

# Stigma toward e-cigarette use: Vaping is negatively perceived similarly to cigarette smoking

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## Abstract

In the current study, an experimental survey assessed participants' perceptions of a target who smoked e-cigarettes, traditional cigarettes, both, or neither. Nonsmoker participants demonstrated significantly more negative impressions of both e-cigarette and traditional cigarette users, whereas active smokers only rated traditional cigarette smokers more negatively.

## Background

While previous research has established a clear social stigma against traditional cigarette smokers, very few studies to date have examined the stigma surrounding e-cigarette use.

Given that e-cigarettes have been explicitly marketed as a more socially desirable and safer alternative to smoking traditional cigarettes, it is unclear whether or not they carry the same negative connotations. E-cigarette use has continued to gain popularity in recent years, especially in youth, which increases the need for immediate research in the field.



Our study aimed to increase understanding of stigma towards e-cigarette use and how it compares to traditional cigarettes. This study also explored how perceptions vary based on personal smoking habits. Specifically, an experimental survey assessed participants' perceptions of a male or female target who smoked e-cigarettes, traditional cigarettes, both, or neither.

## Method

In a 2 X 2 X 2 independent groups experimental design, participants were randomly presented with a male or female target who was a nonsmoker or used e-cigarettes, traditional cigarettes, or both.

A total of 285 participants were recruited through MTurk. They were predominantly European American (70.8%) and evenly divided by gender (52.1% female) with an average age of 25.09. In the previous 30 days, 68.5% of participants were nonsmokers, 6.1% exclusively used e-cigarettes, 12.2% exclusively smoked traditional cigarettes, and 13.2% used both products.

Stigma was measured on a sliding scale from 1-4 by participants ratings the degree to which they would be willing to engage in various behaviors such as renting a room or being a worked on the same job as the target individual. ( 1= less stigma; 4 = greater stigma).

