

'Kool Mixx' remix: How Al Capone cigarillos infiltrated Hip-Hop to promote cigarillos use among African-Americans

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Al Capone is a brand of cigar products—little cigars, cigarillos and large cigars—manufactured and distributed in the USA by the Inter-Continental Cigar.^{1,2} Burger Sohne, which owns the Al Capone brand, has the stated goal of cultivating 'smiling consumers, loyal to (its) brands, in every continent.'³ To that end, Inter-Continental Cigar relies heavily on online marketing through social media platforms to advertise, market and promote the Al Capone brand of cigar products to consumers.⁴⁻⁶ A specific example of the Al Capone brand's use of social media marketing is its paid sponsorship and promotional collaboration with cult-favourite battle rap league, Ultimate Rap League (URL).

Battle rap is a subgenre of Hip-Hop music that originated in the African-American and Hispanic community of the South Bronx, New York in the late '70s and early '80s. A type of lyrical boxing match, battle rap is typified by its poetic 'braggadocio with the quest for lyrical superiority.'⁷ As with other forms of transgressive play practices, battle rap is an inherently subversive lyrical exchange where players are offensive for sport. Verbal assaults are directed at an opponent on themes like poverty, the underground economy, gun violence, wealth attainment and sexual prowess.

In battle rap culture, URL is arguably the most influential battle rap league in the world, though it is not the largest.⁸⁻¹² URL's New York provenance provides the league cachet among Hip-Hop purists. As of October 2018, URL's YouTube platform had 867 116 subscribers and had posted 1446 videos that were viewed 412 282 686 times since its YouTube channel launched in October 2009.⁸ In fact, its live events are so popular in the Hip-Hop culture that international Hip-Hop artists attend them, including Drake, Sean 'P-Diddy' Combs, and Busta Rhymes.

Like other battle rap leagues, URL hosts and records live rap battles. After editing, URL's video recordings are made available for viewing on its YouTube channel, Ultimate Rap League Television (URLTV). URLTV videos are publicly accessible through the YouTube platform. Despite strong and explicit language that would otherwise qualify its videos for a YouTube content rating label for mature content,¹³ few, if any, URLTV videos contain age restrictions or warning statements. The URLTV audience is primarily young, African-American and male. Historically, these groups have demonstrated disparate rates of tobacco marketing exposure and worst tobacco-related health outcomes.¹⁴

Al Capone uses event sponsorship and branded merchandise at live URL battle rap events to engage in product promotion and brand placement. Its sponsorship grants an Al Capone brand ambassador stage time with the audience, free product samples and distribution throughout the event, and prominent display of its brand identity where its products are advertised to event attendees, including sometimes having the battle rappers themselves wear its branded merchandise while rapping on stage, as depicted in the URLTV video recording between battle rappers John John Da Don and Rum Nitty¹⁵ (figure 1, URLTV video screenshot portraying battle rapper Rum Nitty wearing branded merchandise from Al Capone). Once the events have been recorded and edited, Al Capone is sometimes featured in additional commercial advertisements that are embedded at the start of the recorded battle rap video and inserted directly into the footage during the editing process. Frequently, Al Capone's logo is featured as a watermark on the video content, and its recorded stage time during the live event is rebranded and replayed in other social media outlets. During the battle rap events, Al Capone's Sweets cigarillos are marketed as being 'hand rolled in Honduras, wrapped in a natural leaf wrapper and dipped in Cognac.' Similar promotional language accompanies the Al Capone Jamaican Blaze cigarillo flavour that is marketed as being 'dipped in rum.' By emphasising its alcohol flavourants, Al Capone brand cigarillos are promoted in a manner that appeal to males, African-Americans, adolescents, young adults and people of colour.¹⁶⁻²¹

Striking similarities exist between the Al Capone marketing strategy and the landmark Brown & Williamson Tobacco 'Kool Mixx' campaign. In



Figure 1 URLTV video screenshot portraying battle rapper Rum Nitty wearing branded merchandise from Al Capone.



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2003, Brown & Williamson merged with tobacco giant RJ Reynolds.²² In 2004, the ‘Kool Mixx’ campaign targeted African American youth in its advertising, marketing, and promotion of cigarettes in violation of the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement.²³ These similarities are evident and may not be coincidental. From 2004 to 2016, Al Capone’s brand strategy was led by a former Brown & Williamson employee who spent more than two decades with Brown & Williamson and its predecessor American Tobacco Company.²⁴

Although the US Food and Drug Administration deemed cigarillos to be subject to the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act in 2016,²⁵ the regulatory environment for cigarillos has not kept pace.²⁶ Future research is needed to thwart any future remix of ‘Kool Mixx’ and to better understand the effect of cigarillo marketing on the smoking habits of African-American youth, specifically by brands like Al Capone, that leverage social media platforms to target subgenre audiences, like battle rap.

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