

Cigars, Youth, and the Internet Link

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. This study examined the accessibility and appeal to youth of cigar marketing sites on the Internet.

Methods. Sites marketing cigars (n=141) were examined for age restrictions, prices, health warnings, and other elements.

Results. Although it is illegal for minors to purchase tobacco, only 36 sites (25.5%) prohibited purchases by minors. Sites offered low prices, and 32% accepted money orders, cashier's checks, or cash-on-delivery (COD) orders. Almost 30% of the sites included elements with potential youth appeal; only 3.5% displayed health warnings.

Conclusions. The unregulated promotion of cigars on the Internet has the potential to attract youth, and there are few barriers to Internet tobacco purchases by minors. (*Am J Public Health.* 2000;90:790-792)

Cigar smoking among youth is a public health concern. Cigar smoking increases the smoker's risk of cancer¹⁻⁹; passive smoke may harm nonsmokers¹⁰⁻¹⁶; the promotion of cigars may legitimize tobacco use¹⁷; and cigar smoking may cause nicotine addiction.¹⁸ Cigar use is surprisingly common among teenagers.^{19,20} In 1997, the prevalence of cigar use during the previous month among high school students nationwide was 22%.²⁰ During the past decade, industry marketing efforts have increased.^{17,21}

Many US tobacco control regulations exempt cigars, and existing laws are unevenly enforced.²²⁻²⁵ The unregulated Internet could be used to market cigars to youth.²⁶ Almost 10 million minors are online; an estimated 45 million will be by 2002.²⁷ Children are susceptible to media messages about tobacco.²⁸

This study's objectives were to describe Internet sites selling cigars, assess whether youth could potentially purchase cigars through them, and assess their potential youth appeal.

Methods

Site Selection

Normally, sampling is based on the best estimate of the entire population. However, we could not determine with confidence the total number of cigar sites because of large variability among various search engines. Also, although search engines retrieve numerous items, the relevance of many of these items may be low.²⁹ We screened 100 sites; only 12 were relevant.

Therefore, rather than randomly sampling retrieved sites, we searched as someone seeking to purchase cigars might search.³⁰ Using Excite, typing in "cigar links," we selected the first 2 sites retrieved: Fuji Cigar Page (<http://fujipub.com/cigar/>) and Blackhole Cigar Links (<http://www.dnihome.com/~sblack/cigarlink.html>). Each included hyper-text links to cigar sales sites (Fuji=63; Blackhole=139). After we eliminated duplicates, 179 sites remained. Between March 8 and April 14, 1998, we attempted to examine these sites. Thirty-seven could not be accessed; 1 site required registration and was excluded. The final sample was thus 141 sites.

Data Collection and Analysis

The decision rules we used are available at <http://itsa.ucsf.edu/~tobacco>. Sites were

examined for Web site characteristics (universal resource locator [URL], name, city/state, date accessed, ordering information); accessibility to minors (payment methods, warnings forbidding sales to minors, whether single cigars were sold, minimum price, shipping charges, health warnings); and appeal to minors (use of cartoons,³¹ moving images, and music; offers of cigar promotional sportswear³²; information about cigar-related events).

Data were analyzed descriptively. Price information was provided by 108 sites; we used 109 sites in calculating shipping data because 1 site discussed shipping but not prices.

Results

Web Site Characteristics

The Web site characteristics are available at <http://itsa.ucsf.edu/~tobacco>. At least 26 sites (more than 18%) were cigar industry sites or offered links to industry sites, smoking magazine sites, or smokers' rights sites.

Accessibility to Minors

Thirty-five sites (32% of the 109 sites offering ordering information) accepted non-credit card payments (i.e., COD, money orders). Fifty-three sites (49%) accepted credit cards only. On 8 sites (7%), no payment options appeared. The remaining sites offered other options, such as personal checks.

Prohibitive statements were included on 36 sites (25.5% of the final sample of 141 sites) (Table 1). "Passive" statements (e.g., "You must be of legal smoking age to buy cigars") appeared on 21 sites. A smaller number (n=10) required "active" assertions about the purchaser's age, usually by requiring that the purchaser initial, sign, or check a box on the on-line form swearing that he or she was

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TABLE 1—Characteristics of Cigar Marketing Web Sites (n = 141) Examined in March and April 1998

	No. (%)
Accessibility to minors	
Showed price + ordering information	108 (76.6%)
Minimum order ≤\$20	74/108 (68.5%) ^a
Minimum order ≤\$10	51/108 (47.2%) ^a
Prohibited purchase by minors	36 (25.5%)
Required adult signature	3 (2.1%)
Provided health warnings	5 (3.5%)
Appeal to minors	
Used cartoons, moving images, or music	30 (21.3%)
Offered cigar sportswear	18 (12.8%)
Provided information about cigar-related events	19 (13.5%)

^aPrice information was provided by 108 sites.



