Original investigation

“They’re Pretty Much Made for Blunts”: Product Features That Facilitate Marijuana Use Among Young Adult Cigarillo Users in the United States

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Abstract

Introduction: Cigarillo use is prevalent among young adults in the United States. Many young people use cigarillos as “blunts,” a term for a cigar emptied of its tobacco and replaced with marijuana. Because cigars in the United States are not subject to the same regulations as cigarettes, they offer a diverse selection of flavors and packaging styles. It is unclear how these and other product attributes facilitate blunt use.

Methods: Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of 40 young adult cigar or cigarillo users in the United States to assess patterns of use and perceptions about product features. Quotations from interview transcripts were coded for major themes and summarized across participants.

Results: Regardless of their preferred brand, participants felt that the brand Black & Mild is primarily smoked for the tobacco. There was a strong perception, however, that other popular cigarillo brands are almost always used to make blunts. Participants believed that cigarillo companies design their products to simplify blunt-making, with features such as perforated lines or wrappings that unroll easily. Resealable foil pouches, a popular packaging style, are often used to hold unused marijuana and mask its smell.

Conclusions: Blunt use is pervasive among young adult cigarillo users in the United States, and certain cigar companies have developed products that facilitate blunt-making. Future surveillance measures should capture the extent to which cigarillo users are using these products as blunts. Continued surveillance of cigarillo sales and popular product attributes are needed.

Implications: Cigarillo use is prevalent among young adults in the United States, many of whom are using the products as blunts. This study found that product features such as brand, flavor, packaging, and price influence the selection of cigarillos used for this purpose. There is also a strong perception among young adult cigarillo users that cigarillo companies design their products and packaging to make the blunt-making process simple and enjoyable. Better surveillance measures are needed to capture the extent to which cigarillos are used as blunts and which product features are driving category growth.

Introduction

Although cigar use poses many of the same health risks as cigarette smoking, including increased incidence of lung cancer and heart disease,¹ cigars remain less regulated in the United States compared to

cigarettes. As a result, the cigar market offers a wide variety of styles and product features to consumers, maintaining strong sales amid decreasing consumption of cigarettes. Popular cigar types include large, hand-rolled premium cigars, machine-made large cigars, little filtered cigars akin to cigarettes, and machine-made, mid-sized

cigarillos (ie, smaller, unfiltered cigars that are sometimes sold with plastic or wooden tips). Cigar consumption in the United States has nearly doubled since 2000, with inexpensively-priced cigarillos accounting for much of the growth.^{2,3} In the convenience store channel, cigarillo brands such as Black & Mild and Swisher Sweets dominate, though other brands such as White Owl, Garcia y Vega, and Backwoods have experienced marked sales increases in the past decade.³ Cigarillo use is disproportionately high among non-Hispanic African Americans, youth, and young adults. Notably, nearly three-quarters of current cigar users between 18–29 years old report a cigarillo as their usual cigar type.⁴ Unlike cigarettes, which face federal restrictions on product characteristics like flavorings, packaging, and marketing strategies aimed at youth, cigars are exempt from these regulations.⁵ Flavored tobacco products are generally known to appeal to young people, but flavored cigars are especially popular among youth.^{3,6} Moreover, the wide array of cigar packaging styles, including single sticks, inexpensive multipacks, and brightly-colored, resealable foil pouches contribute to the profitability of the cigar market, according to industry sources.⁷

It is well-documented that users of cigarillos and other mass market cigars often empty the products' tobacco and replace the contents with marijuana; the result is colloquially called a "blunt."^{8–11} Importantly, although most of the loose tobacco is removed during the process of blunt-making the outer wrap still contains nicotine,¹² which has been demonstrated to increase heart rate and carbon monoxide levels among blunt smokers.¹ The extent to which cigarillo smokers use blunts is understudied in tobacco research. Marijuana has been legalized for recreational use in several US states and possession is increasingly being decriminalized, most recently in the nation's capital, Washington, DC. Concurrently, the United States appears to be undergoing a shift in the popularity and acceptability of marijuana use. A recent report indicated that past-year marijuana use in the past decade has doubled among young adults in the United States, from 10.5% in 2002 to 21.2% in 2013.¹³ Though increasing rates of marijuana use may not fully explain the rise in cigarillo sales, the practice of blunt-making may have played a partial role in cigar volume growth.

