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Title: “I’m killing myself, but I’m saving the planet”: Rolling tobacco smokers’ perceptions of rolling papers

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“I’m killing myself, but I’m saving the planet”: Rolling tobacco smokers’ perceptions of rolling papers

ABSTRACT

Introduction Despite the global growth of rolling tobacco, we are unaware of any research that has explored smokers’ perceptions of the types of rolling papers available, or plain rolling papers, which are now required in Canada and Israel.

Methods Eight focus groups were conducted with rolling tobacco smokers (N=50) in Greater Glasgow (Scotland) between February and March 2020. Participants were shown a number of packs of promotional rolling papers (natural, transparent, pre-rolled cones, flavoured) and plain rolling papers.

Results Rolling papers were often viewed as functional, a necessity for making roll-ups. The appeal of papers was based on the packaging, with a booklet style pack of natural papers viewed very positively, as well as novelty, usability and taste/smell. Participants often associated papers with particular users, with pre-rolled cones and some flavoured papers thought to be used by cannabis smokers or younger people and those just starting to smoke. In terms of harm perceptions, natural papers were viewed as a healthier choice than standard papers and more environmentally friendly, whereas transparent papers raised concerns about safety to both the user and the environment. Participants were generally ambivalent towards plain papers, which they did not feel would alter their purchasing or smoking behaviour, although some felt they may be less appealing to youth as the branding would be diminished.

Conclusions The panoply of rolling papers available offers consumers considerable choice.

As some promotional papers can increase appeal or create misperceptions of harm then standardising papers would help to counter this.

INTRODUCTION

Roll-your-own (RYO) tobacco is popular in Europe with sales increasing in most other regions.¹ While previously having a ‘downmarket old man image’,² RYO is now widely used by younger people and females.³⁻⁵ This is partly driven by the introduction of new brands, variants and blends, pack and filter innovation, and the rolling papers available.^{1,2,6-8}

Rizla remains the market leader for rolling papers, having two-thirds of the global market.⁹ However, market share has been declining¹⁰ as other brands and types of papers have proliferated. Papers now come in different materials (e.g. rice, bamboo)¹¹ and myriad colours,¹² shapes (e.g. pre-rolled cones),⁶ flavours (e.g. peaches and cream, cognac),⁶ weights and sizes.^{7,12-14} Canada and Israel became the first countries to require plain packaging for rolling papers.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ In the UK, while plain packaging is mandatory for cigarettes and RYO, the latter used by approximately two-fifths of smokers,^{5,7} the legislation does not cover rolling papers.

Despite the growing popularity of RYO, we are unaware of any research exploring the response of RYO smokers to promotional or plain rolling papers, which was the aim of our study.

METHODS

Design and sample

Eight focus groups, segmented by gender and age (18–24, 25-35), were conducted with daily RYO smokers (N=50) in Greater Glasgow (Scotland) in February-March 2020. A market researcher purposively recruited participants using street intercepts, explaining that the study was concerned with perceptions of rolling tobacco and packaging. Eligible participants received an information sheet with study details and provided consent to participate and be audio-recorded.

Procedure

Groups took place in a hotel/community centre and were moderated by CM, using a semi-structured topic guide. Participants were asked ‘What type of cigarette papers do you use?’ before being given four sets of papers (natural, clear, cone-shaped, flavoured), in turn, to handle (Figures 1-3), and asked about prior exposure and perceptions of these. All papers were available in Scotland except for two packs of natural papers (Boo Ba, Rizla Natura) and one pack of clear papers (Aleda). Participants were then shown plain papers (Figure 4), informed that in Canada all papers look like this, and asked their views on the plain papers and the Canadian approach. Groups lasted up to 90 minutes, with participants receiving an incentive (£30). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Stirling (GUEP726).

Figures 1-4 here

Analysis

Discussions were transcribed verbatim, data de-identified, and thematic analysis undertaken using NVivo 12 and an iterative approach.¹⁸ Both authors familiarised themselves with the transcripts. Preliminary codes were identified and collated into overarching themes and subthemes, which were refined through re-examination of the data and discussion. In the

Results, quotes include age group and gender (M/F), with any demographic differences mentioned.