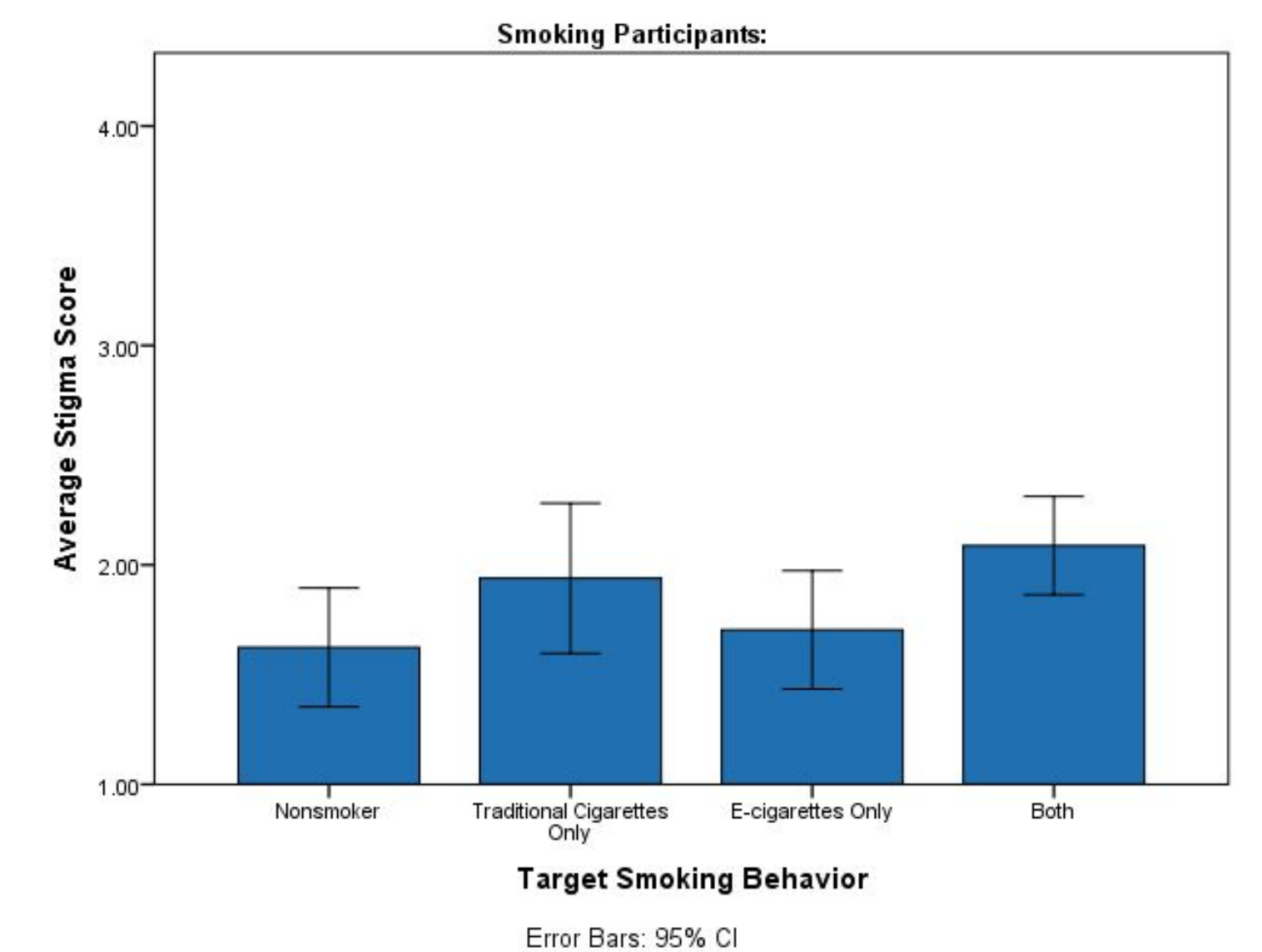
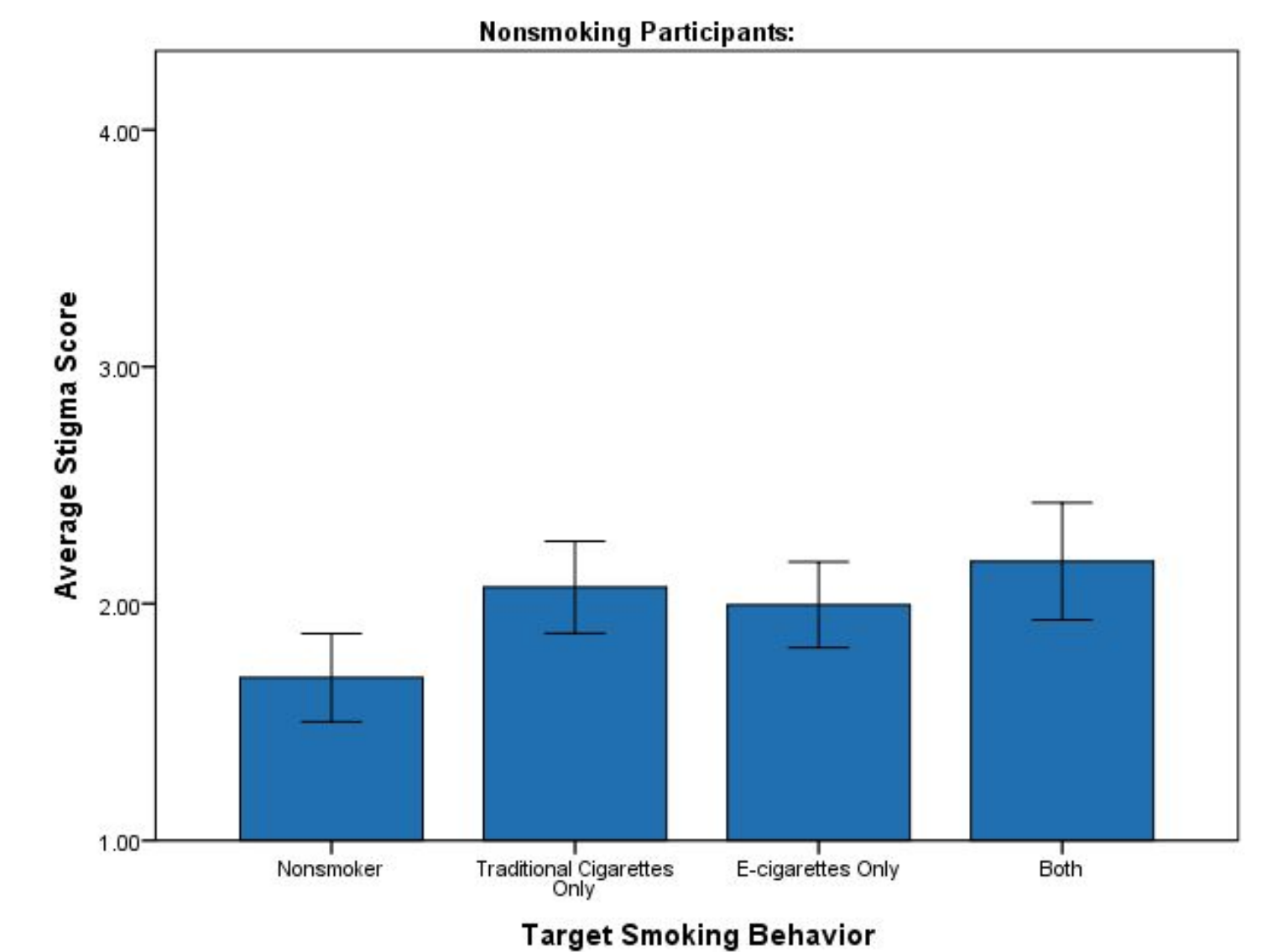
Perceptions of the target's personality were assessed by the average of ten traits with each item being presented as 1 = more negative and 5= more positive (e.g., unintelligent-intelligent, unattractive-attractive, etc).

## Results

Among nonsmokers, there were two main effects revealing that ratings of stigma were higher both toward targets who used e-cigarettes ( $F(1,127) = 4.21, p = .042$ ) and toward targets who smoked traditional cigarettes ( $F(1,127) = 8.07, p = .005$ .)

Similarly, there were two main effects for trait ratings, where the overall impression was more negative for both those who used e-cigarettes ( $F(1,127) = 11.50, p = .001$ ) and for targets who smoked traditional cigarettes ( $F(1,127) = 8.15, p = .005$ .)

Among smokers, there were significant main effects showing more negative stigma and trait ratings *only for smoking traditional cigarettes* ( $F(1,127) = 6.33, p = .015; F(1,127) = 7.33, p = .009$ ), with no significant differences in stigma or trait ratings for e-cigarette use ( $F(1,127) = 0.68, p = .415; F(1,127) = 0.21, p = .884$ ), and no significant interactions.



## Discussion

Among nonsmokers, e-cigarettes appear to carry a relatively strong social stigma similar to that of traditional cigarettes.

In contrast, individuals who currently use e-cigarettes, traditional cigarettes, or both, do not negatively stigmatize e-cigarettes. It is likely that these participants believe e-cigarettes are a more acceptable form of nicotine delivery.