

Focus Testing on Cannabis Product Labelling and Promotion Control Measures (HC POR-19-19)

Executive Summary

Prepared for Health Canada

Prepared by Narrative Research
PSPC Contract Number: HT372-194071/001/CY
Contracted Value: \$150,425.60
Contract Date: January 14, 2020
Delivery Date: March 2020

POR number: 067-19

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Ce sommaire est aussi disponible en français

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March 2020

This public opinion research report presents the results of focus groups conducted by Narrative Research on behalf of Health Canada. The research study was done using qualitative focus groups. The research entailed a total of 24 in-person focus groups, namely, four (4) groups in each of Toronto (ON), Calgary (AB), Regina (SK), Vancouver (BC), Montreal (QC) and Halifax (NS). In each location, one group was conducted with each of four audiences: youth 15-17 years old; young adults 18-24 years old; adults 25-59 years old; and adults 60 years and older. In each group that included participants 18 years and older, a mix of gender, age, education, employment status, household income, and ethnicity were included. Each youth group included a mix of gender, age and ethnicity. The research was conducted between February 10th and 25th, 2020.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre :

Test de mise à l'essai sur l'étiquetage des produits du cannabis et les mesures de contrôle de promotion

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Catalogue Number:

H14-349/2020E-PDF

International Standard Book Number (ISBN):

978-0-660-34717-2

Related publications (registration number: POR-067-19):

Catalogue Number H14-349/2020F-PDF (Final Report, French)

ISBN 978-0-660-34720-2

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Background and Research Methodology

Following the coming into force of the *Cannabis Act* (Act) on October 17, 2018, Health Canada continues to gather information as a means to assess the impact and effectiveness of control measures set out in the Act and associated *Cannabis Regulations*. These control measures include, among others, prohibited promotional activities, strict requirements related to packaging and labelling of cannabis products, and certain product restrictions. Control measures aim to protect public health and public safety, including protecting young persons and others from inducements to use cannabis and enhancing public awareness of the health risks associated with cannabis use.

In this context, Health Canada is interested in qualitative research to evaluate consumer perceptions of various types of imagery; to explore the key influencers on participants' perceptions and beliefs towards cannabis; to increase Health Canada's knowledge of cannabis marketing practices following legalization and the impact on the public's and consumers' perceptions; and to assess public and consumer understanding of mandatory information displayed on the labels and packaging of cannabis products and the relevance and effectiveness of the information.

Specific research objectives included:

- To evaluate consumers' reactions to various types of imagery that could be used in promotion.
- To explore factors (e.g., advertising, peer-influence) influencing consumers'/non-consumers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours surrounding cannabis.
- To explore participants' understanding and use of information displayed on various cannabis product labels and packages. Specifically, to determine if the information is:
 - comprehensive, relevant, and of value to participants to support informed decision making and responsible cannabis use;
 - visible, in plain language and clearly understood by participants;
 - the right size, font and located appropriately on the label;
 - effective in protecting youth and young adults by helping to reduce appeal or inducement to use cannabis;
 - effective in protecting public health by helping to inform and educate Canadians about the health risks and effects of cannabis use; and



- effective in protecting public health by helping to lower the risk of harms associated with cannabis use.

To achieve these objectives, a qualitative research approach was undertaken. This entailed a total of 24 in-person focus groups conducted from February 10th to 25th, 2020 across six locations (Toronto, Calgary, Regina, Vancouver, Montreal, and Halifax). In each location, one focus group was conducted with each of the following four audiences: youth 15 to 17 years old; young adults 18 to 24 years old; adults 25 to 59 years old; and older adults who are at least 60 years of age. Within the young adult and adult groups (18 years or older) an effort was made to include a mix of gender, age (within range), education, employment status, household income, and ethnicity. Youth groups each sought to include a mix of age (within range), gender, and ethnicity.

Although this research study sought to recruit equal numbers of men and women, it did not ask respondents to disclose their sex or gender. The results therefore do not allow for sex- and gender-based analysis. However, given that gender-related factors can influence behaviours and attitudes, this could be an area for future research as it relates to cannabis.

Group discussions were held in English with the exception of those in Montreal which were conducted in French. Group discussions each lasted approximately 90 minutes with participants each receiving \$100 in appreciation of their time. A total of 12 participants were recruited per group (including 2 stand-by respondents). Across all groups, 234 participants attended the discussions, with an additional 28 participants incentivized as stand-by respondents who did not take part in the discussions.

All participants were recruited per the recruitment specifications for the Government of Canada. Recruitment was conducted through qualitative panels stored on Canadian servers, with follow up calls to confirm the details provided and to ensure quotas were met. This report presents the findings from the study. Caution must be exercised when interpreting the results from this study, as qualitative research is directional only. Results cannot be attributed to the overall population under study, with any degree of confidence.

Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify as a Representative of Narrative Research that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the *Directive on the Management of Communications*. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed _____

Margaret Brigley, CEO & Partner | Narrative Research

Date: March 4, 2020



Key Findings and Conclusions

The following summarizes the key findings and conclusions from the *Focus Testing on Cannabis Product Labelling and Promotion Control Measures* (POR-19-19) research study.

Image Assessment

When considering images and their potential implications for the promotion of cannabis, a review of imagery confirms that some images evoke a stronger emotional response than others and elicit a longing or desire to be in that place. By contrast, a generic image does not garner the same degree of emotional response, nor is it considered as compelling. Regardless of the focus group, findings suggest that when an image effectively establishes personal relevance, it has the potential to more strongly compel or engage the participants.

Influences on Attitudes and Behaviours Towards Cannabis

Findings show that for the most part, attitudes and beliefs about cannabis do not appear to have changed since its legalization and regulation, though greater public acceptance of cannabis and a general normalization of its use is evident. Across locations and audiences, results show great consistency in responses for each of the topics explored in the study.