Prior studies have used qualitative approaches to examine cigarillo use among young adults. Most recently, Koopman Gonzalez and colleagues interviewed young, African American males to describe product modification among little cigar and cigarillo users. Participants had a strong perception that non-tipped cigarillos were used almost exclusively as blunts.¹⁴ Sifaneck et al. interviewed young people in New York City in the late 1990s and determined that flavors heavily influenced their choice of cigars to use as blunts.⁹ Similarly, a recent study based in the Southeastern United States found that flavored cigarillos were mood-enhancing and made cigar products more palatable, though this study did not focus specifically on blunt use.¹⁵ Despite these studies' unique contributions, most were geographically restricted and did not have a primary focus on the specific product characteristics that have contributed to the cigar market's recent growth. The aim of this study was to characterize young adults' cigarillo use behaviors and perceptions of popular cigarillo product attributes, such as packaging styles, flavors, and brands using semi-structured telephone interviews with a geographically and ethnically diverse sample of young adults in the United States.

Methods

Qualitative research techniques are adept at gathering in-depth data about participants' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This study used

semi-structured interviews, which gave subjects flexibility to freely discuss their cigarillo use and product preferences while allowing researchers to probe for more detailed information when necessary.

Subject Recruitment and Interview Procedures

A convenience sample of 40 participants was recruited using Craigslist, a popular classified advertising website that enables users to post ads in cities and regions across the United States. Inclusion criteria included (1) being between the ages of 18–34, (2) being a current user of cigars and/or cigarillos, and (3) having proficiency in spoken English. Current use of cigars and/or cigarillos was defined for screening purposes as using cigars or cigarillos in the past 30 days, and more than just once or twice in that time period. Inclusion was not dependent on marijuana use, but participants were asked during the interview if they use cigarillos as blunts. Those who reported using cigarillos as blunts sometimes or exclusively were considered current blunt users.

Interview guides were developed based on previous studies of cigar use and the investigators' knowledge of the content area, and included questions related to cigar initiation, experience using other tobacco products, brand preferences, perceptions about cigar and cigarillo product features, and marijuana use. The questions were broad in nature (eg, "What are some qualities you like about your usual brand?"; "What cigarillo characteristics are important to you when you use or make blunts?"), but probing questions were used as needed to clarify participants' responses or request additional information (eg, "What are examples of *specific* flavor names that you have used?"). Interviews were conducted by telephone between April and August 2015, recorded with permission from the respondents, and transcribed verbatim by research staff. Gift cards worth \$50 were mailed to respondents after the completion of the interview as a token of appreciation. On average, each call lasted approximately 30 minutes. The Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences Institutional Review Board approved all research procedures.

Coding Process

The Framework Method was used to manage and analyze interview data. This method involves coding each transcript for major themes and can be used to summarize themes across many cases.¹⁶ Codes about cigar use behaviors and popular product characteristics were developed both deductively and inductively. Although most codes were derived from existing literature and knowledge of the cigar market, open coding allowed unanticipated patterns to emerge from the data. Two investigators independently coded the transcripts line-by-line in an initial review and highlighted key themes. Notes were compared to clarify code definitions and identify new codes that should be added. After several rounds of preliminary coding, thematic saturation was reached and a final coding guide was developed. Atlas.ti was used to manage, code, and retrieve data for analyses.

Analysis

In order to assess intercoder reliability, 25% of interview transcripts were coded by two investigators, and kappa statistics assessed agreement for each code.¹⁷ Agreement was satisfactory across all codes, ranging from 0.63 to 0.87. Where agreement was lowest, coders convened to discuss code definitions before proceeding with the remaining interviews, which were divided and coded independently by the investigators. Using the Query Tool in Atlas.ti, all quotations for each code were retrieved and compiled into separate text files. The quotations were

summarized across transcripts and illustrative quotations were selected to highlight major themes. We triangulated our qualitative findings related to brands and blunt-making with young adult data from the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. National Survey on Drug Use and Health produces representative, population-level estimates of substance use in the United States.¹⁸ Specifically, we explored the prevalence of past 30-day blunt use among young adult cigar users by their preferred cigar brand. Brands frequently mentioned by interviewees as being used for blunt use were included in the analysis.

Results

Participant Demographics

A total of 40 participants from 20 states across the United States completed an interview. As indicated in Table 1, the majority of participants were male (60%), nearly a third were non-Hispanic black (30%), and over half (52.5%) were non-Hispanic white. Ages ranged from 18 to 32, though most participants were between 18–24 years old (55%). Although the ad intended to recruit all types of young adult cigar users, 36 respondents self-identified as being current cigarillo users. Only four participants were exclusive large or premium cigar users. While some mention of blunt-making activity was expected, fully half of the sample reported using cigarillos almost exclusively for making blunts (Table 1). In line with other findings,¹⁹ Black & Mild use was most common among black respondents (two-thirds reported using the tipped variety of this brand), but use of other cigarillo brands, such as Swisher Sweets, White Owl, and Dutch Master, did not differ between racial and ethnic groups.

