

## **IS A CIGAR JUST A CIGAR? A GLIMPSE AT THE NEW-AGE CIGAR CONSUMER**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Cigar smoking is once again in vogue. While no longer at “fad” levels (Freccia, Jacobsen, and Kilby 2003), imports of quality hand-made cigars rose at almost double-digit rates during 2002 (Savona 2003) following several years of basically flat sales. The continuing strong demand for high-quality cigars appears to fly in the face of an anti-smoking, health-conscious society. Cigar consumption has persistently occupied the attention of high-profile individuals ranging from members of the entertainment industry to the political arena to the corner bar. Cigar smoking is again in fashion. Why has this happened? What does this mean? What do cigars symbolize in the lives of the consumer (both men and women)?

This paper seeks to provide some preliminary insights and first steps into the understanding of this continuing phenomenon. Through the use of existing literature and supplemental qualitative probing techniques, proposed theory is provided concerning the cigar smoking experience. The focus of the work is to build an initial “platform” for reflective thought on the direction of needed future research.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, a review of the current cigar phenomenon is put into perspective given the vast historical context and the meaning of the cigar as a cultural icon. Second, literature and preliminary qualitative data supporting the interactionist viewpoint of product symbolism is integrated to under gird theoretical models. The first theoretical model will represent the “internal/external symbolism” of cigar consumption. The second theoretical model will provide an overview of the internal hedonistic experiential elements of the cigar consumption experience.

### **Background**

According to Watts Wacker of the Stanford Research Institute, “Cigars are a wonderfully placed symbol in an age driven by icons” (Hamilton 1997). The hit movie *Titanic* featured cigars as an icon symbolizing male dominance in early twentieth century aristocracy and as a hallmark of achievement and success for a present-day treasure

hunter. Wacker also argues that people feel justified in “front loading” some fun into their life which, despite health trends, is doomed to be finite.

This new growth in cigar consumption seems to be driven by the rapidly expanding market of those who have come to embrace cigars as a satisfying response to the pressures of political correctness (Gallo 1997). From a review of the writings of Beirne (2000), Peyser (1997), and others regarding the cigar smoking experience, it is as if this act of conspicuous consumption is symbolizing, with significant metaphorical overtones, something more than the simple indulgence in a socially questionable product.

Veblen (1899) originally coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to refer to the purchase of goods for display as a means of asserting prestige and status. He also discussed how those who do not belong to the leisure class might acquire material goods in the belief that they make themselves intrinsically richer as a human identity. Cigars are an affordable luxury which convey attainment, achievement, and belongingness to the cultural elite. In addition, the usage of cigars sends a message about one's own personality. For instance, literature on the extended self refers to the extent to which people view themselves as being a certain type of individual because they use or own certain products (Belk 1981). In essence, the view of Freud that “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” (from Stogie Stats [http://members.tripod.com/~zenwarrior/stogie\\_quotes.html](http://members.tripod.com/~zenwarrior/stogie_quotes.html)) may well be shrinking in the wake of “new age” (since the introduction of *Cigar Aficionado*) cigar consumption in recent years.

Objects serve as props on the theatrical stage of life (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Kleine, et. al. (1994) believe that objects portray basic aspects of our individual personality. The new-age cigar consumer has, in essence, adopted the cigar as one social prop to be played on the stage of their life (Gallo 1997). This prop may take on various meanings as the “actor” uses it to illustrate or demonstrate differing aspects of personal individuality.

*Cigar Aficionado* magazine has played a key role in facilitating the upsurge in “cigar culture” and product symbolism both via advertising imagery, lifestyle articles and hosting of the extremely popular “Big Smoke” events across the country. To this context, we extend the ideas of Grant McCracken (1988), who maintains that, in a fashion system, there is a link between the product and cultural categories and principles that allow opinion leaders to pass along meaning to others through social interaction as well as advertising and promotion.

### **Supportive Qualitative Exploration**

A “grounded theoretical approach” (Dey 1999) building upon subjective personal introspection (Holbrook 1998) and relevant literature was used to supplement our efforts in developing hypothetical underpinnings of the cigar smoking social phenomenon. In addition, several qualitative methods were used to further elucidate proposed theory. One of these approaches consisted of three-dimensional photoelicitation at “cigar parties,” which brought together cigar smokers with a fine collection of cigars and their favorite libations. Digital 3D photos of cigar smokers were taken in typical, yet highly meaningful and enjoyable social situations. Photographed subjects were then interviewed using photoelicitation. This technique allows the researchers to understand how people savor this particular sensory package — the cigar, the drink, the social interaction accompanying the smoking experience. In addition, because cigar smoking is highly symbolic experience where the user is sending “social sonar” to others through their product usage, this technique allows the participant to view their own body language as a means for them to better articulate what they are communicating to others. Collier and Collier (1986) contend that the richer, more provocative, and vividly intense the images are of the informant, the greater the potential projective insight to be gained from the interview data. Pushing beyond the usefulness of mere photographs, Holbrook (1997) has argued for the need to provide visually compelling images in three-dimensions so as to deepen both the informants’ and the researchers’ understanding of visual reference points. In addition to 3D interviews, supporting focus group interviews as well as field interviews at a recent “Big Smoke” event allows us to augment existing literature to build proposed theoretical “nodes and links.” The resulting theoretical models provide “roadmaps” for future empirical exploration of this culturally rich and psychologically complex consumption activity.

**Subject Keywords:** Product Symbolism, Cigar Consumption, Social Influences.

## IS A CIGAR JUST A CIGAR? A GLIMPSE AT THE NEW-AGE CIGAR CONSUMER

This continuing and once again growing demand for high-quality cigars has profound social connotations. With strong metaphorical overtones, cigar consumption has persistently occupied the attention of the popular press and entertainment industry (having shown up everywhere from *The Simpson's* and HBO's *Sopranos* to CD covers such as Jay-Z's) and has been linked to the phenomenal appeal and success of *Cigar Aficionado* (CA) magazine. It seems as though cigar smoking has become a symbol of good times and good fortune (Schultz 2000).

