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Tipping Point Paper

The Explosion of Juul and E-Cigarettes

If you’ve been downtown or any crowded place recently, you have probably noticed that less and less people are smoking cigarettes and more and more people are smoking new USB-stick-looking devices, except that big white cloud lifting into the air isn’t actually smoke. Enter Juul. Juul (pronounced jewel) is an electronic cigarette/vaporizer that was introduced by PAX Labs in 2015. However, its concept began in 2007 when two graduate students at Stanford set out to turn cigarette smokers on to alternatives as part of their thesis (Business Insider). Juul is not just any e-cigarette, it is the most popular and best-selling one on the market. E-cigarettes, or vapes, simulate the feeling of tobacco smoking by heating a liquid to generate an aerosol, commonly called a “vapor”, that the user inhales. For this reason, using e-cigarettes is commonly referred to as vaping. The liquid in the vape, called e-liquid, or e-juice, is usually made of nicotine, propylene glycol, vegetable glycerin, and flavorings. The modern e-cigarette was invented in 2003 by Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik, and since they were first sold in 2004 their global use has risen exponentially (Wikipedia). E-cigs/vapes are changing the game and reaching a tipping point, and the Juul is the clearest example of that. Over the whole year of 2017, Juul Labs “has generated $224 million in retail sales, according to Nielsen data. The brand saw sales explode 621% year-over-year” (Business Insider). Over Christmas, Nielsen reported Juul had “achieved a 46.8 percent market share — exceeding the top market share achieved by Marlboro cigarettes at the peak of that product's measured success. Then, last month, Nielsen said Juul had 54 percent of the market” (NYTimes). One million Juul systems have sold to date. It’s available at 12,000 convenience stores across the US, as well as online. The vaporizer retails for $35, and a four-pack of pods costs $16 (Business Insider). All three of Gladwell’s tipping point principles are in motion, actively helping this product blow up in popularity like an epidemic.

Gladwell’s first principle is the Law of the Few. This law states that a large amount of people is not necessary to spark a tipping point, but rather only a small amount of people. Gladwell talks about the 80/20 Principle, which describes how in any situation roughly 80 percent of the “work” will be done by 20 percent of the participants. This is true with crime, motor accidents, and beer drinking. Except with epidemics, this disproportionality becomes even more extreme. There are three types of people who help spread epidemics by word of mouth: Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen. Connectors are the social networking masters. They are the extroverted ones who are always on their phone or talking face to face with people, maintaining and bolstering connections. In our current age of the internet, these people are very powerful and can reach a global audience and spread news to one another very quickly and easily. The Connectors of Juul and other vapes are people on social media, such as Instagram, posting pictures and videos of themselves vaping. Because Instagram can reach such a large audience via hashtags (#), the power of social media can be so large you may not realize it. Because of exposure to social media pictures and videos of kids doing cool “vape tricks” and blowing “big clouds”, these kids act as connectors in the online realm. In the real world, usually anybody who has a vape can be a Connector, usually having friends who also vape, and they will usually mention the benefits of vaping vs. smoking to anyone they talk to. The Mavens are the knowledge-holders. They know all of the facts, laws, court cases, benefits and even possible dangers of e-cigarettes. These people are trying to help spread knowledge about a relatively new technology via online forums and blogs because they want to help others and save them from the harmful effects of smoking. Mavens are also the ones who are fighting restriction attempts on vaping by providing factual counterarguments in reports and studies. The Salesmen of vaping are the most persuasive pushers of a new product. They will usually entail a lot of emotion in their sales pitches to try and get you in the same mood as them and agree with them easier. The Salesmen of vapes are the employees in vape shops and online websites that try to employ every tactic and strategy they can to get you to buy and try the product, such as sales and discounts. The combination of just these three types of people play a huge part in getting vapes spreading by word of mouth.

Gladwell’s second principle, the Stickiness Factor, plays a large role in blowing up the vape industry as well. It’s not uncommon these days to see a Juul ad on the website you’re on. A lot of times in these ads they also invite the viewer to participate in a sweepstakes to win a free vape by entering in their email address. By engaging the user/customer they are further implanting in their brain the image and memory of vapes, just by spending just a bit more time and focusing more attention on it. Seeing a vaper is almost unavoidable nowadays as well. Anywhere you go, you can almost count on seeing at least one e-cigarette/vape every day, whether it is being inhaled by someone or just being advertised in the gas station/corner store window. When you see that obnoxiously huge, white cloud of vapor rise in the air, it’s almost comical seeing that much smoke come out of someone’s mouth. This image alone helps instill the memory of vaping in anyone within one city block of that vaper. However, the most popular vape that you will see is the Juul. Why? Because it is very small and portable, light, and looks like a piece of jewelry (as intended by the name as well). It sets itself apart from other vapes because of how small and portable it is. Most vapes are large, heavy box mods with large, powerful batteries in order to produce a lot of vapor. They sag down your pants and sometimes even have a hard time fitting in your pocket, and a lot of people do not like the geeky look of holding a big box with a tube on top to smoke out of, instead of that one slim Marlboro you used to light up. The small, rectangular, USB-stick look and design of the Juul changed the game of vapes. Most people are preferring portability and looks over raw power. “One of the things I’m super-interested in is meme culture,” said Mr. McDermott, the Simsbury High class president. “What resonates with our generation is the memes. I haven’t seen the Juul on TV. But you’ll see a bunch of memes about Juuling. It’s just, like, making it more socially acceptable — it’s perpetuating the thing that vaping is cool” (NYTimes). More and more people are seeing the image of a giant white cloud of smoke or a kid sticking a USB-stick into his mouth, and because these images are so bizarre they really stick in people’s heads.

Gladwell’s final principle, the Power of Context, might just be the most important factor in spreading the epidemic of vapes. In today’s day and age, there is so much factual information and evidence of all of the harmful effects of tobacco smoking and it is all widely available. Everyone now knows that cigarettes are harmful, can cause cancer, heart attack, or stroke, and can kill you, whereas in the last century doctors were endorsing tobacco. The idea that cigarettes are synonymous with cancer is so well understood that a lot of people are beginning to quit smoking or look for alternatives. Vapes have just been invented relatively recently, but there could not have been a better time for them to pop up, now that virtually everyone knows how harmful cigarettes are. Because vapes only contain four ingredients (nicotine, flavoring, vegetable glycerin and propylene glycol, which is used in inhalers and deemed safe), they are 1000 times safer and healthier than cigarettes, which are doused in thousands of extra carcinogens and chemicals to addict customers even further. Nicotine is so addictive that many people cannot just cold turkey quit. They need to ween down with an alternative replacement, and vapes are helping more and more people quit smoking for good.

The vaping epidemic is spreading because of Connectors introducing vapes to a large network of people, Mavens educating those looking to quit smoking, and Salesmen persuading customers to buy them. The stickiness of vapes is very apparent by just going outside to a public area and seeing that iconic huge plume of white vapor and seeing that goofy looking big box in hand, which are both bizarre enough to interest others and keep that image in their heads. Finally, the Power of Context might have been the biggest factor in pushing vape popularity, as they couldn’t have been invented at a better time, when everyone has access to the internet and knows of all of the facts and dangers of tobacco smoking and are looking to quit. In the future, I can see vapes completely replacing cigarettes, seeing how obviously better (healthier and cheaper) of an alternative it is. Their popularity will only continue to grow. For now, they are just beginning to explode, with Juul leading the forefront of the battle against cancer and addiction.

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