

Julie - Final Paper

Paola Lopez-Cervantes, Luisa Peñaflor, Charlotte Adams, Colin Franco

The B-Team

Background: Does a humorous advertising style destigmatize emergency contraceptive worries and misunderstandings while positively influencing brand opinion? We decided to pursue this as our research question since Julie's marketing strategy revolves around brand ambassadors, a heavy social media presence, and a playful tone. This stood out to us as unusual and unique among the emergency contraceptive (EC) landscape. Our background research revealed that EC brands were heavily impacted by the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*, seeing a 3000% increase in sales (Cerullo, 2022). Amanda Morrison, the founder, said that the decision "lit a fire under us to provide our product to more women and, more importantly, to educate women about emergency contraceptives" (Kavilanz, 2023). However, our team found a disparity between this goal and the marketing strategy: while it attempts to be a "big sister" to those who purchase it" (Hinchliffe and Abrams, 2024), its content featuring influencers and jokes about sexual partners that would not be good fathers, veered more towards humor than education. Additionally, the majority of women face confusion about the morning after pill, with 73% of women thinking that EC's can end a pregnancy (Richards, 2023). Furthermore, Julie's marketing strategy, if not effective, is widespread—many of their TikTok's had views in the tens and hundreds of thousands. Finally, Julie is also unique in its donation program, which donated one unit for every unit sold. Taking all these factors into account, our goal was to take a deep dive into Julie's marketing strategy, determine its effectiveness in relation to its goals and overall brand perception, and find out how Julie can best present the various qualities that make it unique in a competitive market.

Summary of Methods Used: We started our research with a focus group conducted in class. Our goal was to draw a general picture of how the college-aged demographic views Julie's marketing strategies for their EC pill. Our research question focused on asking participants how they felt about Julie's Gen-Z tailored advertising approach and how it impacted their likelihood of purchase. Nine undergraduate students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill participated in the group, with eight being female and one being male. Participants were shown three of Julie's advertisement videos and asked to share their impressions. We then interviewed eight individuals—seven female, one male—to probe further insight on potential client's trust towards Julie's approach to their advertising and their philanthropic efforts. By individually speaking with participants, we were able to directly ask their genuine feelings towards the brand without fear of peer influence. We conducted ethnographies on four college-aged women to better understand our target audience and their decisions about purchasing personal hygiene and self-care items. The ethnographies were conducted individually at the participant's home to go through their medicine cabinet to see items that fell into the personal hygiene and wellness category. This study was intended to show us what factors are most important for these individuals when making purchases. Lastly, our survey of 52 college students was intended to ask respondents about their general views on EC and birth control. Of our participants, 90% were female, 4% were male and 6% identified as non-binary. Since the questions were qualitative, we employed the Likert Scale. The survey was open for 5 days and was shared via social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat.

Insight #1: Through our research, we have found that a heavy consumer reliance on established EC brands has created a hesitancy to buy from alternative brands. For context, our survey found brand recognition to be one of the most important factors in EC purchases, behind

only “Price” and “Recommendation from pharmacist or doctor.” When presented with a list of leading EC brands, 93% of participants knew of Plan B, while the next most recognized brands were Julie and AfterPill with only 29% and 36% of participants respectively. Moreover, 24 of 32 participants who reported purchasing EC said they bought Plan B. Along with this, we found that all 17 people in our interview and focus group knew of Plan B, but only one person in the former and three in the latter knew any other brands by name. These statistics indicate Plan B’s overwhelming popularity among EC’s in terms of recognizability and purchase preference.

Another testament to Plan B’s popularity is that it has undergone genericization in language. In our focus groups and interviews people frequently used its name in place of “emergency contraceptive”. After having learned about Julie as a brand and its mission, one interviewee was asked if they would be willing to purchase it, but responded that they would not: “I would go with what I know ... even if I trust other products,” in reference to Plan B. Another interviewee said that they would even be willing to pay a higher price simply for the fact that they recognize the brand. Three of the ethnography subjects echoed the sentiment. A member of our focus group stated that they recalled that Plan B “has a low success rate,” but would purchase it anyway since “it’s the most familiar.” This statement exhibits our discovery best: a product that dominates its market to such a major extent as Plan B can continue to do so even with a poor reputation. This, by extension, makes other products look worse when trying to garner awareness. Other focus group participants rallied behind this idea, claiming that any promotion is suspicious and wondering “Why do you want me to buy it? Are you not selling enough?” Participants went further, saying that as soon as they see “#ad” on a post, it “makes it automatically untrustworthy.” Plan B’s market domination and the critical views of consumers demonstrate the stubbornness people possess in their choice of brand.