But the growth in high-quality cigar consumption seems to fly in the face of health consciousness and to contradict the anti-smoking movement. In fact, some anti-tobacco critics argue CA performs a maladaptive function, masking health concerns (DeSantis and Morgan 2003). Quality cigars appeal to consumers that heretofore would have been highly unlikely candidates to favor such a seemingly politically incorrect indulgence. Such otherwise abstemious individuals might be expected to turn up their noses at the mere thought of lighting up. Yet, apparently, they make an exception to their scruples when it comes to the pleasures of smoking a cigar. Perhaps this is reflective of a strong underlying materialistic value system that considers premium cigars and other visible trappings as evidence of success and achievement (Gallo 1997; Martin and Elkin 1995; Richens and Dawson 1992).

In many ways cigars have become *the* fashion accessory (Beirne 2000; Savona 2003). Somewhat paradoxically, many of the new cigar smokers actually consider themselves to be “non-smokers.” They exercise and watch their diet, yet feel free to partake of a hand-rolled Central American tobacco delicacy. Most are upscale professionals – well-educated people with a high social profile (Shanken 1996). After all, good cigars are expensive – typically costing \$8 to \$15 a piece (often more) for something considered conducive to the most refined delectation. Additionally, significant numbers of these new cigar connoisseurs are female (Beirne 2000, Benitez 1996, Triplett 1995) (conspicuous examples are Demi Moore and Raquel Welch on the covers of CA).

As smoking has been demonized and tabooed, it has naturally become eroticized and seductive (*Wall Street Journal* 1997). Women have taken a particular pleasure in transgressing the taboo against feminine smoking. That scandalous pleasure may be found today in the spectacle of women smoking fat cigars while lounging on leather chairs. Along with many other social scientists, we must wonder: Why is this happening? What is the meaning of all of this? How have the self-concepts of upscale individuals changed so as to find favor with cigars? What do fancy cigars mean and symbolize in the lives of the men and women who consume them?

In this paper, a review of the current cigar phenomenon is put into perspective given the vast historical context and the meaning of the cigar as a cultural icon. Second, literature and preliminary qualitative data supporting the interactionist viewpoint of product symbolism (Solomon 1983) where the cigar smoker is influenced by the messages they believe they are sending out to other people through their usage of the cigar. Data are not an end, but rather part of the “bricks and mortar” for construction of proposed theoretical underpinnings of the cigar smoking experience. Our first theoretical model represents the “internal/external symbolism” of cigar consumption. Our second theoretical model provides an overview of the internal hedonic experiential elements associated with the cigar consumption experience.

We contend this current work provides an initial conceptual “platform” for deep, but not overly “pre-structured” reflective thought on the direction of future research on cigar consumption—perhaps best facilitated for the researchers with a Cohiba Robusto and some single-malt scotch.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Growth in Cigar Demand

Cigar production and consumption in North America enjoys a long and colorful history spanning in excess of 500 years (Del Todesco 1996). Perhaps no country on earth is as strongly identified with one particular product as

Cuba is with cigars (Miller and Henthorne 1997). Over ten million Cuban cigars are believed smuggled into the United States each year (Thurston 1995). Given the trade embargo in effect against Cuba since 1960, the supply of high-quality cigars legally available in the U.S. has come principally from other Latin American and Caribbean-based producers, many of which were founded by Cuban exiles.

As recently as fifteen years ago, with the image of the cigar at an all-time historic low, few would have envisioned the tremendous resurgence in cigar sales that has been experienced. This renewal, though tempered, proceeds even in the face of increased consciousness and concern for one's health. Between 1993 and 1997, cigar consumption increased more than 47%, and consumption of large cigars increased a remarkable 68% (Feit 2001). Similarly, in 1996 alone, the growth of imported cigars showed an astounding 67% increase (Savona 1997). From a level of approximately 100 million premium cigars imported annually into the U.S. between the years 1980 and 1992, the market stood at almost 200 million by the end of 1999 (Ackerman 1999). Overall, during the last half of the 1990s, cigar sales and consumption increased by over 50% (Wenger, Malone, and Bero 2001). Today, following several years of declining or flat sales, cigar consumption has returned to those lofty levels. During the first ten months of 2002, handmade cigar imports rose from 179 million to 195 million (Savona 2003), with like increase expected for the final two months of the year.

As a hallmark of the popularity of high-quality cigars, the magazine *Cigar Aficionado* (CA) made its debut in 1992, promoting a sophisticated, materialistic, upscale lifestyle with a complementary attraction to fine wines, single malt scotches, and luxurious clothing (Gallo 1997). At its peak, this publication boasted an estimated readership of 1.5 million (Shanken and Mott 1997). Over the last several years, the Boston Ritz Carlton and other high-end hotels have sponsored evenings devoted to gourmet food, wine, and cigars, thereby contributing to the aura of affluence and success associated with this form of smoking. *Cigar Aficionado* magazine began its highly successful "Big Smoke" events in May 1993, with over 1,500 cigar fans attending that event. The popularity of the event and the cigar is evidenced by the fact that nearly 6,000 cigar aficionados attended the recent "Big Smoke" in Las Vegas.

Such symbols for affluence and success appear to be particularly popular with the rapidly expanding market of males in their 20s and 30s, who have come to regard cigars as a welcome reaction against the stifling pressures of political correctness (Gallo 1997). Apparently, many members of Generation X, along with a few of their elders, regard the spectacle of themselves puffing away on a \$7 Havana Classico Churchill or indulging themselves on a \$12 Montecristo No. 1 as a powerful statement on behalf of their elite status or a potent blow in defense of their personal freedom. From a review of the discussions by Beirne (2000), Gallo (1997), Peyser (1997), and Shanken (1996) regarding the deep meaning of the cigar smoking experience, it is as if this conspicuous extravagance is symbolizing something beyond the simple indulgence of a good cigar.

### **Women and Cigars: A Brief History**

The relationship between women and cigars has always been a precarious one. For instance, cigar "smoking parlours," a must-have accessory in many homes in the United States in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, banished women completely. Men would retire into those parlours after dinner, leaving women to focus on the household issues. In the movie *Titanic*, the cigar is used as a symbol of male domination, illustrated through the character of Cal (played by Billy Zane), who epitomized the blustering, brandy-chugging, cigar-puffing male associated with the Industrialist era. In 1919 U.S. Vice President Thomas Marshall, as a means to engage the male electorate proclaimed: "What this country needs is a good five cent cigar."

