



Internet little cigar and cigarillo vendors: Surveillance of sales and marketing practices via website content analysis

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Cigar sales have nearly doubled as cigarette sales have dropped, and large cigars have been replaced by little cigars and cigarillos (LCCs). Many LCCs are flavored, are perceived as less harmful than cigarettes, and have become increasingly available from e-commerce sources. We conducted surveillance of the online retail environment in 2013 and 2014 for LCCs in order to describe characteristics of Internet tobacco vendors selling LCCs and their sales and marketing practices, youth access practices, and their practices in relation to cigarette and other tobacco product sales.

Methods: In 2013, we identified and manually screened 32,446 websites, yielding 500 unique Internet LCC vendors. In 2014, we identified 511 vendors selling LCCs from a list of 31,239 manually screened websites. We then selected 249 in 2013 and 263 in 2014 for content analysis focusing on six domains including demographics, youth access, payment and delivery, products for sale, promotions and claims, and prices.

Results: Just over half of vendors in both years were located solely in the U.S. with 70.1% of those selling flavored LCCs in 2013 and 76.1% in 2014. Nearly half *only* used proven ineffective age verification strategies and another 10% made no attempts to verify age at all. Most vendors accepted credit cards and advertised using the United States Postal Service. Half of vendors featured a variety of health warnings and most featured promotions.

Conclusions: Federal bans on flavored cigarettes and restrictions on age verification, payment, and shipping for Internet tobacco sales should be extended to include LCCs.

1. Introduction

Cigar sales have nearly doubled over the past decade, corresponding with a drop in *cigarette* sales following excise tax increases (Agaku and Alpert, 2016). While cigar smoking has historically been associated with large cigars, market research shows that they no longer dominate the market, holding only an 8% market share, with over 91% of today's cigar market comprised of machine-manufactured, mass-merchandise little cigars and cigarillos (LCCs) (Euromonitor International, 2015).

Approximately 7% of U.S. adults smoked cigars in 2013 (Corey et al., 2014). In 2015, more high school boys smoked cigars (11.5%) than cigarettes (10.7%), representing 1.4 million cigar-smoking youth (Singh et al., 2016).

While little cigars and cigarillos have differing *legal* definitions, the terms are often used interchangeably by *sellers* to refer to products marketed as cheaper but comparable alternatives to cigarettes: cigarette-sized products wrapped in paper containing tobacco. Cigars have well-established adverse health consequences similar to cigarettes (Chang et al., 2015), but are often erroneously perceived as safer than

cigarettes (Malone et al., 2001).

In addition to being available through traditional retail channels, LCCs are increasingly available in the expanding marketplace of Internet Tobacco Vendors (ITVs). The world of online tobacco commerce is expanding; from 2000 to 2007, the number of English-language Internet vendors selling *cigarettes* rose (and fell) from 88 (Ribisl et al., 2001) to 497, peaking at 775 (Williams and Ribisl, 2011). This was troubling, as online tobacco commerce has historically resulted in sales to minors (Williams et al., 2016; Chriqui et al., 2008; Ribisl et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2006; Ribisl et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2015), cheaper tobacco products through tax avoidance and smuggling (Ribisl et al., 2001; Williams and Ribisl, 2011; Williams et al., 2016; Chriqui et al., 2008; Ribisl et al., 2007; Jo et al., 2015; Samuel et al., 2012), fraud (Williams et al., 2016), and other issues (Williams and Ribisl, 2011; Chriqui et al., 2008; Jo et al., 2015; Samuel et al., 2012; Williams and Ribisl, 2014; Cohen et al., 2001). While significant advances were made in 2005–2009 to regulate and heavily restrict the means by which *cigarettes* may be paid for online and delivered (Office of the New York State Attorney General, 2005; Attorney General of the State of New

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York Health Care Bureau, 2005a; Attorney General of the State of New York Health Care Bureau, 2005b; Attorney General of the State of New York Health Care Bureau, 2006; 111th U.S. Congress, 2010), these measures do not apply to the nearly identical LCC products on the market.

The 2009 U.S. Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (FSPTCA) (111th U.S. Congress, 2009) gave FDA the authority to regulate tobacco, and included restrictions banning characterizing flavors in cigarettes (excluding menthol) and facilitating excise tax increases. However, the initial regulation did not cover LCCs, which resulted in an influx of LCC “replacement products” hitting the market, designed to look like lower priced cigarettes and appeal to cigarette consumers. Some manufacturers simply made minor changes to their flavored cigarette products and relabeled them as flavored cigars (Delnevo and Hrywna, 2015). Further complicating matters, 2009 federal tobacco regulation (111th Congress, 2009) increased taxes on small cigars much more than on large cigars, which led to small cigar manufacturers making minor product changes to add enough weight to legally classify them as large cigars for tax purposes, while they still appeared to users to be cigarette replacement products at a much cheaper price (Gootnick, 2014).

