



## Short Communication

## Tobacco harm perceptions and use among sexual and gender minorities: findings from a national sample of young adults in the United States

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The prevalence of tobacco use was higher for sexual and gender (SGM) minorities compared to their non-SGM counterparts.
- Lower absolute harm perceptions of cigarettes and e-cigarettes were associated with past 30-day product use.
- The perception of little cigars/cigarillos/bidis and e-cigarettes as less harmful than cigarettes was associated with past 30-day product use.
- In this study, harm perceptions did not moderate the relationship between identifying as a SGM and tobacco use behavior.

## ARTICLE INFO

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** In the United States, the prevalence of tobacco use among sexual and gender minorities (SGM) is higher compared to their non-SGM counterparts. Tobacco harm perceptions have gone largely unexamined as a potential mechanism supporting disproportionate tobacco use among this population. The purpose of this study was to examine differences between SGM and non-SGM young adults in harm perceptions of various tobacco products and tobacco use behavior and whether low tobacco-related harm perceptions moderate the relationship between identifying as a SGM and tobacco use behavior.

**Methods:** This study used data from Wave 10 of the Truth Initiative Young Adult Cohort Study, a sample of U.S. young adults (ages 18–34). Data were collected from September to October 2016 and the study sample included 3089 individuals. Demographics, past 30-day use of cigarettes, little cigars/cigarillos/bidis and electronic cigarettes were assessed. Absolute and relative harm perceptions of these products were also examined.

**Results:** Identifying as a SGM and low tobacco harm perceptions were found to be positively associated with past 30-day tobacco use. There was no interaction between SGM status and harm perceptions on past 30-day tobacco use.

**Conclusions:** Findings confirm that SGM young adults continue to disproportionately use tobacco products, compared to non-SGM young adults. More research is needed to understand moderators of the relationship between SGM status and tobacco use in young adults.

## 1. Introduction

In the United States (US), the prevalence of tobacco use is higher for sexual and gender minorities (SGMs), which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and queer individuals (Human Rights Campaign, 2016), compared to their non-SGM counterparts (Agaku et al., 2014; Buchting et al., 2017; Emory et al., 2015; Fallin et al.,

2015; Institute of Medicine, 2011; Johnson et al., 2015; Kasza et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2009; Ortiz et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2014; Wheldon et al., 2018). Recent, national data show that 27.3% of heterosexual individuals are current users of any tobacco product while 39.8% and 45.7% of gay/lesbian and bisexual adults are current tobacco users, respectively (Kasza et al., 2017). Another national study found that 45.9% of transgender males and 33.5% transgender females are past

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30-day tobacco users, while 28.3% of cisgender males and 22.1% of cisgender females are past 30-day tobacco users (Buchting et al., 2017). Among SGMs, tobacco use is especially prevalent among young adults (ages 18–34) (Johnson et al., 2015; Rath et al., 2013; Wheldon et al., 2018). To date, three studies have examined tobacco use behavior among SGMs using a national sample of young adults. A 2011 study by Rath et al. found that ever and past 30-day use of cigarettes and hookah were significantly higher for lesbian/gay and bisexual respondents and that lesbian/gay respondents reported marginally higher prevalence of ever use of cigars and little cigars/cigarillos/bidis, compared to heterosexual respondents (Rath et al., 2013). Using data from the 2012–2013 National Adult Tobacco Survey, Johnson et al. examined differences in tobacco use between LGBT and heterosexual adults by gender. In sub-analyses of 18–29 year olds, they found that cigarette use was higher for bisexual females, but not lesbian/gay females, compared to heterosexual females. They did not find any differences in tobacco use behavior between gay and bisexual males in comparison to heterosexual male young adults (Johnson et al., 2015). A recent study using data from Wave 1 (2013–2014) of the Population Assessment of Tobacco Use and Health (PATH) study found that among 18–24 year olds, a greater proportion of women who identified as lesbian/gay and bisexual women were regular tobacco users and had greater relative odds of experimental use of cigarettes, e-cigarettes, hookah, cigars and smokeless tobacco compared to heterosexual females (Wheldon et al., 2018). Among 18–24 year old men, gay men had greater odds of regular and experimental use of cigarettes compared to heterosexual men (Wheldon et al., 2018).

Research on the factors associated with greater tobacco use among young adult SGMs is scant (Balsam et al., 2012; Blosnich et al., 2013). A systematic review of the etiology of tobacco use among lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals identified two sources of tobacco-use disparities among this population: 1) smoking risk factors unique to sexual minorities, such as internalized homophobia, experiences of discrimination; and 2) common risk factors that are more prevalent among sexual minorities, such as stress, depression, anxiety, substance use (Blosnich et al., 2013). Research also suggests that greater exposure to pro-tobacco marketing (Dilley et al., 2008) and higher receptivity to pro-tobacco marketing (Fallin et al., 2015) may be factors related to disproportionate tobacco use among SGMs.

