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Cannabis Marketing and Ethics

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Abstract

Marketing professionals in a vice industry such as cannabis industry experience sociocultural, political as well as legal challenges in their effort to communicate their product or brand message. Cannabis legalization in various states created opportunities as well as marketing uncertainties. Regardless of prevailing legal restrictions related to cannabis marketing, the broader topic of cannabis marketing and ethics has an unanswered research question as to whether it is ethical to market cannabis in public. To answer this question, a review of scholarly literature works is crucial. Thus, a delve into various effects of public cannabis marketing such as a positive shift in perception and behavior towards the substance; Implications of cannabis marketing information in the mainstream media and social platforms; and the position of various regulations in governing cannabis marketing are among key aspects that were analyzed. It was concluded that despite some States having legal restrictions on cannabis advertising, public promotion of cannabis products had a detrimental effect on the larger society, particularly the youth, minors and young adults.

Cannabis Marketing and Ethics

Widespread use of the internet and social networking acceptance has seen a resurgence of market research. However, the various ways companies carry out market research today can have severe ethical consequences likely to affect consumers' lives in unprecedented ways yet to be fully comprehended (Roy, 2012). Cannabis industry is not an exemption. The issue of civic cannabis marketing has an inherent ethical bearing on the general public. Through the research question: Is civic cannabis marketing ethical? This paper aims to critically review the various scholarly works addressing the question, through a series of selected thematic headings and subheadings concerning resources under critical analysis.

Probable Effect of Public Cannabis Marketing

¹⁰ de Sousa Fernandes Perna et al. (2017) examined ¹¹ the effect of marijuana marketing on the human brain reward system among cannabis users while they were clear-headed or intoxicated. There was an evaluation of human brain activation after exposure to movies marketing cannabis and implicit cannabis perceptions. It was established that public marketing of cannabis utilization was critical in eliciting striatal dopamine activation in the reward system of human brain. As a result, a considerable projection that public marketing of cannabis to a given extent increased striatal dopamine activation for public members who were clearheaded, and that sense of reward lessened when they were optimally intoxicated. Since implicit connotations with cannabis marketing cues are considerably higher in users of cannabis, it was confirmed to the fact that public marketing of cannabis will see the entire population counting users and non-users treat the substance like tobacco or alcohol.

This unregulated public marketing of cannabis has an intrinsically underlying impact on the general population in a couple of ways. It is a fact that marketing is strategically placed at the

core of producing consumer demand through investment in false needs as well as stimulation of formation of compulsive habits of consumption (Roy, 2012). Thus, concerning cannabis users, striatal dopamine arousal following exposure to an advert is one means by which the consumers of the marketing message, regardless of being cannabis users or not, are encouraged to search for emotional arousal. The latter feeling eventually turns out to be a critical motivation for the people when choosing cannabis products for consumption. Hence, cannabis marketing reduction will play a critical role in reducing exposure of brain to cues of reward which encourage use of cannabis.

Conversely, Leos-Toro (2019) surveyed in Canada to evaluate cannabis marketing following mushrooming jurisdictions which legalized nonmedicinal cannabis after its authorization, a year before this study. About Canada's cannabis Act, assessment on various health cautions, marijuana promotion in addition to acuties amongst Canada's adolescence as well as fledgling grownups was undertaken. The results of the study demonstrated that most young adults and youth in Canada were conversant with physical health effects associated with cannabis. In comparing ever and never users of cannabis, the former group of respondents expressed less likelihood of consenting to the fact that cannabis is addictive and could cause mental harm. Moreover, cannabis warnings through pictorial representations were perceived to be extra operative as well as authentic compared to textual cautions. Equally, availing marijuana product branding had the potential to drastically increase participants' appeal to cannabis than when withdrawn. It was evident that those individuals who had always used cannabis found the presence of branding aspects more appealing when evaluating differences to cannabis utilization by status. Again, any references to music, luminary sponsor or party to a greater extent made the respondents perceive that cannabis was strategically targeted for individuals who were young

and those with an aptitude to rave and party. Thus, utilizing brand images when packaging cannabis promotes lifestyle connotations as well as influences the preference and liking of marijuana goods amongst the youth and fledgling populations. Similarly, using doses per package to label cannabis package content and use of graphics or symbols to denote potency of the substance was extra operative compared to other units than used to denote THC in influencing choices related to marijuana usage potency as well as amount. In this regard, there is an urgent need to guarantee satisfactory information is available to consumers of recreational Marijuana to guide their choices of usage. For instance, regulatory approaches should be put in place and public marketing of cannabis strategized.