Source. <http://www.choicemall.com/cgi-bin/tame/stogiestore.com/sportswear.tam>. Accessed February 14, 2000.

FIGURE 1—Logo for the Stogie Doggie Sportswear Collection.

of legal age. Two sites (1.4% of all sites examined) included both passive statements and active assertions. Even when age restrictions were noted, the wording did not always appear calculated to discourage youth interest. For example, the Nat Sherman site (<http://www.natsherman.com/>) stated:

We believe that smoking is an adult pleasure. The appreciation of our premium tobacco products is a mature reward won over time, as is true of all things in life in which only an adult can discern the potential for pleasure. Freedom of choice is an inherent American value and the decision to smoke is an exercise of that

freedom. Also inherent is our responsibility [sic] to properly restrict those not mature enough [sic] to make these choices. We therefore ask you to respect the age pledge where it appears on our order form and to please be aware of the fact that we specifically require an 'adult signature' [sic] upon delivery of our product.

Although only 40 sites sold single cigars, 38 (55%) of the 69 sites not selling singles offered items for \$20 or less. Often these low-priced items were packs of flavored (e.g., chocolate and vanilla) cigars. Minimum item prices ranged from \$0.24 to \$438.00 (median, \$13.97; mean, \$26.18). The highest minimum shipping charge was \$20; 7 sites offered free shipping.

Only 5 sites (3.5%) provided health warnings. Two of these were sarcastic messages, for example, "Cigars are known to the state of California to be bad for you and cause great discomfort to the political correctness and lifestyle police" (<http://www.atn.net/ms/bsweb/>).

Appeal to Minors

About 1 in 3 sites made use of cartoons, moving images, music, and/or sportswear (Table 1; Figure 1). On <http://www.aromaticstogies.com/>, a cartoon clown from a popular TV show smoked a cigar. On <http://cigar-express.com/>, a child modeled a promotional T-shirt. Several sites offered instructions on smoking cigars. Cigar Central (<http://cigar-central.com>) solicited stories about "how you got started." Nine sites (6%) offered contests, drawings, or games.

Discussion

Few of the Internet sites we examined prohibited cigar purchases by minors. Sites may be selling cigars to minors if they provide no mechanisms to prevent such sales. Some prohibitive messages (such as the Nat Sherman statement), rather than serving to dissuade young people, may actually serve to increase smoking's appeal to adolescents by framing it as an "adult" and therefore desirable activity. Cartoons may likewise increase youth appeal.

Although the sites we examined were easily located, we cannot claim that they are representative of all such sites. We do not know whether youth actually visit these sites or how these sites may influence them. We archived these sites, but the Internet changes constantly. On May 18, 1999, we repeated the initial steps of our search procedure to see whether cigar sites were still readily accessed. Excite search results are

reported somewhat differently now than in 1998, but following an Excite link to "Cigar Web Sites" brought up 27 sites, including the Fuji page, which now offers links to 76 sales sites (up from 63). The second-position site, now Internet Cigar Group (<http://www.cigargroup.com/weblist/ret.htm>), lists links to more than 400 sales sites, compared with 139 in 1998 on Blackhole. These increases provide rough evidence that the Internet may be a growing medium for cigar sales.

Recently, the Clinton-Gore administration released an international agreement on Internet use stating that "information and education [and] filtering/blocking systems or other tools"³³ are the recommended approaches for addressing Internet content unsuitable for children. Tobacco control advocates may need to focus attention on improving enforcement of existing laws prohibiting tobacco sales to minors, since restricting Internet tobacco-related content is politically unpalatable. A Synar-like enforcement program for the Internet could be one option. □

Contributors

Both authors planned and designed the study and worked together on the analyses. R. E. Malone collected the data and wrote the paper. L. A. Bero contributed to the editing and revision of the paper. Both authors responded to critiques.

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