



# A content analysis of non-medical cannabis companies' social media marketing strategies in the District of Columbia

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## Background

- In 2015, Washington, D.C. legalized adult non-medical cannabis, yet its purchase and sale remains illegal (*Initiative 71*)
- Retailers, recognizing this legal loophole, began to transfer non-medical cannabis through a "gifting" process
- Medical cannabis advertising in D.C. is currently regulated, however, non-medical cannabis advertising has no existing legislation, and many retailers utilize social media for product marketing
- This is problematic as adolescents' social media use is nearly ubiquitous, and social media can be influential to adolescents' health behaviors
- Consequences of adolescent cannabis use include altered brain development, poor educational outcomes, and an increased chance of adult drug dependence

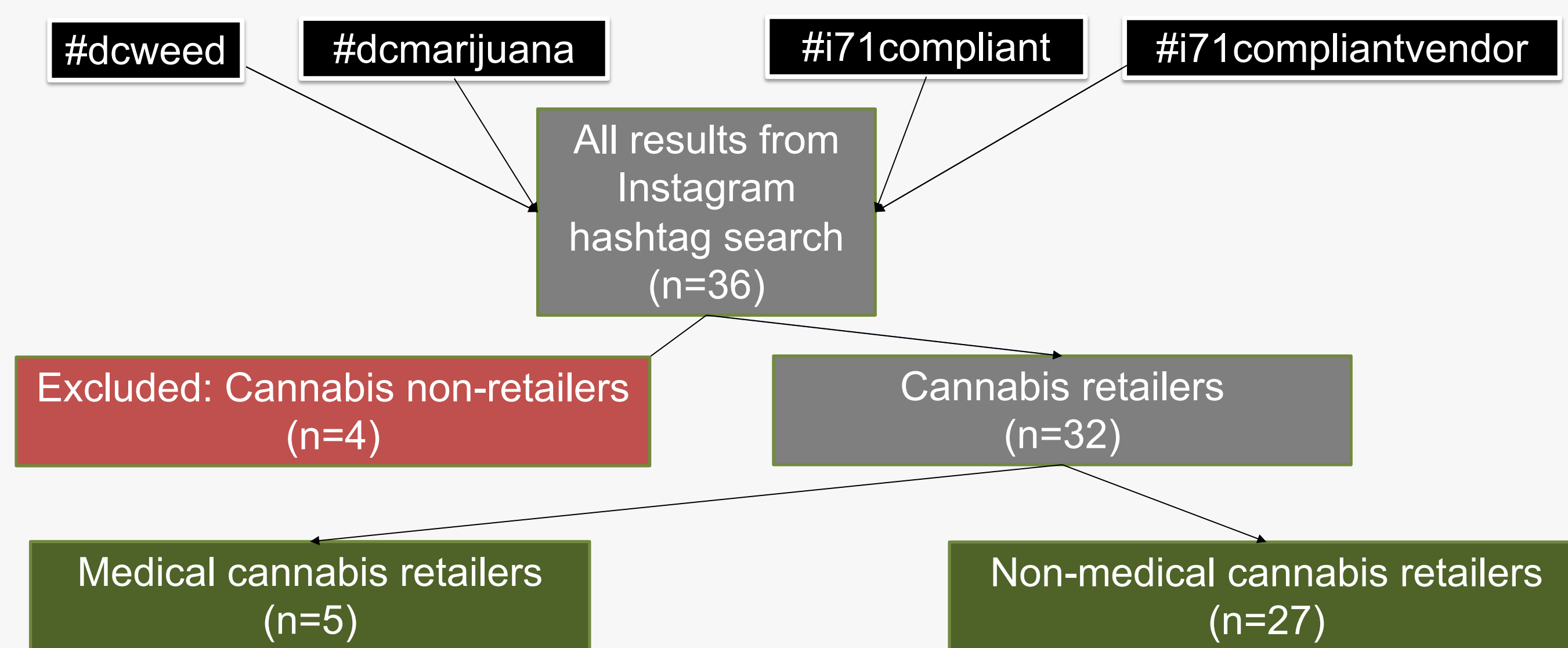
## Purpose

The purpose of this content analysis was to: 1) evaluate the content that non-medical cannabis businesses in D.C. promote on social media 2) identify the prevalence of businesses in violation of non-medical cannabis advertising laws.

