

“Do you know what a JUUL is?” Dr. Halpern-Felsher asked me on my first day. I stared back with a perplexed but also intrigued look on my face. I quickly learned that JUULs were a new vaping device that had become popular among underage high school students and overly sensationalized on social media. Little did I know that this question would define the work of my summer internship, inform recent policies around regulating youth access to electronic-cigarettes (e-cigarettes), and shape the next phase of my educational journey.

I was given the opportunity to conduct my summer internship for my Master of Public Health (MPH) with Dr. Bonnie Halpern-Felsher, Professor of Pediatrics at Stanford University. It was an enriching experience being part of a team that prioritized the importance of developing an evidenced-based curriculum. The importance of effective evidence-informed education became apparent to me while conducting a deep investigative dive on JUULs and their new prevention curriculum that JUUL Labs had recently piloted.

Through a line-by-line review of the JUUL Labs E-Cigarette Prevention Curriculum, I discovered that the JUUL Curriculum did not align with best practices or current research, while also echoing the ulterior motives of past tobacco-industry educational programs. With these findings, I first authored a paper with Dr. Halpern-Felsher (recently published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*), outlining the problems of the JUUL Curriculum and highlighting why more attention needs to be brought towards the youth prevention component of this new growing public health issue around JUULs and other vaping products. It was exciting to see how much press this article generated after it was published, and how my research with Dr. Halpern-Felsher is now influencing the policies around regulating e-cigarette flavors and informing youth prevention efforts. This moment highlighted how vital public health research is in influencing advocacy and changing public attitudes.

Through this experience, I also became very interested in uncovering why a single product could become so quickly and ubiquitously popular across social media platforms among youth. While conducting my research on JUUL Labs and the history of the tobacco industry, I discovered that youth were essentially advertising for JUUL Labs by self-propagating socially trendy images and captions of how “cool” JUULs were. This was all happening at no cost to JUUL Labs. I realized that the root of this problem went beyond just the marketing by JUUL Labs and into the complex interpersonal and structural elements of youth relationships interwoven with social media. It is imperative that public health research keep up with advancing technology and understand the multi-faceted complexity of health behaviors among youth peer networks. This area of research is something I want to pursue during my doctoral program.

I left my summer internship with more questions than I had answers to this growing phenomena around JUULs and youth social networks. I am continuing to explore this topic in my master’s thesis, through the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data on youth’s perceptions of various tobacco products and their advertisements.

Additionally, my coursework at the Yale School of Public Health has provided me with a stronger background in understanding the theory behind public health work and the components to building effective interventions. Before starting my MPH program, I confidently believed that education was the single key to solving the disparities in healthcare. I quickly realized that the

root of these issues could be attributed to structural and systemic flaws, and not just due to a lack of knowledge. My MPH curriculum has given me the academic foundation to understand the theory behind what drives these health disparities, in addition to learning the methodology behind conducting the research and evaluations necessary to implement effective public health programs.

Ultimately, promoting preventive health practices through education is my passion. After completing my summer internship and as I finish my MPH, I more greatly appreciate the need for evidence-based education, and am now motivated to pursue a doctoral degree in Public Health, as I want to contribute to strengthening and developing health prevention education programs through research as an independent investigator.

A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in Public Health would help me build on the research experience that I gained through my MPH years and allow me to develop and spearhead my own projects that will shape future public health initiatives. I want to dedicate my professional career to public health research and using this research to keep up with the advances in technology that directly influence health, such as the role of social media sensationalizing products that are not healthy for youth. Through both quantitative and qualitative methodology, my research will contribute to revealing how technology influences peer networks and aspects of risk behavior, such as substance use or sexual health, and can then be considered for integration into youth prevention education.

After reaching out and discussing common research interests with Professor Vaughan Rees, I am convinced that the PhD in Population Health Sciences at Harvard University would be an outstanding fit for my interests. There are many professors doing work in tobacco use at the Center for Global Tobacco Control, as well as other professors doing work in substance use and young adult health who can support my work and mentor me to achieve my research goals.

I am determined to stay in academia to teach and mentor students. I personally enjoy teaching and mentoring students, as I have done in previous teaching assistant and orientation experiences, and I derive a lot of happiness in knowing that I can provide support in helping others achieve their goals. I hope to be a leader in public health research that can mentor other public health students and professionals to make the appropriate career choices, and inspire some to fulfill their research goals. I want to be able to say something as simple as “Do you know what a JUUL is?” and spark a fire in other minds that will then go on to influence future efforts and initiatives in public health research.