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TrendBlendz: how Splitarillos use marijuana flavours to promote cigarillo use

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Trendsetta, Inc. is a cigar and cigarillo-producing company whose brands include Splitarillos cigarillos, Hood Wraps cigars, Blow vaporisers, Vsmoke e-liquids, as well as other brands.¹ Trendsetta connects with its consumers through live entertainment, social media and experiential promotion, and is highly active on such social media sites as Twitter and Instagram.¹ In addition it uses ‘most popular personalities in entertainment, sports, fashion and style,’ such as rappers Jadakiss, Boosie, and Chris Brown as spokespeople for its tobacco products.¹ As part of the ‘experiential promotion’ the company employs a ‘fleet’ of promotional vans that distribute giveaways and advertise tobacco products in urban areas (figure 1).

Since March 2015, Trendsetta has introduced new Splitarillos flavours or TrendBlendz, including Purple K and Loud.¹² In Summer 2014, the company introduced the Cali Green and Pineapple Express Splitarillos flavours (figure 1). Purple, loud, Cali Green and Pineapple Express are slang terms for marijuana or marijuana strains³ and K2 refers to a synthetic cannabinoid (see online supplementary appendix 1). By promoting these flavours, the company is explicitly embracing the growing trend of tobacco and marijuana co-use in the form of blunts (a blunt is a hollowed-out cigar or cigarillo filled with marijuana).⁴ This is particularly concerning since tobacco companies may use marijuana flavours to promote tobacco uptake among marijuana users. In fact, Cali Green and Pineapple Express-flavoured Splitarillos were promoted at the High Times Cannabis Cup and Chalice California marijuana trade shows (figure 1).

Recently, there has been an increased scientific interest in the relationship between tobacco and marijuana use, in particular the direction of uptake pathways. Marijuana use has increased over time among US youth, with 23.4% of youth currently using marijuana, which is higher than the tobacco use rate (15.7%) among this population.⁵ Since introduction of the ‘gateway hypothesis’ by Kandel⁶ 40 years ago, the notion that cigarette smoking forms a gateway to marijuana use has been extensively studied.^{7–9} However, more recent evidence has found the pathway process to be more complex.^{10,11} Tobacco and marijuana use may

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support and reinforce use of each other as both substances are typically smoked.¹² The use of blunts is one mechanism by which these effects are perpetuated. The phenomenon of 'blunt chasing' (smoking cigarillos immediately after smoking a blunt) has been identified as expanding the cigarillo market among blunt smokers and contributing to nicotine dependence.¹³ Emerging evidence has indicated that up to 90% of marijuana users are concurrent tobacco smokers,^{14–16} and that a reverse gateway mechanism also exists where marijuana use precedes tobacco smoking and can lead to nicotine dependence.^{17–20} Furthermore, many blunt smokers identify themselves neither as tobacco smokers nor marijuana users, which may lead to underestimates of use prevalence for both substances.^{21–23}

Cigarillo sales increased by 25% from \$800 million in 2010 to over \$1 billion in 2014 (figure 2).²⁴ Cigarillo line extensions featuring marijuana flavour references is an emerging trend, with current promotion of Good Times Kush cigarillos, K-Series Royal Blunts cigarillos (including OGK, Purple Haze), OG Kush, White Chiba, and High Indo Show cigarillos.^{25–27} These practices are not exclusive of the larger brands; nearly every large convenience store brand has at least one flavour that can be considered a subtle reference to marijuana use (eg, Wild Rush flavour by Swisher Sweets). This misleading strategy may lead consumers to believe that these products contain marijuana. Unlike cigarettes, cigars and cigarillos can still be sold in flavours in the USA.²⁸ The cigar industry has long used flavours as a strategy to successfully expand their market share,²⁹ target specific populations at risk (eg, youth,³⁰ African-Americans,³¹) and capture cigarette smokers who have quit.²⁹ With the growing trend toward marijuana legalisation and rising marijuana use, the promotion of cigar flavours to capture this expanding market is a major concern for tobacco control. The Food and Drug Administration should expand the current prohibition against the characterising flavours in cigarettes to include cigar products.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Figure 1. Splitarillos USA Instagram photos. Top row: Use of promotional vehicals to distribute giveaways and market Splitarillos in urban neighborhoods (left); Promotion of Loud, PurpleK, 18K Splitarillos flavour (right). Source: https://instagram.com/splitarillos_usa/ Bottom row: Promotion of Cali Green and Pineapple Express Splitarillos at the 2014 High Times Cannabis Cup (left) and the 2014 Chalice California (right). Source: <https://instagram.com/splitarillosusa/>.

Figure 2.

Nielsen store scanner data, compiled and calculated by the Health Policy Center at Institute for Health Research and Policy at University of Illinois at Chicago.