

**#Vaping  
saved my  
Life**

**EXPLORING VAPING AS A VIABLE METHOD  
TO HELP SOUTH AFRICANS STOP  
SMOKING**

**A PILOT SOCIAL EXPERIMENT FROM VAPING SAVED MY LIFE**



## 01 INTRODUCTION

The South African Government introduced the Control of Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Bill in 2018, seeking to pass legislation that effectively treats vaping devices the same as traditional cigarettes, despite scientific evidence showing that they have vastly different risk profiles. Earlier this year, the government also announced plans to introduce a new tax on vaping products of at least R2.90 per millilitre from 1 January 2023. This too puts vaping in the same taxation category as smoking.

### DID YOU KNOW?

One in five South Africans smoke and/or use tobacco products?<sup>1</sup>

Vaping Saved My Life (VSML), a consumer advocacy group, conducted a social experiment among eight participants that saw them being challenged to use vaping as a way to give up smoking over a 90-day period.

The aim of the experiment was to demonstrate to the public and policymakers that vaping can be used to help people quit smoking. Vaping is likely 95% safer than smoking<sup>2</sup>, which in itself means that it should be considered a useful harm reduction method for those who wish to stop smoking but have so far been unable to give up using other methods.

According to the Centres for Disease Control in the US, while the option of quitting the use of tobacco-based products is something many smokers consider at some point, very few are successful<sup>3</sup>.

While research continues on the longer-term impact of vaping on users' health, a 2018 National Academies of Science, Engineering & Medicine consensus report and other reports have concluded that "there is substantial evidence that except for nicotine, under typical conditions of use, exposure to potentially toxic substances from e-cigarettes is significantly lower compared with combustible tobacco cigarettes"<sup>4</sup>.

Studies have found that nicotine vaping is likely to be at least 95%<sup>5</sup> less harmful than smoking cigarettes since most of the chemicals causing smoking related diseases are not in vaping products.

Despite vaping not being strongly encouraged as a harm reduction or cessation method, South Africans are increasingly looking at vaping as an alternative to traditional tobacco products.

An annual study conducted since 2018 by VSML<sup>6</sup>, found that among the 2,176 vapers surveyed:

- almost 95% used traditional tobacco,
- nearly 83% attempted to quit smoking,
- around 79% at that stage vaped exclusively, and
- almost 69% had, at that stage, vaped for more than 12 months

VSML sought to gather additional real-time, qualitative data, rather than rely solely on what has been found in previous studies or the media. To this end, we conceptualised a small pilot study of a few South African smokers who were looking to quit cigarettes, to explore this.



## 02 APPROACH

VSML identified South Africans – all of whom were smokers with a desire to quit but had been unable to do so – as potential candidates to take part in a 90-day challenge that would see them switch to vaping, and potentially give up cigarettes entirely.

Following a stringent selection process, including an intensive round of interviews, eight individuals were selected for the experiment, which began in February and ended in May 2022. All also had a sizeable social media following and committed to posting about their journey on their social channels, thereby holding them publicly accountable, as this was thought to increase the likelihood of their success. However, participants were also told that, while VSML would do all it could to mentor them and assist them on their journey, they were to be as honest as possible about their highs and lows, and we would support them if they ‘fell off the bandwagon’ so-to-speak. During the experiment, one of the eight participants had to withdraw midway for personal reasons, unrelated to the experiment.

While the 90-day challenge officially ended at the end of May 2022, VSML plans to stay in touch with the participants on a casual basis, to further support their resolve to remain off cigarettes. Another, expanded social experiment is planned for later in the year, with an increased number of participants.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Existing evidence indicates that e-cigarette use is a much less harmful alternative to smoking? There is no tobacco and no combustion involved in e-cigarette use; therefore, regular vapers can avoid several harmful toxic chemicals that are typically present in tobacco cigarette smoke.<sup>7</sup>



**XOLANI NDLOVU**

Radio Personality from  
Polokwane, Limpopo



**PEARLY POPS**

Social Media Influencer from  
Qwa-qwa, Free State



**THABISO MAHLOKO**

Foodie & Lifestyle Content  
Creator from Johannesburg  
South, Gauteng



**TENYEKO COMFORT LEBESE**

Content Creator, Freelancer & Influencer from New Eersterust, Gauteng



**SHATADI PHALANE**

Photographer, Graphic Designer & Make-Up Artist from Polokwane, Limpopo



**NELISWA NGADA**

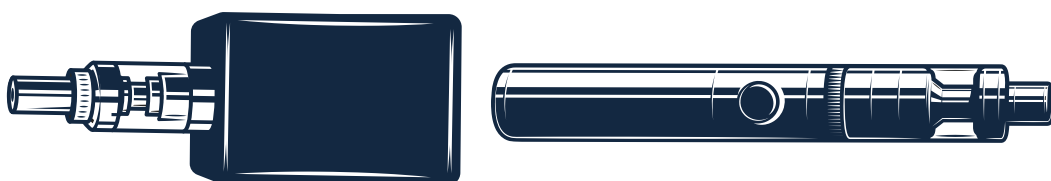
Social Media Influencer from, Midrand, Gauteng



**MBALENHLE ZWAKE**

Actor, Musician, Writer & Dancer from KZN

Each participant was given a choice of equipment and e-liquids, based on their flavour preferences, and asked to document their journey on their Twitter accounts. Fortnightly video diary entries helped capture how they felt physically and/or mentally along the way. Each participant was also asked to answer a series of survey questions about how they felt towards the end of the experiment, to quantify the results.