## Methods

**Study Design:** This retrospective content analysis study utilized direct observation of social media posts of medical and non-medical cannabis retailers in D.C.

### Business Identification



**Data Collection:** Instagram profiles were evaluated for one year of content between May 2018 and May 2019. Posts were coded based on presence of respective variable in a caption/description/graphic. One post could contain multiple variables of interests. Descriptive analyses included summaries and frequencies of variables.

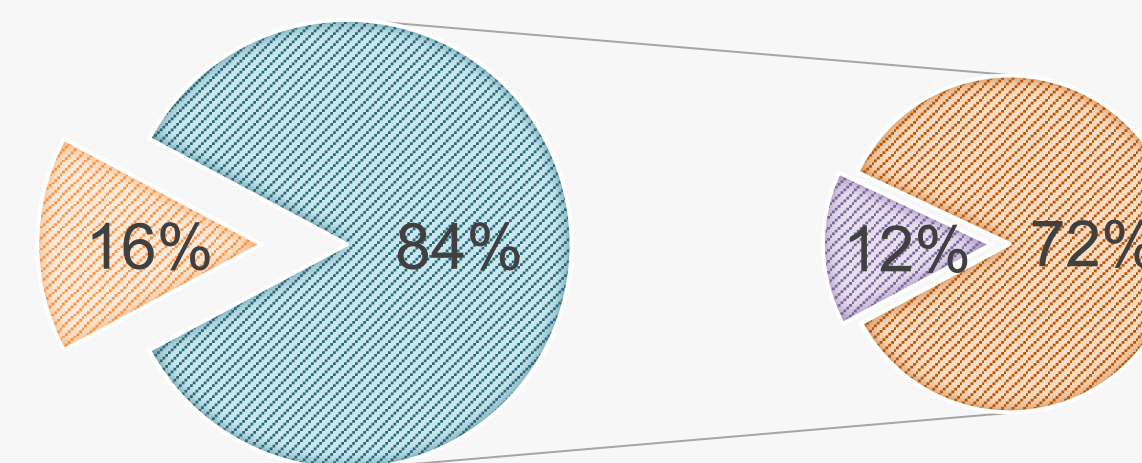
### Variables

Variable	Key Examples of Coding
Overconsumption	#stonerlife, #420life, #wakeandbake
Curative or Therapeutic Benefits	#cannabiscurers, #natureheals, #plantsoverpills, #plantmedicine
Appeal to Youth	#girlscoutcookies, "delicious Watermelon Starburst", emojis (cake, candy, cookie)
Diversity Marketing	#womengrow, #womenincannabis, #dcfemme, #ganjagirls
Pro-cannabis Education	#cannabiseducation, "come learn a little about dabbing..."

## Results

### BUSINESSES

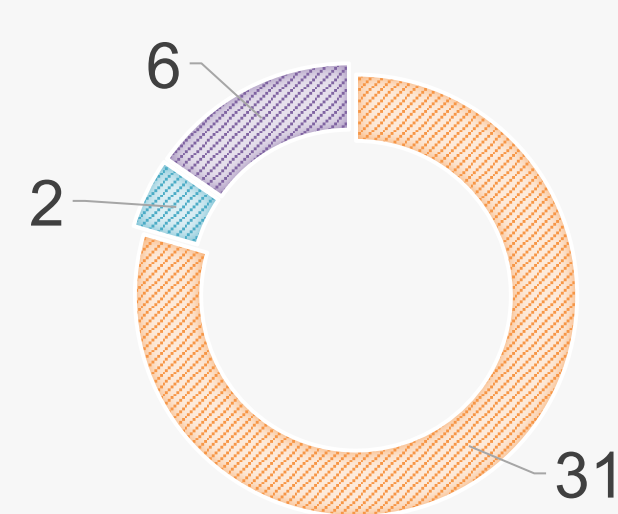
Medical Cannabis Non-medical Cannabis Implicit Non-medical Cannabis Explicit Non-medical Cannabis



