

# 'It's not what you'd term normal smoking': a qualitative exploration of language used to describe heated tobacco product use and associated user identity

East, K.A., Miller, C.R., Hitchman, S. C., McNeill, A., & Tompkins, C.N.E.

## Abstract

**Background and aims:** Tobacco and nicotine marketplaces have diversified over the past decade, including with the introduction of heated tobacco products (HTPs), such as the brand IQOS. HTPs typically heat tobacco to generate an aerosol that is inhaled. HTP nomenclature is lacking, and how HTP users define and identify themselves remains understudied. Research in this area is important because language can construct identity, and identity can shape behaviour. This study aimed to explore users' language choice when describing IQOS use, and how language relates to user identity.

**Methods:** Qualitative interviews in London, United Kingdom, with 30 adult current and former IQOS users. Analyses were guided by Iterative Categorization.

**Results:** Overall, participants expressed confusion and a lack of suitable terminology for how to describe IQOS use. Verbs such as heating and IQOSing were rarely endorsed. Most often, participants reverted to smoking when describing IQOS use and commonly referred to HEETS (tobacco sticks) as cigarettes. Yet the lack of combustion, electronic device, cleaner experience and perceived reductions in health risks led some to frame IQOS as distinct from smoking. Vaping was generally considered inappropriate for describing IQOS use. Participants also manipulated language to suit their circumstances and manage their identity, whereas some IQOS users embraced the terms smoking and smoker, most were eager to distinguish between using IQOS and being labelled a smoker because of the associated negative connotations and to align with perceptions of IQOS use as a better, less harmful behaviour. Instead, when describing their identity, IQOS users more willingly identified as vapers, or ex-smokers, or created new identities (e.g. HEET user).

**Conclusions:** People who use or have used IQOS (a brand of heated tobacco product) are ambiguous about IQOS terminology. Participants in this study commonly referred to IQOS use as smoking for lack of a more suitable term, but also resisted being labelled as smokers, a choice that may influence smoking cessation. Clear terminology must be used in surveys and by healthcare professionals when asking about cigarette smoking and e-cigarette and heated tobacco product use.

## Recommended Citation

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