Harmful Role Played By Public Cannabis Marketing

Research has examined use of cannabis and associated public health risks following decisions made by public, particularly underage populations; to use this substance owing to its ubiquitous prevalence with “unforeseen” varied consequences (Marsico, 2019). From this research, it is stressed that decisions to engage and use cannabis are often wrought and profoundly influenced by advertising professionals in cannabis industries. Consequently, it is comprehensively demonstrated how norms as well as perceptions of using cannabis are shifted in the general public and the corresponding impact on the current use rate of cannabis. For instance, psychological consequences such as poor self-control; social consequences such as poor school performance and physical consequences are three distinct groups by which detrimental effects of publicly marketed cannabis could be expressed and felt. Thus, this is a sure proof that the widely acclaimed perception that cannabis is less harmful is baseless, and the public health needs to edify the young adults and youths of its negative consequences.

Marsico (2019) further states that despite the less studied effects of cannabis, it has been determined that cannabis marketing is potentially harmful to populations deemed as underage or yet to attain the recommended legal age of 21 years. Instagram, YouTube and personal websites as loose ends through which the underage population is exposed to cannabis marketing promotions. Moreover, regardless of user groups, ever users of cannabis are more pertinent to search for cannabis marketing messages, thus exposing them to greater risk for hazardous cannabis utilization. Cannabis has been repositioned to the general public via advertisement and marketing following the move of this substance from illegal to legal profitable industry in some states. Thus, these marketing messages tend to appeal to cannabis' health benefits, enjoyable lifestyles, and marketing ploys such as "*buy one get one free*" deals. Hence, there is a need for a call for restrictions around cannabis marketing, particularly that related to inconsistent exposure to underage population of youth. This as a major concern of public cannabis marketing.

Implications of Cannabis Marketing Content in News, Social Media and Advertisements

Park and Holody (2018) established that social media as well as advertisements to a greater extent, were favorable to cannabis use as well as legalization while downplaying the associated jeopardies. Subsequently, it was noted that messages generated from news, social media and advertisements played a notable role in impacting audience's cannabis-related perceptions and behaviors. For instance, public cannabis advertisement in the mainstream media entailed messages which often shifted from detrimental effects of the substance to relatively positive news coverage on use of cannabis. On the other hand, advertisements as well as social media happens to be awe-inspiring towards use of cannabis and its legalization. For instance, the duo downplay risks of cannabis by appealing to health, romantic as well as social benefits of the substance. Correspondingly, research shows that many advocacy groups and industry interests

run numerous social media accounts instead of individuals who could share experiences or views. As a result, the grave implication of this open cannabis marketing message in news, advertisements and social media is the fact that messages profoundly influence audience's cannabis-related perceptions as well as behaviors. Thus, the general civic along with legislators should be acquainted with knowledge about this milieu of information and proactively protect the susceptible populations.

Place of Regulations Governing Public Cannabis Marketing

Rup et al. (2020) carried out a study aimed at examining cannabis advertisement exposure as well as brand awareness transversely the three jurisdictions: provinces of Canada immediately prior legalization, U.S. states which had not authorized nonmedicinal marijuana, in addition to those which officiated nonmedicinal marijuana. Carrying out the research aimed at providing additional proof of effect of cannabis marketing exposure as well as accompanying potential peculiarities between illegal and legal markets of cannabis. Exposure to advertisement was higher in legal markets of cannabis while all jurisdictions exhibited low brand awareness for cannabis products. The researchers also point out that after enactment of legalization regulations in Canada, many people could recall brands of cannabis that had been marketed to them. In all these regions, social platforms were found to lead as the chief perpetual networks through which marijuana marketing messages had been observed. Equally, brand recalls and advertisement awareness was greater following frequency of use and nearness to retail stores after legalization. Thus, as legal markets were set up, the impact of public cannabis marketing surged. For example, before legalization, many folks in USA could not recall brands. After legalization, there was a higher level of exposure to marketing content among youths and young adults.