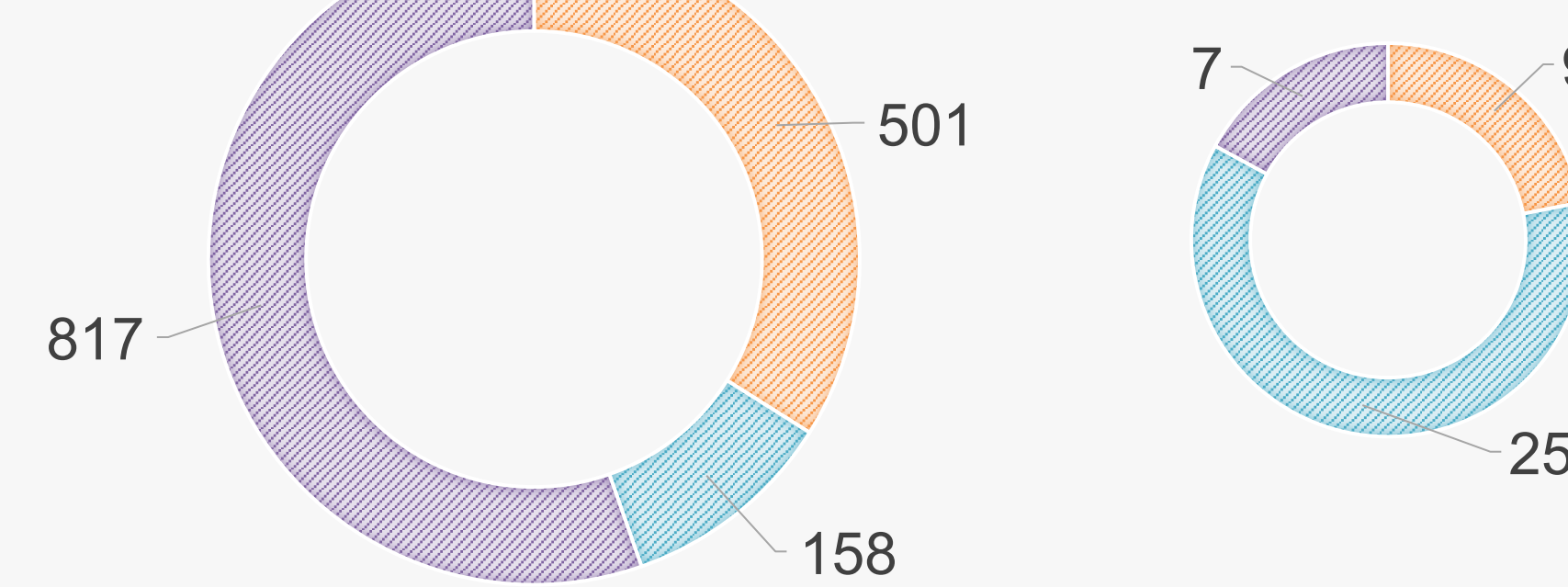
Explicit non-medical cannabis retailers are those business profiles stated "21+", "not for sale", or "i71 compliant" in the biography, posts, or hashtags. Implicit retailers lacked these labels.

