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Focus Group Testing Health Warning Messages for Edible Cannabis Products and Other Cannabis Products, and Public Education Messages for the Consumer Information Sheet Executive Summary

Prepared for Health Canada

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Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

Canada 

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March 2019

This public opinion research report presents the results of focus groups conducted by Earnscliffe Strategy Group on behalf of Health Canada. The research was conducted in February 2019.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre:

Groupes de discussion sur les mises en garde pour les produits comestibles et autres du cannabis et sur les messages d'intérêt public de la Fiche d'information à l'intention des consommateurs

Rapport final.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present this report to Health Canada summarizing the results of focus group testing proposed health warning messages for edible cannabis products and other cannabis products, and key information that is either currently found in or is being proposed for the Consumer Information Sheet.

Health Canada is developing regulations to support the legal sale of edible cannabis, cannabis extracts, and cannabis topicals by October 17, 2019. The regulations will support the Government’s public health approach to the strict regulation of cannabis, and ensure that the unique risks associated with these new classes of cannabis are appropriately controlled. This will include comprehensive packaging and labelling requirements, of which mandatory health warning messages will be an important element. The total cost to conduct this research was \$117,037.60 including HST.

The objectives of the research were to test and ascertain the effectiveness of the possible health warning messages on target audiences, specifically youth and older adults. The research also sought input on key messages and certain concepts that may be used for the cannabis Consumer Information Sheet to determine whether it provides adult consumers with the information needed to make informed decisions around cannabis use.

To meet these objectives, Earnscliffe conducted qualitative research. The research included a series of 20 focus groups across five cities: Toronto (February 11); Québec City (February 12); Edmonton (February 12); Vancouver (February 13); and, Halifax (February 26). In each city, the first group was conducted with young adults aged 18-24, the second with older adults aged 60 plus, the third with youth aged 15-17, and the fourth with adults aged 25-59. All groups in Québec City were conducted in French. The sessions were approximately one hour in length.

It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved, the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

Views on the Consumer Information Sheet Messages

- Reactions to the messages were remarkably similar across audiences. Most found the language easy to understand and described the messages as simple, to the point, and direct; although, in some instances (discussed below) some may have been oversimplified.
- Participants felt that the messages served as important reminders about consuming cannabis responsibly. While most did not feel the information was all that new, it was considered important and appropriate to provide this kind of information at the point of sale especially for those new to cannabis.

- One dimension that participants felt was lacking was an acknowledgement that the effects of cannabis can vary based on: an individual’s experience with cannabis; a person’s sex and weight; the strain of cannabis; the level of Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and/or Cannabidiol (CBD()); etc.
- Messages around the health effects of using cannabis were met with generally mixed reaction. Some questioned both the Government’s decision to legalize cannabis in the context of these health risks; and, how this advice sits with the use of cannabis for medical purposes or for those using it to deal with anxiety, fear or panic. The majority felt that providing explanations or examples to substantiate some of the claims (i.e., how cannabis is linked to anxiety, how cannabis affects mental health, what aspects of mental health etc.) would increase the credibility of these statements.
- Reaction to the edible cannabis messages on the Consumer Information Sheet was generally positive. Indeed, these messages were judged among the more important and the ones most likely to help participants make an informed decision around use and reduce risk of harm. Participants suggested this would help them plan their outings and time their cannabis use (i.e., allowing enough time before driving, going to work, etc.).
- Having said all this, reactions to the wording “start low and go slow” were not consistently positive. Most participants felt the Government was trying to be catchy, but some worried this wording left too much up to interpretation, particularly if it is intended for new users.
- Participants felt the message about high potency cannabis products was unnecessarily complex and long. While they could appreciate that it was important to convey a message about understanding THC and CBD levels, this particular message raised more questions than it answered. This was mostly attributed to a desire for information about the effects of THC and CBD which participants felt would have been more helpful than the scientific name.
- Overall reaction to the lower risk use tips was mixed. The guidance to avoid mixing cannabis with alcohol and to consume cannabis in familiar environments were considered important and particularly well received. The message to “avoid smoking cannabis”, however, was arguably the most widely misinterpreted of all the messages tested. Many participants made the assumption that the message meant “avoid using cannabis”, because the default method of consuming cannabis is smoking. These participants felt that it was contradictory to put a message on a product that inferred “avoid using this product”.

Reactions to Images

- Reactions to the specific images tested were mixed, although the overwhelming majority of participants agreed that coupling an image with a message was an effective way to communicate.
- When asked, most said they preferred coloured images as they found them more attention-grabbing; although, some participants volunteered that an effective image in black and white could be just as effective on this particular topic given the seriousness it communicated.
- With respect to the specific concepts tested, the only concept that seemed to meet with the approval of most participants was the image of the lock and cannabis leaf which communicated the importance of securing cannabis from children and pets.

- Most tended to feel all of the other images were not all that effective at communicating the intended message. Indeed, many pointed out that the other three images – the cookies, the lung, and the alcohol – were all missing the explicit visual of the cannabis leaf.

Views on Health Warning Messages

- Participants’ reactions to the health warning messages were generally positive. Indeed, a number of participants commented that these messages were somewhat clearer than the comparable message found in or proposed for the Consumer Information Sheet, given there was a rationale provided to support some of the assertions.
- There was a sense that the two messages regarding the delayed and long-lasting effects of edible cannabis products were both important but that they should be communicated together. Participants argued that the guidance about the delayed effect of edible cannabis products was important in the context of the duration of the effect.
- In terms of the high potency messages, most felt that these health warning messages clarified some of the information (i.e., the effects of THC and CBD) that participants felt was missing in the Consumer Information Sheet messaging.
- The general health warning message was deemed credible, if not obvious, by most participants.

Research Firm:

Earnscliffe Strategy Group Inc. (Earnscliffe)

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I hereby certify as a Representative of Earnscliffe Strategy Group that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. 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:



Date: March 5, 2019

Stephanie Constable
Principal, Earnscliffe