Smoking for women was considered unfeminine, vulgar, and eccentric during this time. A woman smoking a cigarette in public was seen as lower class, and quite possibly a prostitute. In private, however, 19<sup>th</sup> century women enjoyed a smoke as much as did the men. It was only after the First World War that smoking became a sign of a modern woman, along with short hair, rising hemlines, and the right to vote. While typically the cigarette is more associated with this rise in women's status, as illustrated through Virginia Slim's long-standing campaign, "You've come along way baby," the cigar was also associated with defiance and breaking barriers. For example, the emancipated French writer George Sand (1804-1876) delighted in shocking guests by lighting up a cigar. She

was known for saying: "The cigar is the perfect complement to an elegant lifestyle" (from: <http://www.cuban-cigar-lifestyle.com/famous-women.html>).

Like many institutions dominated by an elite class, those in the under class used the symbols of the elite to attain membership. Sand is a perfect example. Sand took a man's name to get her work published in a male dominated world. She was known to march about Paris in men's trousers, trench coats, and neckties, smoking Cuban cigars - sometimes seven per day. Today, her name is perpetuated by the largest women's cigar smoking society, the George Sand Society, founded in Santa Monica, California in 1992 (cf. <http://www.cuban-cigar-lifestyle.com/famous-women.html>).

Other famous women associated with defiance have been known to smoke cigars. For instance, Bonnie Parker, of the infamous Bonnie and Clyde, smoked Cuban cigars as she and Clyde wreaked havoc across the southwest during the Depression. Annie Oakley puffed on cheroots to calm her nerves before and after shooting exhibitions. And who could forget the night pop icon Madonna smoked a cigar and left the host steaming during an appearance on "The Late Show with David Letterman," in March 1994? (<http://www.cuban-cigar-lifestyle.com/famous-women.html>)

However, an interesting paradox arises in women's use of cigars. While some have publicly used them to display their independence and liberation, the cigar industry itself has and continues to use women as sexual images to sell their products, in ways that would make many feminists balk. In fact, the women and sexual metaphor continues to this day within the pages of *Cigar Aficionado's* advertising. A recent example featured supermodel Linda Evangelista in a suggestive pose with a cigar, the caption reading "Honey, have you seen my Don Diegos?"

Beyond some of the political limitations involved in women's access to cigars, there has been an additional animosity associated between the two, demonstrated by Groucho Marx's famous comment: "Given the choice between a woman and a cigar, I will always choose the cigar." Others have suggested a competition between women and cigars: "Women are really jealous of cigars...they regard them as a strong rival." William Thackeray. (Both quotes from: [http://members.tripod.com/~zenwarrior/stogie\\_quotes.html](http://members.tripod.com/~zenwarrior/stogie_quotes.html).) Cigars are generally considered male products, and some men have resisted women's usage of them, James Belushi is a notorious example: "Women are fashion-oriented, which means they'll do something for a while and then in three years, after they're done with it, they'll start to knock it. Well, this is not fashion, it's a tradition among gentlemen. Women should leave it alone." (Quoted from: <http://www.cigarcircle.com>.) However, if Tomima Edmark, author of *Cigar Chic: A Woman's Perspective*, were to meet Mr. Belushi, she would undoubtedly take issue. She maintains the cigar appreciation between a man and a woman is quite romantic and healthy for relationship building and good conversation. She adds though, "Women cigar smokers, unfortunately must carry an added burden—the disapproval of nonsmoking women who, ironically, disapprove less of men who smoke cigars" (Edmark 1995, p. xii).

### Symbolism of Products

In many ways, objects serve as the props on the theatrical stage of our lives (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Objects are used to define, refine, and extend our self-concept not only to others we come in contact with (Belk 1987), but to further demonstrate this self-concept to ourselves (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Thus, representing the "interactionist view" of product symbolism. In essence, objects herald our association to others and help us express the relevance of our sense of self to ourselves (McCracken 1986; Rook 1985). Our attachment to objects has been shown to portray basic aspects of personal individuality (Kleine, Kleine III, and Allen 1994). For example, a watch that "shows who I am," a new outfit that "makes me feel good about myself" (Kleine et al. 1994), or a car that is "just me." In essence, the view of Freud that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar" may well be shrinking in the wake of this "new age" (since the introduction of *Cigar Aficionado*) cigar consumption.

The new-age cigar connoisseur has adopted the high quality cigar as one social prop to be played on the complex stage that constitutes their life (Gallo 1997); a prop that may take on varying meaning as the individual seeks to illustrate different aspects of personal individuality. Attachment to which has been alternatively described as one method of showing "I've made it" (Gallo 1997) or "the ultimate sex appeal" (Peysner 1997). Cigars, in many ways

one of the most overt of conspicuous consumptions, have come to be viewed by many as well placed status symbols in an age driven by icons (Hamilton 1997).

Veblen (1899) originally coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to refer to the purchase of goods for display as a means of asserting prestige and status. He also discussed how those who do not belong to the leisure class might acquire material goods in the belief that these goods make themselves intrinsically richer as a human identity. Cigars are an affordable extravagance, conveying attainment, achievement and belongingness.

## THEORY DEVELOPMENT

### Subjective Personal Introspection

According to Holbrook (1998), an “autoethnographic approach” to theory building or “Subjective Personal Introspection” (SPI) is an ideal precursor to the process of theory building. Towards that end, the authors offer their own cigar conversion experiences as non-restrictive antecedents to grounded theory development.

The first author’s cigar conversion experience took place several years ago during an academic conference at Jackson Hole Wyoming, following a highly successful day of skiing. The multi-sensory enjoyment of a Macanudo Maduro Churchill was augmented by the appreciation of the natural beauty of the Tetons, being “gloriously exhausted” from skiing, enjoying a favorite beverage and the camaraderie of academic colleagues - including the second author. For the first author, his “conversion experience” seemed to add depth and importance to cigar consumption that did not exist prior to that point. In a sense, this was an epiphany that high quality cigar consumption and appreciation were a world to be explored, not just through cigar smoking, but also through cigar social events and publications like *Cigar Aficionado* magazine.

The second author’s cigar conversion took place approximately ten years ago in the Caribbean, while in Cuba. As part of an official visit representing his university, he was the guest of the University of Havana. Part of his cultural immersion entailed sampling perhaps one of the finest products of the Cuban cigar industry, the Cuban Cohiba. This took place while relaxing with his host in the Hotel Nacional, once the destination of Al Capone. While enjoying this fine cigar, 15-year-old rum and the conversation, he came to appreciate the history of the cigar, the meaningfulness of the industry to the Cuban culture, and the affect of the multi-sensory cross-cultural experience. This has resulted in a long-standing research relationship with Cuban colleagues, which continues to the present day.