Insight #2: Specifically focusing on Julie’s marketing strategy, our research shows that consumers are distrusting of the brand’s humorous videos and witty captions in promoting its medical product through social media. In our focus group, participants described Julie’s advertising as “off-putting” and “out-of-touch” given the sensitivity of the topic. A participant stated that it is “weird to see trendy videos about medical brands” as it makes the product seem more “like a joke.” There was general skepticism around Julie’s advertisement strategy, as suggesting that an accidental pregnancy was a light-hearted situation did not appeal to the group. However, we did have a few outliers, such as one individual mentioning the trendy marketing was more enjoyable and easier to comprehend than traditional medical commercials. Another participant pointed out how Julie’s approach garnered a sense of friendship and sisterhood, which produced comfort in an unlikely situation. Our individual interviews revealed similar findings as our focus group: a majority of participants deemed the product less trusting given its humorous approach in marketing. The use of humor in advertising a medical product seemed to not have the desired effect as intended, but more research is needed to clarify nuances in our findings.

Insight #3: As mentioned above, Julie enacts a unique one-to-one donation policy. Given that fact, our interviews and focus group uncovered that philanthropy or mission-based products are meaningful to consumers. This is an especially significant tool for lesser-known brands like Julie. With these lesser-known companies, their reputation and brand opinions have more room to positively and negatively shift perceptions. These positive influences could then affect purchasing decisions, as shown through responses in our focus group, using words such as “ethical” to describe the company after its donation policy was revealed. Another additional detail we uncovered was the benefit of positive feelings brought into a less-than-ideal situation.

Despite the stress or discomfort typically associated with purchasing EC's, our participants noted they would feel some comfort knowing they would be "helping others in the same situation". Finally, it was clear this had been underpromoted by Julie, demonstrated by the fact that no participant, even those who had heard of Julie prior to our studies, was aware of this aspect.

Conclusion and implications: Our research shows that Julie's humorous advertising has neither significantly improved its public image nor reduced the stigma around EC. Three primary themes emerged among consumers in our findings: there is an overwhelming trust in competing brand Plan B; there is a lack of seriousness in Julie's brand; and there is a strong preference for Julie's underutilized philanthropic and educational approaches. As explained in our first insight, Plan B has significantly more brand awareness and trust than any other EC, to the point where people even use the terms interchangeably. Our second insight highlights that consumers believe humor undercuts the seriousness of accidental pregnancy and thus does not accomplish enough to break down any stigmas. Furthermore, since people already have a strong trust in Plan B, the distaste for Julie's current advertising only widens the gap in consumer trust between the two brands. As our third insight explains, though, when research subjects discovered Julie's educational and donation efforts, they grew more fond of the brand and felt more comfortable with the product. Below we have listed our recommendations for Julie:

- Strike balance between humor and healthcare-oriented approach
- Put donation program at the forefront
- Research and market to healthcare professionals

Our first implication aims to minimize the amount of people put off by Julie's humorous marketing strategy and align it more with its goals and website. Its website, while maintaining the light-hearted, Gen-Z appeal, features articles written by healthcare professionals and a comprehensive FAQ list. Humor ensures that Julie is being seen by a wide swath of potential customers—without aligning, however, more closely to a healthcare-oriented approach, and taking into account the minimal role social media and influencers have on EC purchasing decisions, Julie's humor can only go so far. We suggest more of its social media output to focus on combining education and humor rather than solely investing in brand ambassadors. Additionally, their donation program is underutilized as a marketing tactic. Though there are limits to how donation and philanthropic efforts play into purchasing habits, the positive feedback after individuals learned about the donation program points to how the donation program can help increase brand perception, if not sales. Not mentioned on the box, and rarely mentioned on its social media presence, the donation program could be doing more heavy lifting when it comes to how Julie is perceived by customers. Being forthright about the donation program and how it partners with local nonprofits will help Julie accentuate its competitive edge. Finally, we recommend a comprehensive look into how to best market to healthcare professionals, and using the findings to advertise Julie towards them. Since our research found that individuals turn to doctors for reproductive health expertise and advice, getting doctors to trust and recommend Julie is crucial. It is also key to look into the amount of doctors that refer to EC's as 'Plan B,' and the amount that recommend it to individuals seeking EC's. Learning about what healthcare professionals do and trust is essential in affirming Julie as a reputable brand.

Works Cited

- Hinchliffe, E., & Abrams, J. (2024, March 18). The morning-after Pill brand handed out at Olivia Rodrigo's concert is fighting stigma against emergency contraception. *Fortune*.
<https://fortune.com/2024/03/18/olivia-rodrigo-plan-b-concert-morning-after-pill-julie/>
- Julie For All. (2023). Impact Report. Julie.
https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0573/2571/5498/files/Julie_for_All_2023_Impact_Report.pdf
- Kavilanz, P. (2023, April 3). Morning after pill brand speeds up retail access, doubles supply per pack. *CNN*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/03/business/julie-emergency-contraceptive/index.html>
- “Meet Julie, Your Stigma-free BFF Amplifying Access to Emergency Contraception.” (2024, November 7). *WorkLife*.
<https://www.worklife.vc/blog/meet-julie-your-stigma-free-bff-amplifying-access-to-emergency-contraception>
- Richards, M. (2023, February 1). The public, including women of childbearing age, are largely confused about the legality of medication abortion and emergency contraceptives in their states. *KFF*.
<https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/press-release/the-public-including-women-of-childbearing-age-are-largely-confused-about-the-legality-of-medication-abortion-and-emergency-contraceptives-in-their-states/>