you sit them down and fully help them, they’re still going to do it.*”

OPPORTUNITY

Social influences: peers and parents

Wanting to fit in with peers can prevent vaping, “*if surrounded by people that don’t do it, it’s a bit embarrassing, you know, it’s looked down upon*” or enable it through peer pressure, “*they (peers) can like, take the mick out of you... it’s not as easy as ‘just say no’*”. Further, vaping is used as a common ground to manage new social settings, “*it makes things less awkward like through public (...) If you’re in public with people you don’t know like meeting new friends and you all have like vapes and trade vapes and it makes things less awkward...*” Parents who vape indirectly and directly enable their child to vape, “*It seems alright because mum’s doing it. So, it seems like you want to do it because your mum just lets you buy it.*”

Environment: A context conducive to vaping

The marketing of vapes is appealing to young people, for example “*Oh, like the flavours, they’re like, for kids, like skittles*” and “*It’s got colourful packaging so it’s like, more attractive to kids*.” Also, under-18s can easily buy vapes at shops, “*You can get served at a lot of shops being whatever age...*” which leads to repeated purchasing, “*They also sort of started making like a connection with the shopkeeper, which made them keep going back and stuff.*” Punitive-only approaches in schools do not work to prevent or stop vaping, “*If they like, tell you off and punish you loads that probably won’t like encourage you to stop.*” Discreet nicotine addiction support is needed, “*Having like, a safe person, because there’s a lot of people who want to stop, but they don’t want to tell an adult because they might get in trouble...*”

MOTIVATION

Emotion: Vaping to feel good

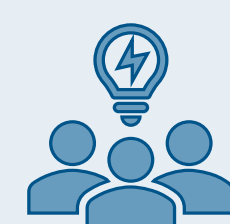
Vaping can give short-term positive feelings, “*So, like because when you do vape it gives you like an all-time high.*” It is also used to cope with stress, “*...like people I’ve met like... they do it to help stress*” or similarly, as a distraction, “*Something to do to take your mind off things.*”

Identity: Visibility and discretion

Certain social perceptions influence who is seen as a typical vaper, including social class “*the more chavvier you are, the more likely you are to*”, involvement in sports, “*(...) sports and stuff. A lot of the boys don’t do it in our year because of that...*”, and academic achievement, “*the lower the grades, the more likely.*” However, perceptions are influenced by how certain groups vape, for example, “*people that are doing as well in school will not brag about doing it but will just do it and everyone knows that they do it more type of thing.*”

Conclusions & Next Steps

There are several opportunities for a multi-systems approach to primary and secondary prevention including legislative measures, educational campaigns, support systems, and access regulation. Next steps include:



Developing co-produced educational resources that incorporate behaviour change techniques including, but not limited to, refusal skills, knowledge about addiction, and coping strategies for stress.



Working with secondary schools to support the development of non-punitive responses to student vaping.



Interviewing with Trading Standards and vape retailers to better understand IDing practices to identify opportunities to reduce under-18's access to vapes.

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