### CODED POSTS

#### MONTHS ACTIVE (MEDIAN)

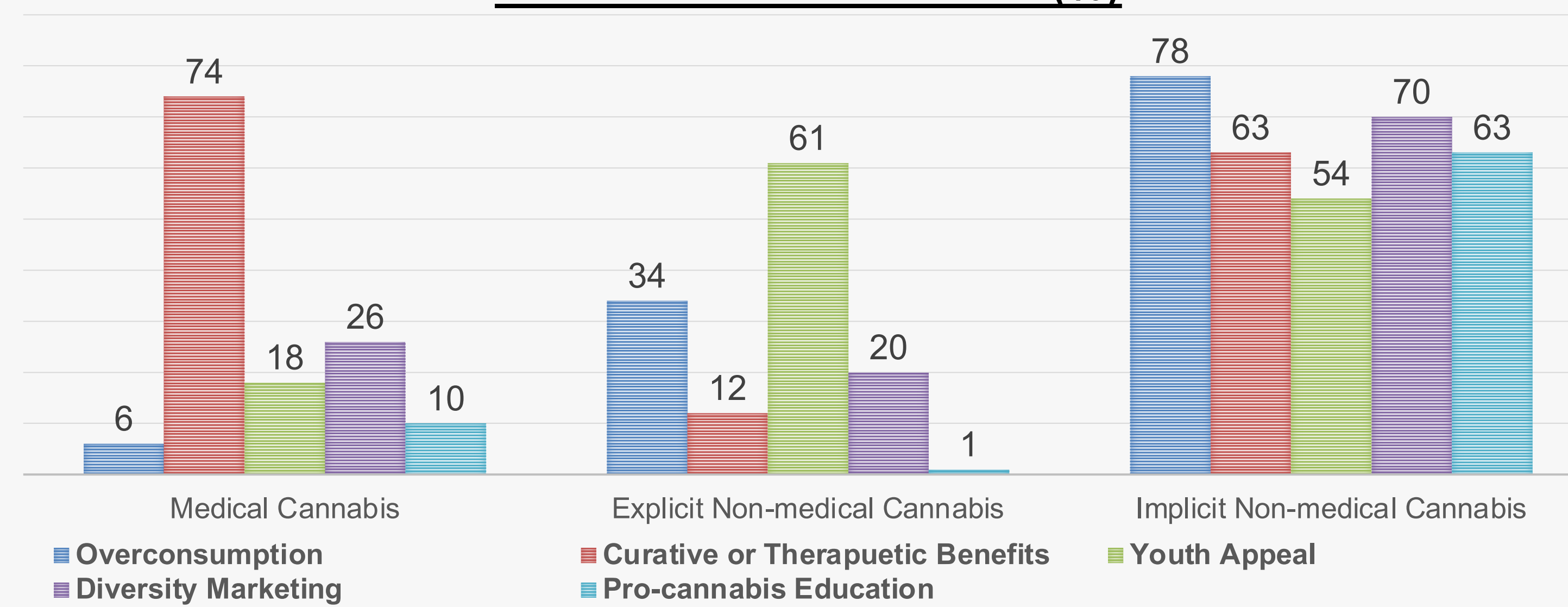


#### POSTS PER MONTH (MEDIAN)



Medical Cannabis Implicit Non-medical Cannabis Explicit Non-medical Cannabis

### VARIABLE PREVALENCE (%)



### Example Posts



## Main Findings

- Two subcategories of non-medical cannabis retail were discovered: explicit and implicit non-medical cannabis
- The most common variable among posts by medical cannabis businesses was curative or therapeutic benefits
- Youth appeal was common among posts of explicit non-medical businesses
- Two promotional variables were identified: diversity marketing and pro-cannabis education
- All coded variables were common among implicit non-medical business posts

## Implications

This study suggests the necessity of regulating of cannabis-promoting content on youth-dominated social media, specifically Instagram. Various strategies can improve the safety of these online spaces. 1) One strategy is to allow users to flag cannabis-related advertising as inappropriate or sensitive. This flagging would alert Instagram to review the post. This strategy may be in effect to some degree as some profiles, specifically implicit non-cannabis cannabis retailers, have been deactivated on Instagram since the initial post coding. 2) Providing an age restriction to certain pages or posts may be a viable option. Currently, Instagram has a feature that blurs a post if the material has been determined to be "offensive" or "disturbing" material. A similar feature, where a post can be blurred if the user's registered age is below 21, can be a step in right direction in creating a safe environment for our youth

## Contact Information

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