Cigarillo Smoking Patterns

The first major theme to emerge was the belief that cigarillo smoking (ie, non-blunt use) is more infrequent and casual compared to cigarette smoking. Whereas cigarettes were seen as extremely addictive and ritualistic, cigars were more often perceived as a social experience, especially while drinking or relaxing.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Cigar Use Behaviors (*n* = 40)

	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender	
Male	24 (60.0)
Female	16 (40.0)
Age group	
18–21	9 (22.5)
22–24	13 (32.5)
25–29	12 (30.0)
≥30	6 (15.0)
Race/ethnicity	
White, non-Hispanic	21 (52.5)
Black, non-Hispanic	12 (30.0)
Hispanic	4 (10.0)
Other	3 (7.5)
Current cigar use	
Exclusive cigarillo	32 (80.0)
Exclusive premium	4 (10.0)
Cigarillo and premium	4 (10.0)
Current blunt use	
Yes	20 (50.0)
No	17 (42.5)
Unknown	3 (7.5)

You know, when you're a cigarette smoker, there are times when you habitually just, you don't even have a nicotine craving, but you want a cigarette because you're just so used to it that point in the day or after a meal. Whereas cigars, that doesn't really happen. There are guys that I see frequently that smoke one cigar a day, or four cigars a week...it's pretty sporadic.

Several former cigarette smokers perceived that they had more autonomy over their smoking with cigars versus cigarettes, and cited this as influencing their decision to switch. Because cigarillos are typically larger than cigarettes, burn slower, and last longer, users felt that they can better manage their overall tobacco consumption. An additional perceived benefit of cigarillos was that they do not have the stigma of cigarettes, and because many brands are heavily flavored and fragranced, the odor is less offensive to others. This was especially true for the Black & Mild brand.

I noticed that when someone's smoking cigarettes...people have a tendency to walk away or make complaints about how stinky they are...But if you've got a cigarillo, people are often interested because they're so different.

Perceptions of Black & Mild also deviated from other cigarillo brands in terms of the product's "purpose." Participants reported that Black & Mild was rarely used for blunt-making, and was instead being smoked primarily for the tobacco. Indeed, the majority of Black & Mild smokers in the sample reported inhaling, a less common behavior among users of other brands. The plastic or wooden tip, primarily available on Black & Mild brand cigarillos, served the practical function of preventing tobacco from falling into the user's mouth, as well as making the product more comfortable to inhale.

Blunt Use

Though blunt use was not a criterion for study inclusion, half of the interviewees voluntarily disclosed that they primarily use cigarillos for blunt-making. All participants, regardless of their own marijuana use behaviors, perceived that young people use cigarillos (with the exception of Black & Mild) almost exclusively for blunts. One White Owl cigarillo smoker that does not use marijuana was asked how many of his friends that use cigarillos typically smoke them as blunts:

Respondent: *100 percent of them! They laugh at me.*

Interviewer: *Do you think you're kind of a rare example of someone who smokes them for the tobacco?*

Respondent: *In the youthful generation, yeah, definitely.*

Other respondents shared similar beliefs, as illustrated by the quotations below:

I'd say 9 out of 10 people in my age group, you're buying that Dutch (a colloquial term for the Dutch Masters cigarillo brand) to cut open and fill up with weed. That's pretty much the matter of fact.

Now if you start talking about cigarillos – Dutch Masters, Backwoods – nobody out here is smoking them by themselves. They're emptying out all the tobacco and putting weed in them. It doesn't matter the color of their skin, nationality. For the most part, anyone buying those cigarillos are not gonna smoke that tobacco out of there. It's for weed.

I've never actually seen anyone actually smoke a Dutch. That's like, that's for a comedy routine.

Participants generally shared the perception that cigarillo manufacturers know that most of their customers are using the products to

make blunts, and “design them” for that very purpose. Whereas in the past, blunt-making required a certain level of dexterity, most of the cigarillos on the market today have simplified blunt-making, due to product attributes such as outer wraps that come apart easily.

I don't know if you've used marijuana before, but whenever you split a cigar down the middle, the Zig Zag's got a perforated line on most of them. The paper's really easy to split and put back together.