The third author was introduced to the glory of cigar smoking by the first author, her husband. The context was a romantic evening at a “retro” 1940s-style martini and cigar bar. The ritual of cutting the cap, correctly lighting the cigar, and appreciating the subtle nature of the flavors was complimented by Bombay Blue Sapphire martinis and a quixotic atmosphere. These romantic cigar encounters have continued to flourish; in fact, on a recent visit to Paris they shared a Cohiba in the lobby of the Ritz and caught the attention of Woody Allen as he walked by with his entourage.

The authors’ reflections on the cigar smoking experience dwelt upon the contemplative, creative and aesthetic qualities of the high quality cigar smoking experience and context and an abiding curiosity as to the psychological underpinnings of cigar smoking experiences for other consumers.

### Further Exploration into the Context of Personal and Interpersonal Discovery: The “Big Smoke.”

In order to “prime” analysis of the related literature and to compliment additional preliminary qualitative analyses the authors explored a profound context for the cigar smoker, *Cigar Aficionado*’s “Big Smoke” event held recently in Atlanta, Georgia. This event brought together several hundred dedicated cigar smokers under one roof and allowed the researchers the opportunity to observe behavior and gather additional textual data.

The setting for the “Big Smoke” was impressive, there were huge booths representing the best cigar makers in the world, as well as conspicuous examples of status products displayed - e.g., the Porsche Carrera and Triumph motorcycles. The room was filled with mostly men (90-95%) being served single-malt scotches by a provocatively attired female waitstaff. Arturo Fuente Junior was seen signing autographs. One booth was sponsored by Macanudo, which allowed participants to become part of their ad, as shown in Figure 1. We thought this was an excellent way to demonstrate participants’ level of product involvement.

**FIGURE 1**  
**First Author Cigar-Ad Involvement**



The overall atmosphere was relaxing, though many wore business attire to the event. Given the social atmosphere, we were able to only briefly talk to participants about their usage of cigars. A male participant commented, “I enjoy a cigar primarily playing golf with friends...it’s in recreational activities that I enjoy it most.” A female smoker intoned with a more common line of thought by saying, “Nice dinners are good occasions for a smoke. It is just something to relax with, like a glass of wine, after dinner.” Another female attendee carried this thought

further by stating, “We [my husband and I] like to relax by having a smoke on the beach at sunset. It is a perfect cigar time with a glass of champagne.” “This is not a macho thing. This is a relaxing thing” forcefully stated a male participant, effectively condensing the views of many participants into a very few succinct words.

The relationship between cigars and sex appeal cannot be overlooked. For many, the association between the two is inescapable. “I think a lady smoking cigars is the sexiest thing on earth. It is a woman who knows what she likes.” Comments such as this one, by a male participant, are common. Another male interviewee stated, “A woman with a cigar in the right environment can be very titillating and sexy.” This same individual further commented, “It says that she is more than a pretty face, it says that she has a love of life.”

Once again, relationship building was viewed as an important core element. As one male attendee put it, “It is all about bonding. I tell you what, I am here with my two neighbors and there is no talk about work or war. We put that all aside. We are just here to have fun.” Another participant visiting from California went on by stating, “We try to find a good cigar club with good scotch. It's tough in California. I don't smoke cigars because of what it says about me, I smoke cigars for the camaraderie.” A female participant summed up this train of thought by saying, “It is about wine, relationships, conversation – the whole person. Cigar smoking acts as a common bond. It can be a remarkable bonding experience.”

Possibly, the one interview exchange that most effectively sums up the general thoughts and beliefs of the “Big Smoke” participants is the following. “Just check the different presidents who have smoked cigars and you will see that they were smarter and more in touch with the people,” stated a female attendee. “Like Clinton?” the inrepid researcher asked. “Yes! I have yet to meet an uptight person who smokes cigars.”

### **Grounded Theory Development via Preliminary Data Collection**

Two focus groups of cigar smokers were conducted, one at a cigar bar in the Montgomery, Alabama area and another in the New Orleans area. While not providing the level of rich insight as the photo elicitation depth interviews, the focus group textual data was useful from the standpoint of illustrating motivation for cigar smoking, general gender issues, and cigar smoking contexts. Given the exploratory nature of this research and the need for laying the groundwork for future full-length individual depth interviews, the coding process also included data obtained from these focus groups. A total of seven men and one woman participated in the focus groups.

The one-on-one interviews were accomplished at two “cigar parties” held in the metro-Atlanta area. Potential study participants were invited to come and enjoy an evening of socializing with their friends under the stars while enjoying quality Central American and Caribbean cigars and selections of their favorite libations.

For each qualitative data collection interview, informants were asked to volunteer to be photographed while smoking and then to be questioned in-depth while viewing the three-dimensional stereographic photos just taken.<sup>1</sup> Pushing beyond the usefulness of mere photographs, Holbrook (1998) has argued for the need to provide visually compelling images in three-dimensions so as to deepen both the informants' and the researchers' understanding of visual reference points.

According to Heisley and Levy (1991), such an approach can be adapted to “the responsiveness of the informants and various applications [envisioned by] the researchers” (p. 269). Indeed, they contend that such a technique “dredges the consciousness and subconsciousness of the informant,” thereby providing a projective view of the subject in depth and enabling heightened objectivity, enhanced insight, and diminished interview wear-out. According to Collier and Collier (1986), the richer, the more provocative, and the more vividly intense the photograph of the informant, the greater the potential projective response or insight to be gained from the interview

<sup>1</sup> Toward this end, two Nikon 990 CoolPix digital cameras were employed. The cameras were mounted side by side on a bracket, toed slightly inward to converge at a distance of about eight feet, and synched to trigger at the same moment. After producing suitable left and right pictures, these files were downloaded and, utilizing Vrex digital imaging software, three-dimensional images were created and displayed on a computer screen for viewing by the informant during their interview with the researchers.

data. Three-dimensional stereography was employed in an effort to insure the availability of such richly evocative photographic images. A total of five men and two women were interviewed in this way.

### **Analysis**

Coding of these preliminary data was facilitated with the application of Atlas.ti 4.2 software. The authors easily agreed upon the coding labels and comments to be associated with specific sections of interview text. The purpose of this study is to “lay the groundwork” and provide “provisional” hermeneutic insight (c.f., Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994) for launching future deep metaphorical analysis. Therefore, in keeping with the tenets of “grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1999), the current project seeks to provide a useful framework upon which future research may be built. Indeed, in the future, this framework may well be altered through the addition of rich and revealing depth interviews. Such interviews may add data for the assessment of the logical linkages between text derived coded constructs.