Correspondingly, Parker (2018) in his doctoral dissertation looks into the future of what cannabis public relations are likely to be relative to the present state where it is regarded as an illicit, odd and highly-regulated market. The future of the industry will transform consumer products owing to cannabis' reactional and medicinal usage. Nevertheless, the article emphasizes that currently cannabis marketing, advertisement as well as publicity are facing extensive regulation. Parker (2018) further stresses that due to classification of cannabis in Schedule I status, it has been difficult to conduct conventional business practices with financial institutions. Thus, everyone in cannabis industry should familiarize themselves with various intricacies stemming from local, federal and state jurisdictions due to their dynamic nature as well as understand cannabis's civil rights issue, and prevailing market. In this thesis, there is a huge concern about ethical considerations in cannabis marketing. For example, when representing cannabis industry, communication professionals should consider the aspect of age-gating and make it their priority as well. In essence, the general public comprises various age sets and groups, as demonstrated in aforementioned reviews, youth and young adults are among the most vulnerable populations. Seconding these groups of civic individuals are the minors, thus the concept of age-gating pertains to restriction placed on product marketing and advertising to deter minors from having a glimpse (Moreno et al., 2018). Thus, cannabis marketing should be governed by regulations limiting advertisements as well as public relations for cannabis products from being expended by or pushed towards juvenile.

Consequently, Parker (2018) cites the strain created by age-gating aspect regarding cannabis companies' push to communicate their services and products to mass audiences. A reflection on an instance that took place in 2017, where hospitals in Colorado experienced a 34% growth in number of minors who were admitted in emergency rooms within Colorado for having

gulped cannabis is established. Notably, a similar scenario but relatively lower to 19% was experienced across various hospitals in United States.

Restricting Cannabis Promotions to Youth

Trangenstein et al. (2019) examined youth residing in states that had jurisdictions which authorized cannabis retailing. Essentially, research aimed at finding out youth engagement with cannabis promotions, in addition to whether they had preferences for or were following established cannabis businesses on social media. Also, whether they had a favorable brand of cannabis or soon could resolve to own or put on cannabis branded items. It was established that youth who had higher chances of having consumed marijuana for the previous year, had been liking otherwise following Marijuana commercial on at least on either social dais. Besides, it was noted that approximately one out of three youth could engage with cannabis marketing and promotion messages on popular social platforms. Thus, jurisdictions that have retail cannabis should considerably restrictions aimed at limiting youth engagement with cannabis marketing messages, such as social platform content monitoring and restriction of searches associated with drugs.

In summation, not everyone in the general public is fit to consume all contents of cannabis marketing. A review of the above scholarly works demonstrates that civic cannabis marketing is by all means unethical. Cannabis marketing cues in civic environment not only have a tolling effect on users but non-users as well, who are compelled to undergo perception shift to treat the substance like tobacco or alcohol. Youth and young adults are the most affected public members and any attempts to push cannabis promotions towards them in the name of legalization have seen majority of them frequently downplay health risks of cannabis at the expense of seeking emotional arousal. To a greater extent, cannabis marketing messages influence

audience's cannabis-related perceptions as well as actions through forfeited branding content.

Thus, the public and policymakers should be aware of news, social media and promotions appealing to cannabis and proactively engage in protecting the public through ways that restrict minors, youth and young adults from accessing them. Equally, marketing professionals in cannabis industry should become aware of civil rights issue, in an attempt to curb the detrimental effect of recreational cannabis in society.

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