# ABSTRACT

**Background:** Smoking is a global public health issue responsible for more than eight million deaths annually, with at least 20,000 of these occurring in Australia. Nationally, almost one third of smokers unsuccessfully attempt to quit each year. Nicotine withdrawal symptoms and nicotine craving are often cited as reasons cessation attempts fail. Therefore, smokers having a greater understanding of these processes could assist smokers to quit. There is an absence of research examining smokers' conception of, and distinction between, nicotine withdrawal and nicotine craving.

**Methods:** Netnography was employed to explore non-traditional sources conveying smokers' understanding of both processes, and a range of disparate views was identified. A primary objective of the research project was to examine if and how smokers distinguish between nicotine withdrawal and cravings for nicotine. The research project was based on critical theory methodology. An online mixed-methods survey of 39 university students who smoke tobacco explored respondents' understanding and experience of both phenomena. Participant responses were analysed to produce three major themes.

**Findings:** Survey results indicated that most participants considered nicotine withdrawal and nicotine craving to be different processes, a position which contrasts with that of many researchers. A substantial proportion of respondents considered it possible to crave something that was not wanted. The sample also possessed a low level of nicotine pharmacology health literacy, with many participants unaware of how frequently withdrawal is experienced. The low level of nicotine pharmacology health literacy identified, if representative of smokers more broadly, could have significant implications for the ability of many people to quit.

**Conclusions:** The findings from this research project highlight the need for further research examining smokers' understanding of basic nicotine pharmacology, withdrawal, and craving. Future smoking cessation resources which incorporate such findings may lead to improved rates of quitting and health outcomes.