## **CONSTRUCTION OF THEORETICAL MODELS**

*“Here, have a cigar. Light it up and be somebody.” ...from the film Pete Kelly's Blues*

Our first interest was in understanding the symbolism of the cigar. Data from the focus groups and 3D interviews were combined for the analysis. However, the focus groups proved more influential in the development of the first theoretical model, the symbolism of the cigar (shown in Figure 2). The 3D interviews were more beneficial toward understanding the experiential nature of the cigar experience reflected in components of the second theoretical model (displayed in Figure 3).

### **Symbolism Associated with a Cigar**

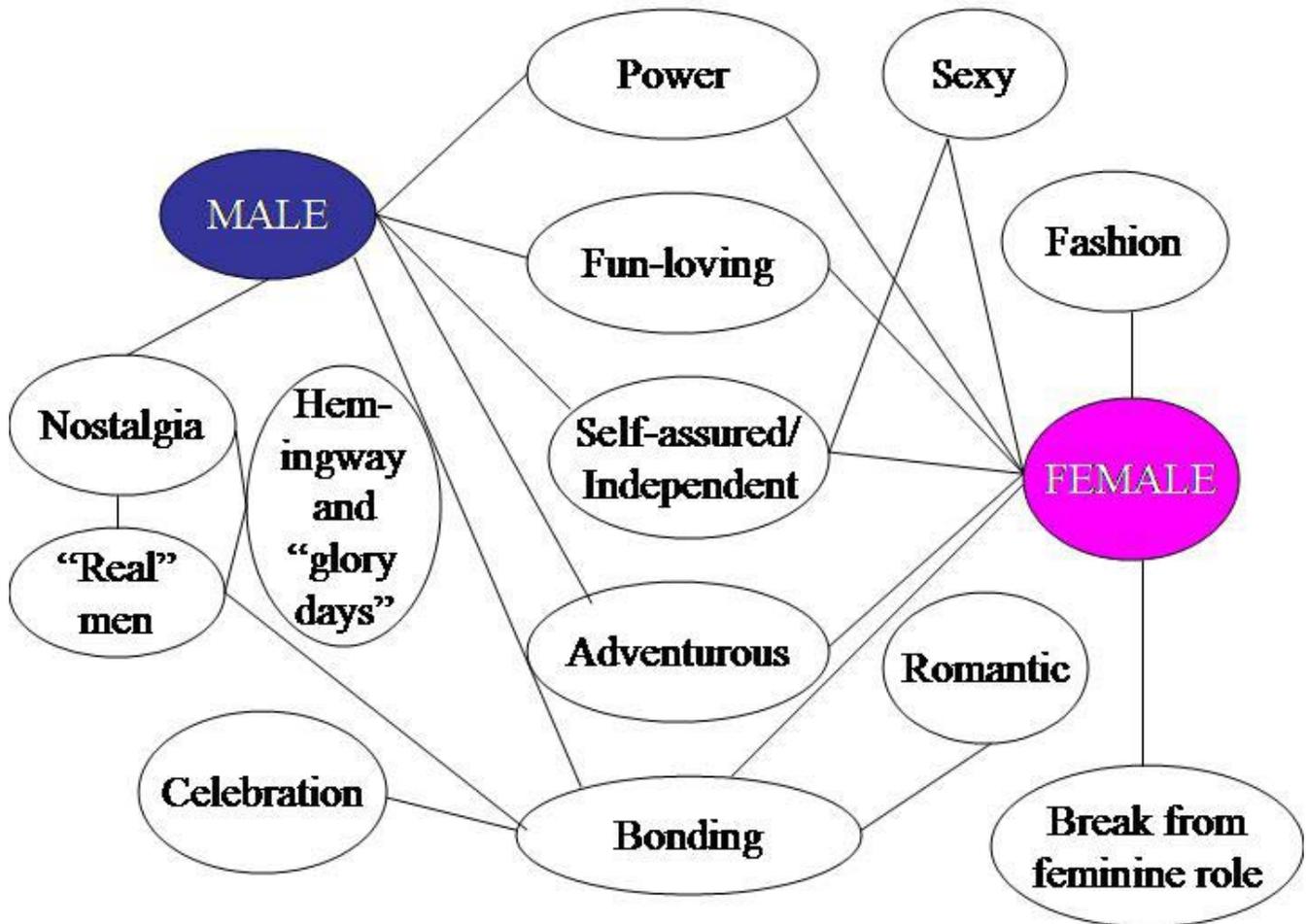
Symbolism was found to differ, depending on whether the consumer was male or female (refer to Figure 2). Note that many of the traits associated with both men and women smoking a cigar are similar. However, what one cannot see from this figure is how the traits emerged. The men were very reticent to admit the symbolism attached to the cigar. Scott, an advertising executive said, “One of the youngest visuals I have is this guy in my dad’s law firm. This guy was bigger than life. I don’t smoke to look like that.” But later in conversation, he admitted that he does it to “look established.” David, a salesman, indicated that the type of cigars one smokes does send a message: “I thinking smoking a Cuban cigar is kind of a status symbol. There is certainly snob appeal.” But that he, personally, would never smoke a cigar for that reason, rather he likes to try different brands each time he smokes. Matt, an MBA student, said he would never smoke a Cuban cigar, for another reason - that it was not patriotic. “Castro symbolizes repression. Castro symbolizes communism. It is a forbidden fruit.” But he was very interested in trying one if the regime were to fall.

Women, on the other hand, were far more forthcoming about the symbolic nature of the cigar. This finding is consistent with research finding that the newer user, or the one seeking attainment, is much more aware of the symbolism associated with the product. Belk, Mayer, and Bahn (1981) found that lower-class adults drew greater consumption-based inferences from products than did higher-class adults. Associatively, while we only had one female in the focus group and two in the 3D image groups, they were more direct about the power associated with the cigar, as well as the self-confidence one feels when smoking. “Independent, self-assured, that seems to be the personality of it,” Kola, a federal employee working in D.C., said of cigars in the focus group. Women appeared to use cigars as a passport to the boy’s club. For instance, Elizabeth, in the 3D interview said: “There’s no doubt that I’m a woman. I’m sitting out there and they all know that I’m female but yet they were able to talk about things that I think around some women maybe they wouldn’t have talked about...such as dirty movies....I was able to put in a few words about how I felt and I was not offended in any way.”