Tobacco harm perceptions have gone largely unexamined as a potential mechanism supporting tobacco use among SGMs. More prevalent peer tobacco use (Jannat-Khah et al., 2017; Blosnich et al., 2013; Remafedi, 2007) and tobacco industry marketing efforts (Dilley et al., 2008; Fallin et al., 2015; U.S. National Cancer Institute, 2017) may alter tobacco harm perceptions among this population by making tobacco use appear more normative. One study used a nationally representative sample of adults to examine differences in risk perceptions of e-cigarettes between lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) and heterosexual adults (Nayak et al., 2017). In bivariate analyses, a smaller proportion of LGB adults believed vapors from e-cigarettes to be harmful compared to heterosexual adults. No differences were observed between LGB and heterosexual respondents in terms of relative harm perceptions of e-cigarettes compared to regular cigarettes and absolute harm of e-cigarettes. This study did not examine risk perceptions of other tobacco products and did not present data on young adults specifically (Nayak et al., 2017).

Research demonstrates that in the general population, tobacco harm perceptions are significant correlates and predictors of tobacco use intentions and behaviors among young adults, such that lower harm perceptions of a product are positively associated with product use (Adkison et al., 2013; Villanti et al., 2015; Wackowski and Delnevo, 2016). Specifically, several longitudinal studies have found that beliefs about the health consequences of cigarettes and lower perceptions of harm are predictors of cigarette use (Krosnick et al., 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2007; Song et al., 2009). Data are similar for non-cigarette tobacco products. Cross-sectional data from the National Young Adult Health Survey found

that those who perceived a tobacco product as “less risky” than regular cigarettes were more likely to use the corresponding non-cigarette tobacco product (Wackowski and Delnevo, 2016). An earlier longitudinal study in the Truth Initiative Young Adult Cohort found that perceptions of hookah as less harmful than cigarettes predicted subsequent hookah trial in young adults (Villanti et al., 2015).

To fill this gap in the literature, we examined differences between SGM and non-SGM young adults in perceptions of absolute and relative harm of various tobacco products and tobacco use behavior. We also examined whether low tobacco-related harm perceptions moderate the relationship between identifying as a SGM and tobacco use behavior. Given the high rates of tobacco use among SGM young adults, the paucity of data on the mechanisms that support smoking behavior in this population, and the established link between harm perceptions and tobacco use, this study may provide meaningful and generalizable insight into potential reasons for the disproportionate tobacco use among SGM young adults in the US.

## 2. Methods

This study was approved by Chesapeake IRB, Inc. and online consent was collected from participants before survey self-administration.

### 2.1. Data

This study uses data from Wave 10 ( $n = 4091$ ; collected September – October 2016) of the Truth Initiative Young Adult Cohort Study, a national, longitudinal sample of young adults, aged 18–34 that is collected approximately every 6-months. The sample was drawn from GfK's KnowledgePanel®, an online panel of adults ages  $\geq 18$  that covers both the online and offline populations in the U.S. Additional information about survey methodology have been reported elsewhere (Cohn et al., 2015). After Wave 1, the sample for each wave consisted of people who completed the previous wave, plus a refreshed sample from the GfK panel, meaning that new individuals were added to the cohort at each wave to maintain sample size and compensate for those lost to attrition (Hirano et al., 2001). Two hundred and twenty-five respondents did not provide information on sexual and gender identity and were excluded from the analysis. An additional 777 respondents were older than 34 years of age and were also excluded from the analysis, resulting in a final sample of 3089 respondents.

### 2.2. Measures

The primary independent variable of interest was SGM status, which was assessed at study entry. For those who entered the study in Waves 1–8, sexual and gender identity was assessed with the following question: “Do you consider yourself to be: heterosexual or straight, homosexual or gay/lesbian, bisexual, transgender, other, not sure/don't know.” Those who selected “homosexual or gay/lesbian,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” “other” and “not sure/don't know” were categorized as SGMs. In Waves 9 and 10, respondents in the refresh samples were asked two separate questions regarding their sexual and gender identity. First, respondents were asked if they consider themselves to be transgender. Answer choices included “yes, transgender, male to female,” “yes, transgender, female to male,” “yes, transgender, gender non-conforming” and “no.” Participants were then asked: “Do you think of yourself as: straight, gay or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, transsexual, or gender-non-conforming?” Those who identified as straight/heterosexual were classified as non-SGM, while the remainder of participants were classified as SGM. Respondents who identified as transgender in Wave 10 but also identified as straight/heterosexual were reclassified as SGM ( $n = 3$ ). Answer choices to all questions related to sexual and gender identity were mutually exclusive.

#### 2.2.1. Demographics

As part of KnowledgePanel® routine baseline data collection,

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