Increasing use of LCCs could undermine the public health benefits of declining cigarette use absent responsive and swift regulation and enforcement. Identifying how LCCs are marketed and sold is essential to informing the implementation of recent FDA Deeming regulations (Food and Drug Administration, 2016) and ultimately to reducing use. While LCCs are now subject to federal regulation, regulatory oversight of Internet LCC Vendors (ILVs) and enforcement could be challenging for several reasons, including the broad reach of the Internet, the rapidly changing online tobacco product marketplace, and complexities related to regulating interstate and international commerce (Ribisl et al., 2003; Banthin, 2004).

Despite the rapidly expanding Internet tobacco marketplace, to date there has been no systematic investigation of online LCC marketing and advertised sales practices. To address this gap, we conducted surveillance of the online retail environment for LCCs in 2013 and 2014 prior to FDA Deeming regulations in order to describe the characteristics, advertised sales and marketing practices, youth access prevention practices, and practices in relation to cigarette and other tobacco product sales of ILVs. This study's findings can inform the development of new policies and enforcement of new and existing policies to regulate online sales of LCCs.

2. Methods

2.1. Website identification procedures

We identified ILVs from a concurrent study of Internet Tobacco Vendors (ITVs) selling all types of tobacco products, using several sources to identify potential ITVs. Study sampling sources and procedures are described in Fig. 1 and further detailed in a prior publication using the same sampling methodology (Williams et al., 2017). The breadth and depth of our methodology resulted in the identification of a much larger and diverse population of potential ILV websites than previous studies of online tobacco sales using popular Internet search engine queries to identify vendors (Cuomo et al., 2016; Klein et al., 2016; Mackey et al., 2015; Grana and Ling, 2014; Zhu et al., 2014).

After manually screening 32,446 websites for eligibility in 2013, we identified 500 ILVs. In 2014, we identified 511 ILVs from 31,239 manually screened websites. While the approximate number of identified ILVs remained consistent from year to year, 46.8% of sites in 2013 were no longer in business by 2014, consistent with attrition trends seen in Internet Cigarette Vendors prior to federal regulation (Williams and Ribisl, 2011).

2.2. Inclusion criteria

We defined an ILV as an English-language website selling little cigar or cigarillo products for home delivery. Modeled after definitions by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we defined a little cigar as a small cigar similar in size to a cigarette, often including a filter and a cigarillo as a three to four inch short and narrow (mostly non-filtered) cigar containing around three grams of tobacco (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). We combined the product categories because both *manufacturers* and *ILVs* often use the terms interchangeably, along with terms such as small cigar or filtered cigar (in product descriptions or packaging), making consistently distinguishing between the two product types as presented on ILV websites impossible, and as previously noted, some manufacturers made product changes that, while unnoticeable to the user, changed the products' tax categories, making distinction between the product categories impractical.

Using highly accurate (Fishken, 2015) *Alexa.com* website traffic rankings (Alexa Traffic Rankings, 2016), the 200 most popular ILVs were selected for content analysis in 2013, along with an additional 49 ITVs that were not among the most popular LCC vendors but were among the 200 most popular vendors of cigarettes, e-cigarettes, or other tobacco products and also sold LCCs. The same protocol applied in 2014 resulted in selection of 263 ILVs.

2.3. Coding procedures

We used software to create offline browsable archives of all websites during a short time window, allowing for unchanging copies of the websites for an extended period of in-depth data collection, auditing, and data analysis verification using OnTrAC (Online Tracking, Auditing, and Coding), our proprietary data collection application built for analyzing Internet content. Two trained staff coded each website, and OnTrAC flagged any inter-rater discrepancies for resolution by senior staff. Using SAS 9.3, final records were analyzed and appropriate statistical tests calculated including frequencies, descriptive statistics, and chi-square tests for between group analysis and *t*-tests to test for significant differences between means from 2013 to 2014.

2.4. Measures

To gather comprehensive information about ILV business practices, data were collected across six major domains including demographics, youth access, payment and delivery, products for sale, promotions and claims, and prices. Demographics information collected from each ILV included the country(ies) and state(s) in which they were located or operate and whether or not they had a retail location.

Youth access features assessed included age warnings and what, if any, age verification was utilized. Age verification strategies tracked that *cannot* effectively verify age included clicking a checkbox and statements that merely ‘submitting an order certified the buyer was of legal age’ (Vowell, 2002). Age verification strategies that could *potentially* verify age were tracked, including Date of Birth (DOB), by itself and with more or less rigorous strategies (examples of the former including using an online age verification service, sending driver license information, or claiming to verify age at delivery).

Products offered, prices, payment and delivery options, and promotions such as free shipping and tax-free sales were assessed, as were vendor claims (both accurate and not) including health and price advantages of LCCs over cigarettes.

3. Results

3.1. Website location and characteristics

Of the popular ILVs analyzed from 2013 ($N = 249$) and 2014 ($N = 263$), most were solely online vendors, with about a third having

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