The most notable difference in Figure 2 between the symbolism associated with men and women is men’s connection to the rich history of cigar smoking, the nostalgia felt, “Hemingway,” and the manly-man symbol associated with smoking. Keith, a high school football coach said: “I am not a solo smoker...My duck hunting friends are also fellow football comrades. That seems to make it special, those Cajuns who smoke with me.” While Kola

noted the history of cigars, her focus was on what had changed: "In the old days, the guys would go into their reading room and smoke cigars away from the women. Now we have a change in social ideas. Now men and women are more together."

**FIGURE 2**  
**Symbolism Associated with Cigars**



The participants did note directly that they thought men and women were smoking cigars for different reasons. Mark, a liberal arts professor in the focus group: "A lot of guys want to demonstrate they are a "real man" to the females, so I suspect that is a motivation. There is also a trendy factor. So some women smoke cigars because of *Cigar Aficionado*, but the guys do it for macho reasons." Matt said: "I don't think women are really breaking into the cigar thing because women care more about what each other think. If women do it they know it sends a sexual message." An interesting finding was the animosity women who smoke have for those who do not, and visa versa, consistent with what Edmark (1995) speculated. Kola said, "It means you are not as high strung and high maintenance as a lot of women. Some women will look down on you for it." Kola said she had to explain to her girlfriends that it was a sexy, "cool" thing to do, but they seemed unreceptive. It appears that cigar-smoking women provoke a hostile response; other women see them as "selling out." It is noteworthy to add that the Bill and Monica scandal was still timely during these interviews so that may have tainted the cigar's image somewhat, especially among women. The disassociation between cigar-smoking women and other women, which appears in Figure 2, may help explain why women who read *Cigar Aficionado* are not offended by the sexist advertising—the women being exploited are not like them.

When men were asked to comment on what they thought about women smoking cigars, we got two main responses: one, some thought it was sexy - "titillating" according to one participant; others thought it was "cool" and showed the women were not high maintenance. However, while women thought that by smoking they were entering the men's club, men did not view it in that manner. When men discussed camaraderie, for instance, they associated smoking with other men, using the cigar as an instigator for the conversation. Keith, for instance, mentioned that "you talk about things you wouldn't ordinarily talk about." Chris, a stockbroker, discussed the ease of transport of a cigar, making it a more social instrument than, for instance, a pipe. In general conversation, men typically mentioned the imagery of Hemingway, Cuba, and the "glory days" of cigar smoking associated with bygone eras. Women, on the other hand, only mentioned smoking a cigar in the presence of a man; there was no mention of "girls night" out featuring cigars.

When men acknowledged women in their cigar circle it was usually in the form of a romantic encounter, where the two shared cigars together. Keith recalled: "My wife would smoke a cigar. It could be a nice steakhouse in Chicago. A romantic environment. It does appeal to the higher end. It is a mood setting factor." Though Matt, our youngest participant, was more open to the idea of including women: "Actually some of my girlfriends from college do smoke cigars with us every once in awhile. It is a select few, but we're always proud to be with them." So it appears women may be breaking from the traditional feminine role in the context of mixed gender company. In the mid-1990s, Edmark (1995) contended mixed gender and "all-female" cigar "outings" were becoming part of the cigar culture. Future research will need to explore "women-only" cigar smoking environments as to the perceived psychological benefits derived.

### **Internal Hedonic Associations**

*The enjoyment of a cigar after a hard week gives me a feeling of well being and relaxation that a Valium could not match. While there may be a more ideal form of stress reduction, I haven't yet discovered anything else as effective and easy.- Lou Gehrig (From: [http://members.tripod.com/~zenwarrior/stogie\\_quotes.html](http://members.tripod.com/~zenwarrior/stogie_quotes.html))*

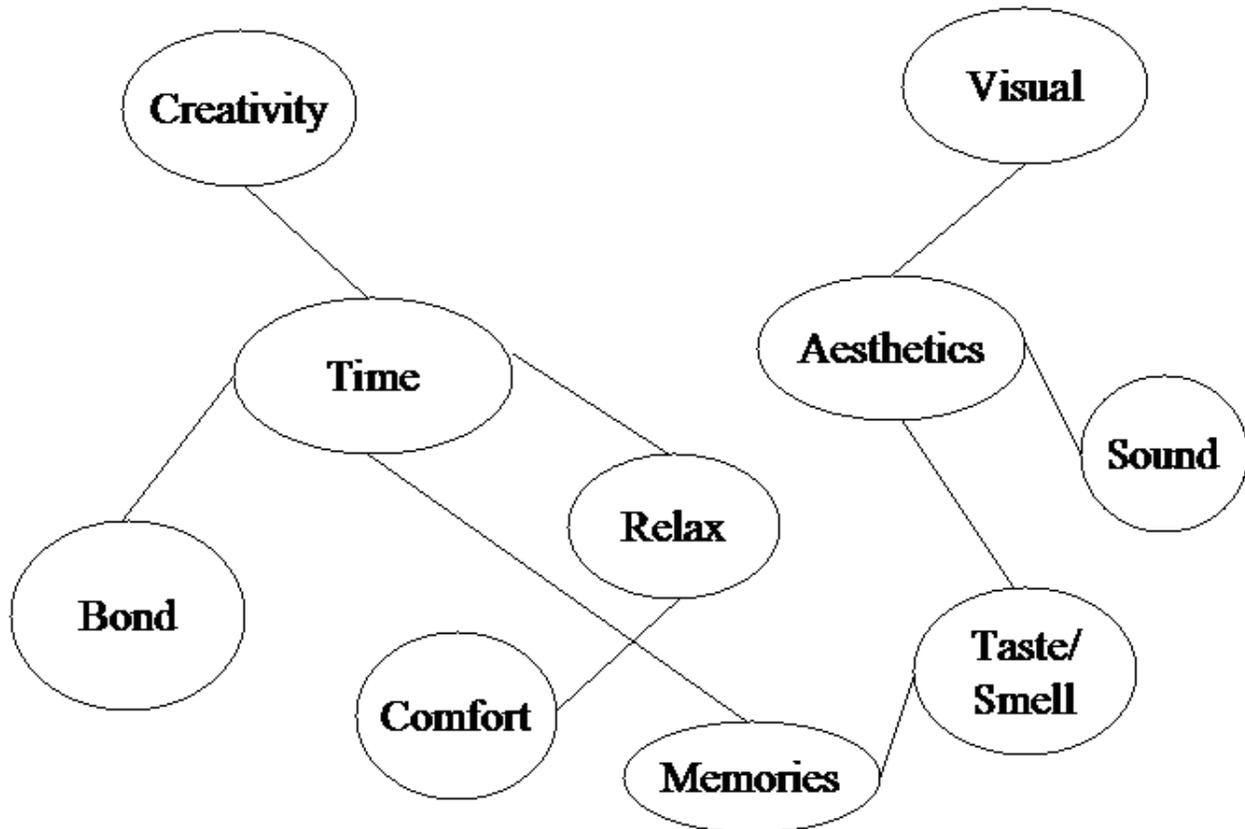
Perhaps one of the strongest and most culturally universal phenomena inspired by consumer behavior research is the tendency to make inferences about others, based on the choice of their consumption objects (Belk, Mayer, and Bahn 1981). However, there is also an internal, experiential nature of cigar consumption that is important to explore (see Figure 3). In the present study, 3D interviews were found to be much more revealing about this aspect of the experience. Perhaps this is so due to the focus on the individual alone in the photo. Elizabeth, a photographer's assistant, responded to her 3D image, which shows her exhaling out a wave of smoke: "I look like I'm going for the gusto right there. I wanted to appreciate the experience.... Once I was able to let the smoke out I was able to relax. I wasn't afraid to be myself. In some social situations I'm afraid sometimes to be myself because I don't know how people are going to react to me because I am very opinionated."