The leaf wrapping holds its form, so you don't have to be an expert tobacco roller to roll a good blunt anymore. You roll it back together, and there you go.

But none of them in that category, Phillies, Dutch Masters, White Owl, I don't know anyone who buys them for the tobacco. It's to gut it. And like I said, the Games [Garcia y Vega] are designed to be cut open easily. These companies know what we're using it for! They have to.

In an effort to examine the generalizability of participants' responses regarding blunt use, 2013 weighted National Survey on Drug Use and Health data was used to explore the prevalence of past 30-day blunt use among young adult cigar users. Among current (ie, past 30 day) cigar users between 18–34 years old, 41.1% had also used blunts in the past 30 days. Several of the cigarillo brands that participants indicated were popular for blunt use indeed seem to be associated with this behavior. Figure 1 shows the prevalence of past month blunt use by participants' preferred cigar brand. Over two-thirds of Zig Zag, Dutch Masters, White Owl, and Garcia y Vega users were also current blunt users. Over half of Phillies and Swisher Sweets users reported recent blunt use. Black & Mild, however, was less commonly associated with blunt use.

Product Characteristics

Cigarillo users in the sample identified three key product features that positively influence their smoking experiences. Whether they use cigarillos to smoke tobacco or for blunt-making, highly valued product attributes included: flavorings, packaging styles, and price.

Flavors

A few respondents preferred smoking unflavored cigars or cigarillos, noting the appeal of a cigar free from chemical additives, but most cigarillo users enjoyed smoking products with characterizing

Figure 1. Prevalence of past 30-day blunt use among current, young adult cigar users by preferred cigar brand, 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (weighted $n = 4\,143\,936$).

flavors that are infused in the tobacco and the cigarillo's outer wrap. It was common for users to have tried several flavored varieties of their favorite brands and they expressed excitement over the wide array of flavors available. Other reported benefits of flavored cigars included the pleasant aroma of the smoke compared to cigarettes or unflavored cigars, and a smoother and easier inhale. Some former cigarette smokers mentioned that they switched to cigars after flavors were banned from cigarettes. Others reported that a flavored cigar was their first cigar smoking experience and helped ease the transition into regular use. As one Black & Mild smoker noted:

[Flavoring] makes it a little bit more pleasurable. Kind of the way that people make mixed cocktails instead of just drinking straight liquor. It just masks the unpleasant flavor [of the tobacco] until you get more accustomed to it.

While some blunt users dislike using flavored cigars, especially when they are smoking high-quality marijuana, most reported that flavorings enhance the taste of the marijuana or make the blunt-making experience more pleasant. Fruit-flavored cigarillos, especially grape and white grape, were highly preferred. When asked why people like to use flavored cigarillos to smoke as blunts, one respondent stated:

Whenever you take the innards out, and you're licking the wrap to make your wrap pliable for rolling, you can taste it. That's kind of the sole reason [for the flavorings].

Packaging

Packaging styles, especially the resealable foil pouches that hold 2 to 3 cigarillos, were discussed as enthusiastically as the cigarillos themselves. Users frequently mentioned the glossy colors of the pouches and how they immediately communicate the products' flavors. Cigarillos sold in the foil pouches were perceived to be substantially fresher than cigars that are individually wrapped in plastic or that come in a cardboard box. An added benefit of the “foil fresh” pouches is that they can be used as storage for partially-smoked cigars or for unused marijuana without letting the associated smells escape. One Black & Mild smoker discussed this advantage:

Ok, let's say you get a pack of three, you know? And let's say you're at work, you don't have enough time to even smoke a full one. So you just smoke some, you know, half of one, you can put it back in that package, and it'll be fresh.

Another participant whose friends smoke blunts added:

They can keep that cigar AND they can keep their weed in that little foil thing, because it's re-sealable. I'm sure [the cigar companies] did some kind of research to determine that. I know a lot of people who do that. That's where they keep their shrubbery (a slang term for marijuana) at.

Price

The four premium cigar users in the sample denigrated machine-made cigars, calling them “cheap,” but for a majority of respondents, the low prices of cigarillos strongly influenced brand preference and use behaviors. “Cheap” was more often perceived as a positive attribute among these individuals. Former cigarette smokers referenced price as a major factor in their decision to switch to cigars or cigarillos. One Swisher Sweets smoker described his calculations on the cost-effectiveness of cigarillos that helped justify his decision to switch:

[Cigarillos] cost me about 50 cents (0.36 GBP / 0.44 EUR) apiece, if they have the deal on the pack, right? When I look at the cost of cigarettes, it's \$10 (7.11 GBP / 8.82 EUR) a pack in some places. So that's 50 cents a cigarette. You can get cigarillos for almost the same price as a cigarette, so at least you have [something] that'll last longer.