## 03 FINDINGS

Of the seven participants who completed the journey, the majority started smoking at age 17. The bulk (86%) had smoked for between 10 and 20 years. On average, just under three-quarters of participants smoked between 10 and 15 cigarettes per day. When asked how much harm they thought smoking cigarettes caused, just over four-fifths said “*a lot*” of harm. Responding to a question on the harm caused by vaping, most participants said they felt it caused “*little*” harm. All seven had tried to quit before, with ‘cold turkey’ being the most used method (just under three-quarters of participants reported having tried ‘cold turkey’ before). Other methods included relying on apps or books to help them break the habit and medication. Across the board, their health was given as the main reason for wanting to quit. Other motivators included the inconvenience, smell, and cost of traditional smoking.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Studies show switching from combustible cigarettes to vapour products completely may reduce exposure to key carcinogens and other toxicants known to be associated with tobacco-related diseases?<sup>8</sup>

After the first two weeks of their transition to vaping, almost half of participants shared that they were struggling with cravings, with nearly a third saying that vaping helped with this. Other changes reported included being able to move faster, whiter teeth, and that they had been able to cut down on the number of cigarettes they smoked for the first time ever.

By the sixth week, almost all participants had stopped smoking cigarettes. Just under a third of participants reported that the withdrawal experience “*wasn't bad*”. One participant even shared that it was an “*easy transition*” for them,

while another revealed that they now vape nicotine-free e-liquids and don't enjoy cigarettes anymore. This participant reported that they are entirely off nicotine, even in liquid/vaping form.

At the eight-week mark, the participants shared the ways in which vaping had been helping them, with responses that included: “*My lungs feel better because vaping doesn't burn your lungs*”; “*Vaping helps with cravings*”, “*Vaping is not as addictive as smoking*”; and “*Vaping is convenient*”.

By week ten, all participants had quit smoking cigarettes, and all were experiencing benefits in some way, including being less out of breath, saving money, feeling healthier, and sleeping better. Just under a third had even begun recommending vaping as a cessation method to their friends.

At the end of the 90-day challenge, participants had all managed to stop smoking completely and their social media posts about the challenge had received more than 72,000 views. On completion of the challenge, all said that they felt vaping is less addictive than smoking, while more than four-fifths of participants said they felt that vaping was less harmful to their health. In terms of the improvements to their physical health, more than two-fifths of participants reported an increase in ease of breathing, nearly a third listed improved energy levels, and just under a fifth of participants described improved teeth brightness, as well as a reduction in chest pain. Additionally, all participants believed that vaping had improved their mental health.

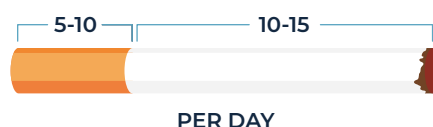
Over and above this, all participants said that vaping had saved them money. Nearly a third revealed that they saved more than R1,500 during the 90-day period; just under a fifth saved between R1,000 and R1,500, nearly a third saved between R500 and R1,000, with another third saving between R0 and R500.

When asked about the future, almost three quarters said they would continue vaping and not smoke cigarettes, while nearly a third said they would quit vaping and smoking altogether. As for whether they would recommend vaping to a smoker, the answer was 'yes' from every participant.

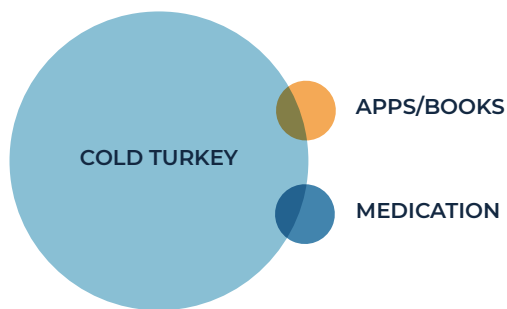
### HOW MANY YEARS DID YOU SMOKE?