RESULTS

Functionality

While papers are a pre-requisite for making roll-ups, and something that RYO smokers frequently interact with, RYO packs often include papers and many participants said they would use whatever papers came in the pack. When running short of papers ('skins'), participants often bought Rizla because it was reliable, available in shops and has high brand awareness:

"If I'm buying them I'll buy Rizla, but if I just buy a packet of tobacco and they have it [papers] in then I'll just smoke them" (FG6, 18-24F).

Appeal

Packaging

The packaging of the natural papers created interest, particularly Boo Ba, gumless papers packaged with a bound edge. Females described the packaging as "lovely", "beautiful", "fancy", "cute", and "fun", with younger males calling it "cool". Several females suggested ways to enjoy Boo Ba packaging beyond its intended use, with one saying she would "buy that even if I didn't smoke... just to give them to people" (FG1, 18-24F). Others said they would "buy it and frame it" or "have it on your wall... for decoration" (FG6, 18-24F).

Descriptors on packs of natural papers (e.g. natural, unbleached, organic, chlorine-free) also increased appeal:

“That’s the new best thing since sliced bread having natural skins... I’ll maybe go and buy a packet after we finish here. I’m wanting the organic stuff” (FG1, 18-24F).

Novelty

The novelty of natural papers boosted their appeal, but novelty did not always mean favourable perceptions. While few participants had seen transparent papers before, some suggested they held limited appeal beyond a one-time purchase due to the ‘novelty factor’:

“I don’t think it’s a regular thing [purchasing transparent papers]... but I would still, it’s like a novelty... a wee trial, yeah” (FG4, 25-35F).

Usability

Perceived or actual usability of papers was an important component of appeal, sometimes over-riding initial reactions based on the packaging, especially for natural papers which were perceived by younger males as difficult to roll:

“They look cool but they’re absolutely useless” (FG7, 18-24M).

Males usually preferred thicker papers because of the propensity of thinner papers to self-extinguish, e.g. *“The thinner the paper means it goes out all of the time”* (FG5, 18-24M), although some flavoured papers, e.g. liquorice papers, were considered too thick: *“You may as well rip a page out of a book”* (FG5, 18-24M). Females preferred thinner papers, with

several drawn to some natural papers on this basis. The Jamaican rum and Cannabis papers, single rolls that enable users to customise the length of each roll-up, were dismissed by one group as too thick and awkward to use.

Taste/Smell

Some who had tried natural papers were disappointed by the taste whereas others considered it preferable to standard papers. Many had tried flavoured papers, but no longer used them or viewed them for occasional use only, e.g. *“I couldn’t use them all the time, it would make you sick”* (FG2, 25-35M). While participants often liked the smell of flavoured papers, the taste failed to live up to expectations, e.g. *“They smell nice but never taste like it”* (FG1, 18-24F).

User identity

Natural papers were perceived by one group as designed for *“hippies”*, *“vegan smokers”* (FG7, 18-24M) or those seeking a healthier lifestyle, even if this seemed illogical, e.g. *“I want to say health conscious, but how can you be [as a smoker]?”* (FG7, 18-24M). The pre-rolled cones and many flavoured papers were typically associated with cannabis use:

“Naebody is smoking that [pre-rolled cones] unless they’re smoking joints” (FG3, 25-35M)

Some females suggested that the pre-rolled cones are designed for inexperienced rollers, e.g. *“For people that can’t roll”* (FG1, 18-24F). Participants felt that flavoured papers are designed for young people, with several having tried them when younger. Several females suggested that the tobacco industry used flavoured papers to attract people into smoking, e.g. *“[It is] for when they don’t really like the taste of tobacco yet”* (FG8, 25-35F).

Harm

Health harms

Natural papers were typically considered a healthier choice than standard papers because they are natural, organic or unbleached. In one group, participants equated natural papers with reduced harm, and an alternative to quitting: “*Instead of quitting people might just want to cut down to those skins*” (FG1, 18-24F), with another group considering the natural papers positioning them unrealistically as a healthier lifestyle choice:

“They’ve got to try and get a little instance of ‘oh it’s a little bit healthier because they’re not bleached’.

It’s like buzz words to make you choose so you feel a little bit less guilty [about smoking]” (FG7, 18-24M).

Participants viewed the transparent cellulose papers as “*horrible*” and “*unhealthy*”, with product safety concerns:

“It’s plastic and you just think, I’m not putting that in my body.