Having the ability to view their image during the interview seemed to "breakdown" existing barriers. We were able to obtain more personal insights into the cigar consumption experience. For example, Grant, a salesman, upon viewing his 3D image, mentioned that he often feels like an outsider, and smoking a cigar is an easy entry into a group or conversation starter. Not one of our more "macho" males in the focus group revealed such vulnerability. However, Mark, from the focus group, did say: "To me the cigar experience coincides with creativity. A cigar can't be rushed. It is a very different type of activity from, say, smoking cigarettes. It is kind of a luxury item when you have a couple hours to smoke it." His mention of time is one of the key aspects of the cigar consumption experience, appearing in Figure 3. Time is associated with getting comfortable, relaxing, bonding with others, breaking out of the everyday mindset to become more creative.

Aesthetics associated with the consumption of cigars are particularly important, as also noted by Mark: "Usually when you are smoking a cigar you are going for the finer things. You don't want to waste it by adding a cheap taste to your mouth." Many participants mentioned pairing the cigar with a fine wine, brandy, or tequila. Some mentioned associated the cigar with a steak dinner. These other items could be viewed as the "constellation" asso-

ciated with cigar consumption (Solomon 1983). The taste of the cigar itself was important; Kevin: “ I absolutely taste the cigar. It’s a difference between a good cigar and a cheap cigar...”

**FIGURE 3**  
**Internal Hedonic Associations**



Taste and smell are highly related. Jim, compared the smell of the cigar to that of cooking: “There’s some odors between cooks that you smell and start salivating, you taste them and it’s kind of exciting...There’s a liquor store here in Atlanta that has a large humidor.... Going in there...There’s a scent that’s appealing to me. It tastes, smells good at the same time...I went in a humidor in a large city and I was in heaven because they had coffee, which I like very much, and they had cigars and cigar smokers. The magnificence of the scent, I enjoyed breathing it in...I said ‘Oh, man, this is cool.’ Deep smell, suck it up.”

It is notable that olfaction is directly tied to the limbic system which can evoke strong memories ala Proust (an aspect of the 3D interviews which are discussed in the next paragraph). Sound was also an important aspect of the experience. For some it was the Caribbean music they paired with consumption, for others it was the sound of the cigar itself - the distinct sound made when one rolls the cigar between one’s fingers. The visual images associated with the cigar ranged from outdoor settings, mountains, beaches, to the unique ethereal images made by the cigar smoke itself.

The past was an important aspect of the 3D interviews. Tammy, a Cuban American loan officer, looking at the image of herself, said it “brought back a lot of memories” of growing up in Cuba and the image of her smoking

represented her “true self”: “Comfortable in having a good time. So it’s about feeling yourself. This feels like Tammy. Just being me.” Joseph, a construction worker, also noted that the picture brought back memories for him, of other buddy bonding moments.

Kevin said the 3D image made him envision more than the visual aspects of the experience. It provided a more multi-sensory pull, where he envisioned the feel of the cigar, its texture and size. He noted that smoking a cigar has a mood transforming effect on him, where he becomes more creative (he is a photographer). When smoking a cigar he is more apt to use black and white film, and “change his perspective” or what he claims he “sees through the lens.”

While other products such as fine wine and jazz recordings also promote creative reflection, the proposed linkages we feature set the cigar apart. It is a unique multi-sensory experience for many consumers. Grant proposed that: “A cigar frees up your mind. Maybe it’s the contact high from the nicotine in your memory that’s contributing to it. But most definitely it does make it a little bit more exhilarating...”

Given today’s focus on health awareness, the upsurge in cigar consumption begs the notion of a cigar being more than just a cigar. Rather, deeper meaning seems to be reflected in our theory building to this point. We now espouse the need to strike a careful balance between forwarding our proposed models as an initial glimpse of the cigar consumer, while not drawing “premature closure” as to what in-depth empirical research might find in the future.

## DISCUSSION

So, why should we, as social scientists, be so interested in the “new age” cigar consumer? Clearly, something much deeper than “smoking a stogie” is taking place. This became self-evident during our subjective personal introspection experiences and reinforced by the preliminary data. Yet, it would be very easy to overlook this phenomenon as a temporary fascination with one aspect of Caribbean/Latin American culture and consumption imported into this country. Time has substantiated that this is not a fad and it certainly was not anticipated prior to the advent of *Cigar Aficionado* magazine. In fact, the actor Michael Nouri reflects the views of many aficionados when he says “I have great respect for what goes into the cigar, so necessarily the circumstances under which I smoke reflect that respect” (Shanken 1996, p. 10). He goes on to differentiate cigar smoking from wine drinking “There is something ceremonious about it. After all, I would not open a fantastic bottle of wine at a baseball game.” (Ibid) While our theoretical formulations represented in Figures 2 and 3 can be useful in the analysis of other social mood modifiers, such as fine wine, experiential differences as well as commonalities between such should be of continuing interest to social science researchers. For example, there could certainly be bonding commonality with wine appreciation. In fact, CA was a “spin-off” of *Wine Spectator*. It was clearly evident at the Atlanta “Big Smoke” that fine beverages (single malt scotch, etc.) were quite complimentary to appreciation of the cigar. Also, some common ground exists as to hedonistic pleasure and appreciation of various social mood modifiers. However, cigar smoking is more “visual” than wine drinking and we doubt the gender differences would manifest as strongly.