Results show that most participants have not changed their attitudes or beliefs about cannabis since legal access for adults was permitted in 2018. This lack of change was generally driven by a pervasive attitude that cannabis should not be criminally prohibited, or by a continued lack of interest in using cannabis. In all locations, a considerable number of young adults and adults felt strongly that the legalization and regulation of cannabis was long overdue and generally considered cannabis to be a substance of lesser risk or harm in comparison to alcohol.

While comfort levels with the concept of cannabis varied, there was general agreement that increased conversations or public discussion on the topic has resulted in greater acceptance.

There is a general appreciation that the legalization and regulation of cannabis has resulted in a better product as a result of providing access to a strictly regulated and quality-controlled product supply. In particular, participants felt that legalizing cannabis has helped to eliminate reliance on illicit cannabis which presents an increased risk to cannabis users. Some felt that the legalization and regulation of cannabis has reduced the presence of the illicit market and helped to reduce the negative stigma associated with cannabis, although there is a perception that the high cost of legal cannabis has permitted the illegal market to continue to exist.

Overall, findings suggest that interest in, or intentions to use cannabis have changed minimally since legalization and regulation, although there appears to be a general attitude among adults that they would be open to use cannabis for medical purposes should health needs arise.



How people feel or think about cannabis is primarily influenced by family, friends and personal experiences. Personal experiences, be they positive, neutral or negative, have largely shaped beliefs and opinions towards cannabis and far exceed any other competing influencing factors. That said, aside from family, friends and personal experiences, a number of other key influencing factors were evident, albeit to a lesser extent, including: school curriculum; online searches / news; celebrities; culture; religion, and public education campaigns. Of note, across groups there was no mention of advertising from cannabis licensed producers or retailers as influencing what participants believe about cannabis.

Review of Information on Cannabis Product Labels and Packaging

The packaging of twelve (12) different empty cannabis products was shared with focus group participants to test information that must be displayed on cannabis product labels and packages. The review of information confirmed that the bold yellow health warning message and the red cannabis symbol most effectively caught participants' attention. It also revealed that the sharp colour contrast between the health warning message and the package itself encouraged reading of the warning. Further, the use of bold font in the warning was considered especially effective at gaining attention, as was the use of capital letters for the word WARNING.

The red cannabis symbol was also easily identifiable and clearly denoted a cannabis product, adding legitimacy to the product. For most, the information on product labels and the plain packaging design clearly portray a regulated product and resemble a pharmaceutical product with its brand-free design. That said, the perceived volume of information on cannabis products was criticized for being illegible because of the small font size, and all audiences concurred that label font size should be enlarged, and the amount of text reduced.

Findings clearly show that additional information may be needed to help improve public understanding and comprehension of cannabis products. Indeed, some of the information displayed on cannabis product labels was difficult for participants to grasp. In examining the empty packages, both cannabis users and non-users were unable to easily identify the product type or its intended use. In addition, most participants were unsure how to interpret the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD) content and were generally unable to put those numbers in context. There was a general lack of understanding of what the numbers indicated, and participants were unable to determine the potency of the product. In addition, many did not understand what the difference between THC and CBD content was in relation to the overall product experience. To increase understandability and comprehension, participants suggested that some type of guide, scale or legend should be considered to educate consumers on the strength or potency of the cannabis product.

In addition, the language presentation on some of the cannabis products proved problematic for many English participants. Those participants found it cumbersome and difficult to read all the information, and some stopped reading, when the information presented alternated between English and French sentences. The presentation of English and French information separately was the preferred format for most.



Across locations and audiences, the possession statement was consistently misunderstood, and no one associated it with an indication of the 30-gram public possession limit. Rather, this information was misinterpreted as either providing a guide of product strength or as a benchmark for easy cost comparison to determine the product's cost per gram.

Findings confirm that information presented on cannabis labels effectively communicates that there is a risk associated with using cannabis and a sense of caution is clearly implied. That said, there is some concern with the health warning messages being inconsistent across products, and a lack of clarity as to whether the warning messages are intended to apply to a specific product or cannabis generally. Some participants criticized the health warning messages for not being 100% truthful or accurate as presented. It was generally felt that consideration should be given to either applying health warning messages consistently across packages (i.e. all packages have the same warning messages) or alternatively, that messages closely align with the particular product itself. Across locations, participants sometimes felt that the health warning messages were presented as facts that had little to do with the specific product in the package.

When considering what information is the most essential on a cannabis product, results show that clearly displaying the product type, product strength, intended use, recommended dosage, and potential side effects are deemed the most important information. Inclusion of health warning messages are appreciated and desired, however it was felt that priority could be placed on warnings related to the specific product's immediate use (e.g. may cause drowsiness), rather than more long-term effects of cannabis use.

Finally, research findings show there is a general lack of understanding and familiarity with cannabis use. Across locations and audiences, participants would like access to more information on the safe use of cannabis to inform their opinions, as well as their decision to purchase. In particular, there was a perceived need for reliable information resources on cannabis (THC/CBD, strains, product types), how to use it, anticipated effects, potential benefits and risks. It was not felt appropriate that such information come from a licensed cannabis producer or retailer, given a perceived vested interest. It was suggested that the Government of Canada may want to consider the inclusion of a website URL on the cannabis product, whereby clear and easy to understand information on cannabis and its usage could be accessed. The use of a detailed pamphlet, a pullout reference on the product label itself or a QR code was also suggested. Although much of the information that participants mentioned is covered within Health Canada's cannabis Consumer Information sheet (<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/laws-regulations/regulations-support-cannabis-act/consumer-information.html>), the content of that handout was not the focus of this POR.