

UW Health: Despite state restrictions, recreational cannabis companies use marketing that appeals to adolescents

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MADISON, Wis. – A new study led by the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health finds many recreational cannabis companies market their products in a way that appeals to children and teens, despite state-based regulations prohibiting it.

The study, led by Dr. Megan Moreno, professor of pediatrics at the school, and adolescent health expert with UW Health Kids, evaluated one year of publicly displayed posts on Facebook and Instagram by retail companies from four states in which recreational marijuana use is legal: Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington. The [study](#) was published this month in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Moreno says people of all ages can easily view these posts on social media, highlighting the continued importance of conversations with kids about social media.

“As a pediatrician, I know that marketing and advertisements have a strong influence on kids and teens,” said Moreno. “Previous studies have shown how alcohol and tobacco companies’ marketing is associated with youth using these products.”

In total, researchers evaluated 2,660 posts from 14 businesses, looking for both restricted content (such as branded promotions or discounts, modeling or

normalization of overconsumption, youth-focused messaging, and health benefits) and required warnings (limited to age 21 and older, avoiding impaired driving, and advisory notice of health risks).

Despite being prohibited, discounts or promotions were found in approximately 35% of all posts. Overconsumption was found in 12% of all posts. Less than half of all posts contained content warnings, despite being required.

“I had expected that cannabis companies were unlikely to fully adhere to existing guidelines,” said Moreno. “Some cannabis companies generated dozens of social media posts per day, and there is no current system in place to monitor or enforce these regulations on this scale. However, it was surprising to see how the presence of guidelines made a difference between states.”

For example, Washington state prohibits displaying branded products, such as t-shirts and hats, with a company logo. Still, about 1 in every 100 social media posts from Washington-based cannabis companies contained this content.

In states without this regulation, these types of posts appeared between five and 10 times more frequently. While regulation did not guarantee compliance, it seemed to affect how often companies shared content that may or may not be restricted.

Companies are still clearly using content designed to appeal to youth culture (showing young models or recognizable cartoon characters) and to people with more budget limitations (evident through offers of promotions and discounts), despite current regulations, Moreno explains.

“Given that the vast majority of youth and adolescents use social media, it is important for parents to know that cannabis companies are actively sharing youth-friendly and restricted content in these places,” said Moreno. “Parents should talk with their kids about how cannabis companies seek to influence them by using youth-friendly approaches, like using cartoon characters and memes.”

The findings are equally vital for policymakers, she says.

“It is important for them to know that the restrictions and requirements for how cannabis companies use social media are meaningful,” said Moreno. “Steps to make these rules more impactful include having monitoring systems in place and designating consequences for violations of these restrictions and requirements.”

The study authors also recommend the strong approach of considering banning cannabis companies from using social media altogether, since it is so readily accessible to adolescents.

A recorded interview with Moreno is available.

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