### NUMBER OF CIGARETTES SMOKED PER DAY



### PREVIOUS QUITTING METHODS



### PERCEIVED HARM CAUSED BY SMOKING



### PERCEIVED HARM CAUSED BY VAPING



### PERCEIVED HEALTH IMPROVEMENTS



## MONEY SAVED IN RANDS



## WILL YOU CONTINUE VAPING



## TESTIMONIALS

### A WORD FROM VSML FOUNDER, KURT YEO



*"For 20 years I smoked 40 cigarettes a day. But it was the death of my father, a lifelong smoker, that made me seriously consider quitting.*

*I tried several methods, but all my attempts failed. That is until I tried vaping. It offered me the same experience I would get with smoking but in a far less harmful way. For me, the number one reason why all my previous attempts failed is that I was constantly surrounded by smokers at work, with my family, and at social gatherings. With vaping though, I could still participate in these social interactions.*

*Vaping literally saved my life. My wife is a doctor and would often warn me that if I continued smoking the way I did, coupled with my family history, I would not live to see my 60s. Vaping also gave me a better quality of life. This sparked a passion in me for how vaping could impact other smokers, which is part of the reason we embarked on the #VapingSavedMyLife pilot social experiment.*

*I am impressed by the results. I went in with an expectation of no more than a 50% success rate. I thought that a lot of participants would fail or end up using both smoking and vaping, but 100% of them successfully quit.*

*I haven't smoked a cigarette in eight years, and I believe that this is possible for other smokers too. Government needs to look at all the available evidence and science – including data from this pilot social experiment – and provide better policies that look at vaping as a solution, rather than just another problem."*



## HERE'S WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY ON COMPLETING THE 90-DAY CHALLENGE:

"Vaping is an easy way to quit. It helped me get rid of a 10-year addiction to cigarettes."

- **Tenyeko**

"I succeeded in the challenge and plan on continuing to vape."

- **Neliswa**

"I recommend vaping to quit smoking."

- **Pearly Pops**

"It's been an amazing, but challenging experience. I will continue vaping and would recommend it to friends." - **Thabiso**

"I saved money and am feeling more healthy and less anxious. My teeth are whiter, and my thought process is clearer. I want to eventually quit vaping too." - **Xolani**

"It's been smoother than quitting before. I can jog now, breathe better and my finances are better. Plus, I don't have cravings. I would recommend vaping for people trying to quit." - **Shatadi**

"My health and finances have improved. Vaping helps people to quit smoking." - **Mbalenhle**

## 04 CONCLUSION

With all participants managing to quit smoking cigarettes, the social experiment proved that vaping has the potential to be a viable tool for smoking cessation. Additionally, participants reported health improvements, showing that vaping is likely a feasible harm reduction method, especially for smokers who have previously tried (and failed) to give up cigarettes. What all this demonstrates to us as VSML, is that vaping is not the same as traditional smoking and shouldn't be treated the same in policies and legislation.

### DID YOU KNOW?

75.5% of South Africans started vaping to either cut down on or quit smoking cigarettes?<sup>9</sup>



*“Smokers around the world are being neglected, but more so in this country. South Africa has limited services that help smokers. Instead, they are taxed, ostracised and stigmatised. In some cases, they are even refused medical treatment based on their smoking history. And that’s why vaping can play such a critical part. The most important vaper is the smoker who hasn’t yet switched to vaping. We are missing a golden opportunity to once and for all remove smoking from our society and give people a better quality of life.” – Kurt Yeo*

Despite evidence of the success of vaping in this regard, a recent paper by 15 former presidents of the Society for Research on Nicotine & Tobacco<sup>10</sup> concluded that long-term smokers are being misled about the relative risks of vaping and smoking. *“We believe the potential lifesaving benefits of e-cigarettes for adult smokers deserve attention equal to the risks to youths,”* the scientists wrote. *“Millions of middle-aged and older smokers are at high risk of near-future disease and death. Quitting reduces risk.”*

*“While evidence suggests that vaping is currently increasing smoking cessation,”* they added, *“the impact could be much larger if the public health community paid serious attention to vaping’s potential to help adult smokers, smokers received accurate information about the relative risks of vaping and smoking, and policies were designed with the potential effects on smokers in mind. That is not happening.”*

VSML is currently running a petition to stop the passing of the proposed Control of Tobacco Products and Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems Bill in its current form, along with the proposed new tax on vaping products. In its current writing, the proposed bill deems Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems and Electronic Non-Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS/ENNDS) as part of the problem, which is contradictory to the latest empirical evidence. The petition urges Government to regulate vaping based on scientific evidence as well as to make tobacco harm reduction part of the country’s health strategy.

For more information, visit [vsml.co.za](https://vsml.co.za).

## 05 ABOUT THIS STUDY

While every effort has been made to ensure that participants in this study followed their own journey and reported as organically and accurately as possible about their personal experiences, as VSML we know that this sample size is too small for any scientific accuracy to be gleaned from this experiment. However, in the interest of using resources effectively, we chose to begin this on a small scale, and if we saw success, we would consider expanding the experiment to a larger group of participants. As we have been astounded by the great results reported in this pilot experiment, we are looking to expand the social experiment further later in the year. All results reported in this document are accurate as of the end of May 2022, with the 90-day challenge having begun in February 2022.



**#VapingSavedMyLife**

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