



# Presence of Sweets in Online Cannabis Marketing

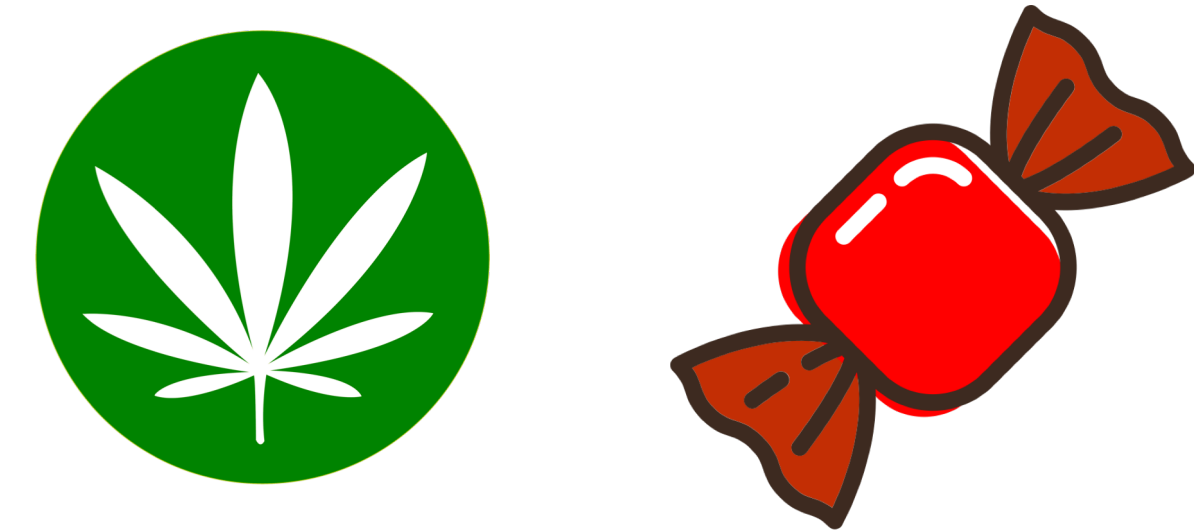
Marina C. Jenkins, Kole Binger, Aubrey D. Gower, Lauren Kelly, Megan A. Moreno, MD MEd, MPH  
University of Wisconsin – Madison  
School of Medicine and Public Health, Department of Pediatrics

**UW Health**  
American Family  
Children's Hospital

 Department of Pediatrics  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

## INTRODUCTION

- Since several states have legalized recreational cannabis sales since 2012, cannabis businesses have used social media as a main form of advertising
  - There are concerns that this social media presence may lead to significant exposure and influence on underage viewers
- The use of sweets, including images of sweets or promotion of edibles, in online cannabis marketing is not included in laws regulating youth appeal content, despite literature on tobacco advertising showing evidence that the use of sweets can increase the appeal of tobacco use
- Previous research has shown that sweets in cannabis marketing, such as infused candies, can increase the appeal of cannabis
- Purpose:** This study aimed to evaluate the presence of sweets in cannabis marketing on Facebook and Instagram



## METHODS

### Study Design:

- This study used content analysis to evaluate recreational cannabis promotions on social media
- This project received IRB exemption from Seattle Children's Research Institute

### Setting:

- Facebook and Instagram pages of recreational cannabis businesses in Washington, Colorado, Oregon, and Alaska
- Evaluated between June 1, 2017 and May 31, 2018

### Data Collection & Sampling Criteria:

- A Facebook search was used to identify cannabis businesses located in each of the four states
- Inclusion criteria:
  - Business purpose focused on non-medical cannabis products
  - Business location in Washington, Colorado, Oregon, and Alaska
  - Content in English
  - Presence on both Facebook and Instagram
  - Maintained both social media profiles since 2017

### Content Analysis:

- Codebook developed in a previous study
- Our evaluation included measures of youth appeal and presence of age restrictions to limit underage viewers
- Each social media post was evaluated for the presence of each category

## METHODS

### Variables:

Category	Definitions
Sweets	Presence of sweets was defined as either: <i>image of sweets</i> or <i>cannabis-infused edible</i> . Sweets were defined as candy, sugary food and drinks
Youth Appeal	Images of cartoon characters or toys suggesting the presence of a child, or images of youth
Underage Warnings	Warnings against underage consumption and recommendations to keep products out of reach for those under 21 years of age
Age Restrictions	Social media profile blocked from viewers under age 21 using age verification or restricted access based on user profile age

### Analysis:

- Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate presence of age restrictions and sweets across businesses
  - Co-occurrence of youth appeal content and underage warnings with sweets was measured as well
- Presence of sweets was also evaluated by state

## RESULTS

- A total of 2648 posts were analyzed from 32 cannabis business social media pages on Facebook and Instagram from 4 states.

### Presence of Sweets:

- Sweets were present in 13% of all posts (n=345): 11% (n=169) on Facebook, 15.7% (n=177) on Instagram.
  - One post included a picture of cannabis-infused gummy candy and the hashtag "#candy."
  - Example:



### Sweets and Age Restrictions:

- Over half (52.6%) of sweets posts were on pages without age restrictions.
  - Example:



### Sweets and Youth Appeal Content:

- 9.6% (n=33) of sweets posts were co-categorized with youth appeal.
  - Example:



### Sweets and Underage Warnings:

- Less than half (40.3%) of sweets posts contained underage warnings.
  - 57.6% of posts with both sweets and youth appeal content contained underage warnings.
  - One example includes a post with the caption: "The Sour Banana Sherbet has got to be the sweetest thing we've tasted in a while!" and the hashtag "#girlscoutcookies."
  - Example:



## RESULTS

### Presence of Sweets by State:

State	Presence of Sweets %(n)
Washington (N=756)	10.4 (79)
Colorado (N=1029)	9.4 (97)
Oregon (N=791)	20.1 (159)
Alaska (N=75)	13.3 (10)

## CONCLUSIONS

- This study found that the marketing of sweets is common among online cannabis marketing, including on public pages that youth can access and co-occurring with youth appeal content. This may increase the appeal of cannabis to youth if they are exposed to this content.
- With Washington State recently reversing policy proposed to ban candy edibles due to pushback, it is important to consider implications of online marketing accessible to youth.
- Enforcement of site age restrictions on pages with youth-appealing content is needed to prevent youth exposure, including limiting use of hashtags that could lead youth to cannabis business pages.
- As sweets are currently not considered restricted youth appeal content in any state, regulations should take careful consideration of advertising around cannabis-infused sweets.

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

Poster Author  
Posterauthor@wisc.edu

Megan A. Moreno, MD, MEd, MPH  
moreno@wisc.edu

<http://smahrtresearch.com/>

 @SMAHRTeam

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