I don’t trust things like that.

That would just kill you on the spot.

It doesn’t look safe” (FG1, 18-24F).

Environmental harms

Participants voiced environmental-based concerns about the transparent papers, describing them as “*unnatural*” and “*plastic*”. Conversely, natural papers were viewed positively, with

terms such as ‘organic’ and ‘natural’ prompting views that they are more environmentally friendly:

“It’s probably better for the planet?” (FG1, 18-24F).

“They biodegrade much quicker, so when you throw them away you’re like ‘I’m still saving the planet. I’m killing myself, but I’m saving the planet’” (FG3, 25-35M).

Perceptions of plain papers

While some younger males liked plain papers, calling them “cool” or “class”, the consensus was that they would not change their purchasing habits or smoking behaviour as the pack does not matter, e.g. *“It’s just a packet”* (FG2, 25-35M). These views contradicted those expressed about the Boo Ba packaging. One participant reflected on this, saying *“The novelty of these new products coming out would definitely be lost if they were just you know in a sea of other identical products... I don’t know if I’d reach for that the one that looks like a school jotter [Boo Ba papers]... if it’s branding was like that”* (FG5, 18-24M).

Some felt that plain papers might deter youth from starting to smoke RYO as the branding would no longer be salient, e.g. *“It stops making it as fun... young people, they’d just run in and be like ‘oh, that mustn’t be for me because it’s... basic and all black’”* (FG8, 25-35F). Participants discussed reduced brand identity as a result of plain papers, particularly for *“impressionable smokers”* (FG7, 18-24M) who might ordinarily be drawn to certain brands. However, the availability of different paper types, such as flavoured papers, would limit any potential value of plain papers:

“And while they’re doing this [plain papers], there’s chocolate and blueberry flavours elsewhere, you know?” (FG1, 18-24F).

DISCUSSION

Rolling papers were often considered functional, a necessity for constructing roll-ups.

However, when shown different papers some were viewed positively, with appeal driven by usability, taste/smell, novelty and packaging. Natural papers with innovative packaging were viewed very favourably, particularly among females, aligning with tobacco industry journals descriptions of the importance of RYO packaging for creating brand appeal.¹¹ Flavoured papers were thought to be targeted at young people. Just as flavours in factory-made cigarettes can promote initiation^{19,20} some females suggested that flavoured papers may offer a route into smoking.

There is a perception among RYO smokers that rolling tobacco is more natural, and therefore safer, than factory-made cigarettes.^{2,21} Participants suggested that natural papers may reduce the harms of smoking, consistent with the view of a manager of a rolling papers manufacturer who stated that “a new generation of adult smokers considers natural rolling papers to be less harmful to their health”.²² Just as cigarettes with descriptors such as natural or organic are associated with reduced harm²³⁻²⁷ the same may be true for rolling papers using these terms and, as such, regulators may feel it beneficial to ban these on RYO papers, as they have done on RYO packs across much of Europe, as a result of the Tobacco Products Directive.²⁸

Plain papers, which are required in Canada and Israel,¹⁵⁻¹⁷ were not thought to impact on purchasing or smoking behaviour but may reduce appeal to young people as brands would not stand out, and would prevent innovation and product development,¹⁵ which is predicted to stimulate increased demand for RYO.²⁹

The findings provide no insight into populations other than young adults. As some promotional papers, and the plain papers, were novel, this may have influenced responses. Research exploring adolescent response to plain papers, and consumer response in Canada and Israel, would be fruitful. As the RYO market is dynamic, helping engage new and existing consumers,^{6,7} market developments for RYO tobacco and accessories need to be monitored.^{8,30}

What this paper adds

- While sales of rolling tobacco are increasing in many regions, to our knowledge there has been no published research exploring how consumers perceive accessories such as rolling papers.
- We explored rolling tobacco smokers' perceptions of a range of rolling papers, including plain rolling papers.
- The packaging of some natural papers was considered highly appealing, with participants also suggesting that natural papers may reduce the harms of smoking.
- Plain rolling papers were not considered to have any impact on purchasing or smoking behaviour, but it was suggested that they may reduce RYO appeal for youth.

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Figure 1: Natural rolling papers



Figure 2: Transparent papers and pre-rolled cones



Figure 3: Flavoured rolling papers



Figure 4: Plain rolling papers

