

# Filipino Students Who Vape Believe It Is Less Harmful, Even As Most Know the Risks

## Background

Public health campaigns have long emphasized the harms of nicotine use, and most Filipino adolescents are aware that cigarettes and vapes can cause serious health damage. But awareness of harm does not always translate into avoidance of use. Understanding how Filipino youth perceive the risks of vaping, and whether those perceptions differ between users and non-users, is essential for designing prevention messages that actually change behavior.

This study examined harm perception among students in Grades 7–10 in four highly urbanized cities with active tobacco control programs (Baguio, Pasig, Iloilo, and Davao), comparing how users and non-users assess the risks of cigarettes and vapes.

## Methods



A self-administered survey was conducted among **4,340 students in Grades 7–10 between November and December 2025**. All four cities have ongoing tobacco and vape control initiatives.



Students were asked to rate the harmfulness of cigarettes and vapes, whether vaping is less harmful than smoking ("harm reduction"), and how stress influences their use of these products. Open-ended responses on perceived health effects were thematically analyzed using the Framework Method.

## Key Findings & Implications

Even in cities with active tobacco control programs, a **clear harm perception gap exists between users and non-users**.

Most Filipino students recognize that cigarettes are harmful:



**74.0%** rated them as "very harmful."

But among students who currently vape, perceptions on the harm of vape shift sharply

**55.0%** "very harmful"    **19.4%** "a little harmful"    **12.1%** "not harmful"

Vape users are also more likely to view vaping as a safer alternative.



**76.3%** of students who answered "yes" to vaping as a form of "harm reduction" are **exclusive vape users**

In contrast, non-users were more likely to reject this idea or remain uncertain.

**Critically, awareness of harm does not prevent use.**

Open-ended responses showed that even students who vape can clearly name the health risks (e.g., lung damage, addiction, cancer) yet continue using these products because they associate them with stress relief, social belonging, or sensory enjoyment. As one student wrote, vaping "helps maintain emotion but causes a lot of issues physically and mentally."

## Key Recommendation

These findings reveal a **two-part problem** that current tobacco control programs are not addressing

- **First**, students who vape systematically **underestimate the harms of vaping compared to cigarettes**, a misperception that aligns with industry marketing of vapes as a "safer" alternative.
- **Second**, even when students understand the risks, they continue to **use these products to cope with stress and fit in socially**.

Addressing these **requires more than information campaigns** but should include expanding access to interventions such as **counseling services and stress management initiatives and integrating prevention with support systems** so that students not only hear about risks but also have practical, accessible pathways to quit or avoid nicotine use.

The persistence of these misperceptions in regulated cities supports **stronger restrictions on industry messaging, or a comprehensive ban**, to prevent further erosion of harm perception among Filipino youth.

## Supplemental Results

### Perception of Harm — Cigarettes

Across all respondents, the majority (74.0%) rated cigarettes as "very harmful."



15.5% said they "don't know" how harmful cigarettes are.

Cigarettes were rated as "very harmful" by:

48.3%  
of single  
cigarette  
users



59.8%  
of single  
vape users

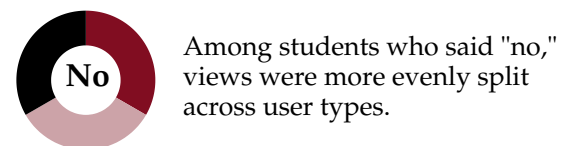


49.2%  
of dual  
users  
(cigarettes  
+ vapes)



### Belief That Vaping Reduces Harm

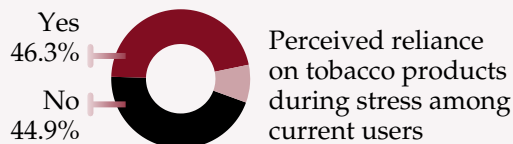
When asked whether vaping is a form of harm reduction:



43.99% of the respondents said they "don't know," indicating widespread uncertainty about relative risk.

### The Role of Stress

Students who currently use nicotine products are more likely to associate their use with stress



31% of all respondents perceived dependence on tobacco products during stress as "somewhat likely" or "very likely"

### What Students Said About Health Effects

Responses showed clear awareness of physical harms, "it'll affect their lungs badly," "nicotine can damage lungs or lead to addiction, as well as cancer," but also revealed competing beliefs:

- Students named lung damage, addiction, and cancer as known consequences.
- Many described vapes and cigarettes as helping them "relax," "calm down," or "remove stress."
- Some students explicitly held both views at once—acknowledging harm while still seeing the product as useful. One wrote: "I think smoking/vaping affects a person's emotional and mental being in a way that they use it to calm themselves or to take out depression."
- Several students wrote that "vape is safer" than cigarettes, often citing internet sources or social media as the basis for this belief.


### Why This Matters

The harm perception gap is not a knowledge problem alone. It is a **problem of competing meanings**. Students who vape know the risks, but assign vapes a different role in their lives than cigarettes.

Closing this gap will require more than information campaigns; it will require addressing the **emotional drivers of use** and the **industry messaging** that frames vapes as safer.

### Contact us!

For questions and concerns, reach out to us through the following channels:

 [healthpromo.upm@up.edu.ph](mailto:healthpromo.upm@up.edu.ph)

 <https://healthpromo.nih.upm.edu.ph>



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