ANALYSIS OF CANNABIS RETAILERS’ ADVERTISING TACTICS

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PRODUCT ADVERTISING AND LABELING ➔ CONSUMER PRODUCT PERCEPTIONS

• Consumers form perceptions and expectancies of a product based on how that product is advertised and labeled.

• Tobacco products labeled as ‘light,’ ‘mild,’ ‘natural,’ ‘additive-free’ are perceived as lower harm.

• These forms of labeling are restricted because they inaccurately convey modified risk.

ADVERTISING AND CANNABIS

• As cannabis becomes regulated and commercialized, advertising may play an increasingly important role

• Advertisers may attempt to appeal to individuals’ motivations for cannabis use

• Descriptions used to advertise products could influence consumers’ product perceptions, use expectancies and use behavior
ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

• Advertisements contain central cues
  – Statements or arguments about the product

• And peripheral cues
  – Additional features such as imagery

• Audiences can vary in use of these cues based on
  – Ability to process (e.g., distractions, education)
  – Motivation to process

• Online retail environment likely captures central processors
  – Consumers who are motivated to learn and make an informed decision

OBJECTIVE

Describe claims and descriptions made about cannabis flower products on cannabis retailers’ websites
METHODS: SAMPLE

Retailers identified from National Cannabis Industry Association member database

→ 76 providers identified
→ 69 with linked websites
→ 27 sites with online menus
→ 1,153 product names
→ 497 product descriptions
METHODS: CODING

• Codes identified through review of product descriptions and discussion between investigators
• Two coders trained on codebook
• Reliability >.8
• Sample split between coders
  • 3 codes with <.8 reliability double-coded on all ads; discrepancies reconciled by a 3\textsuperscript{rd} coder
METHODS: CODING

• Ads were coded on 6 dimensions
  – Psychoactive effects
  – Physical effects
  – Social effects
  – Sensory descriptors
  – Disease and symptom treatment claims
  – Side effects
RESULTS: PSYCHOACTIVE EFFECTS

% products containing each claim

- Relaxation: 50%
- Happiness: 40%
- Focus/productivity: 15%
- Sleepiness: 15%
- Creativity: 10%
RESULTS:

• Snowcap: “well-suited for consumers who want to begin the day smiling and giggling while also being lucid and creatively productive.”

• Fruity Pebbles: “euphoric effects will keep you happy when you’re stressed”

• Grape Ape: “potent psychoactive effects are clearly detectable in both mind and body, delivering a fusion of cerebral euphoria and physical relaxation. Relaxed, Sleepy, Uplifted, Happy, Euphoric”

• Green Crack: “it offers a legendary energetic high which allows users to maintain enough focus to "get things done."”
RESULTS: PHYSICAL EFFECTS

% products containing each claim

- Relaxation
- Energy
- Hunger
RESULTS:

• Island Sweet Skunk: “users enjoy for its energetic effects”
• Flo: “The effects are characterized as light and energetic”
• Bubblegum: “may leave you feeling a bit glued to the couch”
• Platinum Purple Kush: “Though this strain produces an almost sativa-like euphoria, you may still find yourself stuck on the couch”
• Girl Scout Cookies x Face Off OG: “Prepare for deeply calming body effects coupled with a heavy mental space that'll have you relaxed beyond be-leaf.”
• Rockstar Kush: “Effects: relaxed, happy, hungry, sleepy, tingly.”
RESULTS: SOCIAL EFFECTS

% products containing each claim

- Isolation: 2%
- Socialization: 3%
- Talkative: 2%
RESULTS:

• Banana Kush: “helps stimulate your creative juices and can help you remain talkative in social settings.”
• Fruit Punch: “Perfect for social occasions”
• Tahoe OG: “ideal for use while staying home on an off day”
RESULTS: TIME TO EFFECT

% products containing each claim

- Slow to take effect
- Quick to take effect
RESULTS:

• Flo-Ta: “This strain’s hazy euphoria takes effect immediately as the body buzzes with a gentle relaxing warmth”

• Headband: “The effects have been known to come on slow, so pace yourself with this potent strain.”
RESULTS: TASTE AND SMELL

% products containing each claim

- Fruity: 40%
- Sweet: 35%
- Pungent: 30%
- Earthy: 25%
- Sour: 10%
- Floral: 5%
- Cheese: 0%
RESULTS:

• Dutchberry: “This hybrid is loaded with citrus and berry flavors that taste as good as it smells.”

• Electric Lemon x Conspiracy Kush: “Profile: Skunky, citrus, earthy”

• Sour Grape: “Get ready to pucker up, because this strain truly tastes like sour grapes”
RESULTS: SYMPTOM TREATMENT CLAIMS

% products containing each claim

- Pain: 20%
- Nausea/Low appetite: 5%
- Headache: 0%
RESULTS: DISEASE TREATMENT CLAIMS

% products containing each claim

- Depression: 10%
- Migraine: 2%
- PTSD: 4%
- MS: 12%
RESULTS:

- Electric Lemon x Jillybean: “This strain is a very good mood elevator and has been found to be effective against depression”
- Firewalker OG: “It also has many medicinal qualities, making it potentially beneficial for patients who are suffering from depression, muscle spasms, mood disorders, and anorexia”
- Durango OG: “This strain is perfect for treating...chronic headaches, and migraines.
- Ghost OG: “ability to annihilate pain, insomnia, depression, and anxiety.”
- NUG Strawberry Banana: “great to battle stress, depression and fight pain while stimulating your appetite.”
- Pennywise: “effective in treating arthritis, PTSD, epilepsy, neurological disorders, and cancer symptoms.”
RESULTS: SIDE EFFECTS

% products containing each claim

Dryness: 8%
Dizziness: 6%
Paranoia: 5%
Anxiousness: 4%
Headache: 2%
RESULTS:

• Dutchberry: “Negatives: Dry Mouth, Dry Eyes, Anxious, Paranoid, Dizzy (minimal)”

• GG4: “negatives: dry mouth, dry eyes (half), paranoid (qtr), dizzy (qtr), anxious (quarter)”

• Gelato (also referred to as Larry Bird): “Beginners may want to approach this THC powerhouse with caution”
DISCUSSION

• Online cannabis retailers made many claims about the products’ abilities to produce psychoactive and physical effects

• Claims that a product could be used to treat a disease or a symptom were not uncommon
LIMITATIONS

• The sample in this study may not be representative of all online retailers

• The product descriptions in this study may not represent how products are described in brick-and-mortar dispensaries

• The product descriptions also may not reflect how cannabis is advertised in other channels, such as social media
  – Peripheral cues (e.g., imagery) may be more important in these settings

WHAT DO WE WANT TO KNOW?

• How do descriptions vary by product qualities (e.g. THC/CBD content)
• How do descriptions vary by retailer location?
• What are the effects of these descriptions on use intentions, use expectancies and use behavior?
• How do these descriptions align with actual product effects?
CONCLUSIONS

• The effects of the product claims on consumer perceptions, use intentions and use behavior should be studied
• Need to ensure product claims are evidence-based
• Regulations should be developed to ensure retailers are not conveying inaccurate information and misleading consumers
WHAT INFORMATION WOULD BE HELPFUL TO YOU?

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