Reflection on our theoretical models should be as much a catalyst for raising additional questions as it is a potential explanatory tool. Each one of the “nodes” and “links” featured in our proposed models can be “expanded” in a quest for deeper enlightenment. For example, in Figure 2, “Nostalgia” linked to “Hemingway and the glory days” in turn linked to “real men,” confronts today’s male in the midst of an identity crisis. As feminist consciousness grows in our culture and abroad (LaTour 1996) men continue to be seeking self actualization as society rethinks and at times debates the nature and complexity of what it means to be a “real man.”

Furthermore, Figure 2 linkages between “female” and “break from the feminine role” points to a potentially deep issue embedded in feminist consciousness raising. Clearly, breaking from the feminine role in this case is “breaking new ground” with great potential for gaining evolving insight as women continue to explore their feelings surrounding this consumptive experience. Future research could, for example, attempt to capture the relationship

between “female autonomy” as a dimension of “feminist consciousness” (c.f. Ford and LaTour 1996) and female perceptions of the meaningfulness of cigar smoking. In addition, the female cigar consumer experience appears to be symbolically linked to romance. In the midst of so many women expressing negative views of cigars, how is it that romance can come into the picture? Can cigars be “seductive,” if framed properly in a context that doesn’t trigger images of male chauvinism? Figure 2 features shared linkages between the male and female side of the figure. Both men and women see a symbolic association between cigar consumption and “power,” “fun loving,” “self-assured/ independent,” “adventurous,” and “bonding.” Each of these mutual connections provides potential focal points for deeper exploration. Can a fine cigar really be a key part of relationship building? Do couples communicate better contemplating issues over a cigar? Can men and women truly bond in new ways due to a mutual appreciation of the fine points of the cigar and romance associated with mutual consumption? How might cigar smoking fit into other “bonding experiences” such as riding Harleys, renovating the house, or thinking of new research papers to co-author? How might all of this fit in with “post-modernity” view of the blurring of gender and sex roles in the consumptive context (c.f. Gentry, Commuri, and Jun 2003)?

The same notions apply to Figure 3. According to the late Raul Julia, “While smoking a cigar, you are discovering things. You can be creative. Maybe it’s like becoming one with the cigar. You lose yourself in it. Everything fades away: your worries, your problems, your thoughts. They fade into the smoke and the cigar and you are at peace” (Shanken 1996, p. 10). Indeed, the multi-sensory nature of the experience reflects internal hedonic associations. Stopping to enjoy a cigar symbolizes a much deeper appreciation for the fact that our lives are fast paced and media cluttered. Enjoying life’s rewards is an art form unto itself. We are human. In addition to camaraderie, we need moments of self-indulgence, inspiration, and reflection to “recharge” our quest for creativity. Is smoking a fine cigar while drinking in the view of the magnificent Teton mountains really “downtime” without a constructive payoff?

Appreciation of the cigar and associated lifestyle is the focal point of *Cigar Aficionado* magazine. Several informants indicated they read each issue “cover to cover” and many are motivated to spend \$150 or more to attend an evening CA sponsored “Big Smoke” event. The aesthetics of the experience - the fine points of taste, the visual experience of the smoke, the cigar ash, and the deep sense of comfort in which one can literally get “lost.” Future research should further elucidate these internal hedonic associations while building linkages to the social context. Both theoretical models can be used to “prime” the thought process of the researcher without generating premature closure. Indeed, a great deal of the psychological underpinnings associated with cigar consumption may have their “roots” in the subconscious requiring in-depth probing techniques. The 3D interview technique was one way to get our participants involved in the interview and move beyond top-of-mind thought. Future research might consider “digging deeper” with more probing questioning, such as that used by ZMET researchers (Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter 2001; Zaltman 2003). Our hope is that the current theoretical constructions have broken new ground in a future research stream focusing on such consumption phenomena.

In summary, cigar consumption holds many distinct and varied meanings to those who choose to partake of this pleasure. Cigar smoking can be used as an ice-breaker in social settings, as a “getting to know you” crutch. Cigar smoking can transport the consumer to another place, another time, even to another era. Alternatively, cigar smoking can contribute to feelings of celebration; of enjoying the finer things life has to offer. Or feelings of increased sensuousness. Study participants embraced the smoking of cigars to describe a multitude of personal feelings using vivid wording.

And while a cigar may or may not be the phallic symbol originally proposed by Freud (who smoked 20 cigars a day), cigars do serve as symbols through which we express much about ourselves. For some, the action of lighting up a cigar signifies a time to “slow down the pace” and take the opportunity to enjoy a little of what you have. For others, this same action is an expression of appreciation for the “finer” things in life. The cigar is one method this appreciation is given life.

Others use cigars and cigar smoking to send a message. A message laced with highly charged overtones. Women smoking cigars has been shown to generate feelings of “shock” and “intrigue” in onlookers and bystanders. It

seems as though the metaphorical overtones are never far below the surface. As our own personal introspection revealed the importance of having a “conversion” experience, future research might tap how cigar users move from novices to connoisseurs.

In addition, future research should delve into the richness of the cigar experience. The preliminary data from this mainly conceptual study were limited to the southeastern United States. Clearly, future research should be conducted in the “Mecca” of cigar smoking – New York City. For example, Columbia University is home to a student cigar society, boasting a large membership - approximately half of which are women. Based on our preliminary investigations, we would expect this to be an unlikely occurrence in the Deep South. In addition, exploration of the historical and cultural roots of cigar smoking should be explored in Central America and the Caribbean.

Given the self-evident profound symbolic nature of the socio-cultural cigar phenomenon, there is no doubt that the current research has just scratched the surface of what promises to be an intriguing trip into the richness of the consumption experience.

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