Without prompting by the interviewers, many cigarillo users, primarily the blunt users in the sample, brought up a “2 for 99 cents” or “2 for a dollar” (0.70 GBP / 0.88 EUR) promotion, which was lauded as “a great deal,” especially if the cigarillo is only being used as a vehicle for marijuana. As one blunt smoker stated:

Most people are smoking cheap weed, and if you're buying cheap weed, then you want to buy cheap cigars, which like I said is the two for a dollar cigars.

Discussion

Patterns of cigarillo use seem to differ by style and brand. Despite participants' geographic diversity, ethnic backgrounds, or own cigar use behaviors, they universally believed that cigarillos (non-Black & Mild) are predominantly used as blunts by young adults, which supports findings from similar qualitative studies.^{14,20} National data appear to validate this sentiment, with most users of popular cigarillo brands also reporting past-month blunt use. Although blunt use is by no means a new phenomenon,^{8–11,21,22} several participants expressed the belief that the tobacco industry now designs cigarillos specifically for blunt use, making the blunt-making process a simpler and more enjoyable experience. For example, the packaging of Splitarillos, an emerging cigarillo brand, features an image of a zipper, implying the ease with which a user can “split” the cigarillo's wrap. This is in contrast to the blunt use subculture of the 80s and 90s which was more ritualistic and required a certain level of dexterity and skill.⁹ Even today's cigarillo packaging styles serve an important purpose for blunt users; in addition to keeping the products fresh, the resealable foil pouches can be used to transport and store unused marijuana. Due to the lack of federal restrictions governing cigars' usage of flavor, pricing, and packaging as marketable attributes, mass market cigars are heavily flavored,^{3,23} inexpensively priced, and use innovative and attractive packaging, which respondents in this study have indicated are valuable and important in their product choice decision-making. These product characteristics are important to users who smoke cigarillos as blunts or primarily for the tobacco. Continued surveillance of cigar sales and features that drive growth is needed, as it may indicate tobacco industry knowledge of factors that drive young adult cigarillo use, and potentially marijuana use.

This study has several methodological limitations common to most qualitative studies. Although respondents were ethnically and geographically diverse, the sample was small and was recruited using convenience sampling techniques. As such, their responses may not be generalizable to all young adult cigar users. We expect that blunt-making behaviors differ across racial and ethnic groups, but our small sample size was not conducive to subgroup analyses. Large, representative studies are needed to examine these differences and assess whether the participants' beliefs and behaviors are common among cigar smokers nationally. Furthermore, many participants may have minimized or denied their marijuana use behaviors in an attempt to provide socially desirable responses or to avoid admitting that they engage in a behavior that remains illegal in a majority of

US states. Therefore, the prevalence of blunt use in the sample may have been underreported.

This study's findings indicate that blunt use is pervasive among young adult cigarillo users. While the health risks associated with smoking a cigarillo for the tobacco are known, the risks associated with using only the outer wrap for marijuana use are less clear. Research has demonstrated that there are significant amounts of nicotine in the outer wraps of cigars and cigarillos,¹² and while this nicotine appears to contribute to and enhance the physiological effects of marijuana,²⁴ it also increases the risks of increased heart rate and elevated carbon monoxide levels.¹ Evidence also suggests that the practice of combining tobacco and marijuana, including through blunt use, contributes to the symptoms of cannabis dependence, a disorder recognized by the World Health Organization and American Psychiatric Association.^{25,26} Future studies should examine how chemical exposures differ between smoking cigarillos for the tobacco and smoking cigarillos as blunts. Additionally, improved population surveillance is needed to assess cigarillo users' main reasons for using their preferred product. According to our results, users of some cigarillo brands and styles almost exclusively use them as blunts, so they may be imprecisely categorized. Conversely, many people who use cigarillos only as blunts may not consider themselves a tobacco user and are likely missing from cigar prevalence estimates.²⁷ Finally, this study revealed that product features unique to cigars (ie, innovative packaging styles, flavorings, and low prices) are influencing use. More research is needed on the product characteristics that drive cigar volume growth. Stricter regulations of these product characteristics may result in lowered rates of cigar and blunt use.

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Declaration of Interests

None declared.

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