

# **AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT AWARENESS, BELIEFS, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT THE CANNABIS INDUSTRY AND ITS IMPACT ON MARKETING CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY**

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## **Abstract**

The legalization of cannabis for medical and recreational use in a number of U.S. states and the subsequent emergence of a growing legal cannabis industry poses both an opportunity and a challenge for business schools. Should this industry be incorporated into the marketing and broader business curriculum and, if so, what are the key considerations for how to do so effectively and appropriately? This goal of this article is twofold. First, to explore the characteristics of the cannabis industry context that differentiate it from other industries and the implications of these characteristics for pedagogy. Second to conduct an examination of student awareness, beliefs, and attitudes about the cannabis industry as a key input for future curriculum development. This examination seeks to understand which influences have the greatest impact on student beliefs and overall attitudes, and which specific beliefs and intentions are most altered due to exposure to factual information about the cannabis industry.

## **Background**

The stigma and past criminalization associated with cannabis is undeniable and often the terminology like marijuana, weed, pot, ganja, etc. further separate it from other types of harmful products. The United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has classified cannabis as a Schedule 1 drug, indicating that it has no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse and thus making it federally illegal. Other Schedule 1 drugs include heroin, LSD, mescaline, and ecstasy. However, cannabis leads this group in gaining credibility in the medical community as a potential aid to a wide variety of medical conditions. An increasing number of states have legalized possession, sale and use of cannabis for medicinal and/or recreational purposes.

28 states and Washington, D.C. currently have legalized cannabis for medical use based on the results of the November 2016 elections when voters in Arkansas, Florida and North Dakota voted. Recreational cannabis use is already legal in Colorado, Alaska, Oregon, Washington, and Washington DC and voters in four more states - California, Massachusetts, Maine and Nevada – voted to legalize recreational cannabis in the most recent election. Although legalization at the state level has reduced the black market for cannabis, a “gray” market exists as cannabis travels from legal states to illegal states and medical prescriptions and legal recreational purchases are used fraudulently. Regulated cannabis sales totaled \$6.7 billion in 2016, according to Arcview Market Research and it is projected to increase to an estimated \$20.2 billion by 2021 (2017, NPR). At the same time the banking industry has been forced to navigate federal regulations on dealing with local cannabis revenue.

Colorado legalized medical cannabis use in 2000 and legalized recreational cannabis use in 2014. Since that time, Colorado has been the epicenter of pioneering this complex and emergent industry including the development of regulations and guidelines for advertising, dispensary retail locations, public and private usage, agricultural tracking, sales and packaging of edibles and infusions, just to mention a few. Tertiary industries and organizations involved in the growth of this industry include agriculture, tourism, commercial real estate, law, investment banking, business, local and state government organizations, and nonprofits. Because it is an evolving space, there are no national or regional brands that are garnering the majority of attention. These facts, and the increasing interest in this industry, make it a compelling, innovative, and important topic for business and marketing students.

Policy makers in state and local governments have many challenges as they evolve legislation around recreational and medical cannabis. Some of these challenges have to do with the active ingredients called

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and how this effects people while driving and operating equipment. Others involve determining the appropriate age at which individuals can legally consume cannabis, and developing rules regarding product potency, labeling, ingredients, and public consumption.

### **Implications and Lessons Learned for Pedagogy**

As a starting point of inquiry, a new course titled Social Awareness and Ethics, was developed as a 5-week, 20-hour core course in the MS Marketing curriculum at the University of Denver. The intent of the course was to introduce graduate students to many aspects of our contemporary culture and build an awareness to develop context, basic ethical considerations, and critical thinking skills in order to make good business and marketing decisions. A one-week module in this course focused on considerations for marketing and business development of potentially “harmful products”. The main focus is when legal products can be harmful when misused, abused and even used as intended. This included alcohol, tobacco, gambling/betting, narcotics/prescription drugs, guns/firearms, and cannabis/marijuana. The module did not include “fringe” harmful products such as fast food, video games, etc. Pursuant to this, Dr. Paul Seaborn, Assistant Professor of Management, along with Dr. Theresa Conley, Associate Professor of the Practice of Marketing, developed a cross disciplinary module focused on the cannabis industry. Topical readings (national and international), case study, articles, an audio podcast, class discussion on a set of preassigned questions, and a case study were used during the module. The students were asked to review all materials before class and create annotated notes individually and within their team activity. During this module, it became clear to Drs. Conley and Seaborn, that students had radically different attitudes and levels of knowledge about the cannabis industry, yet were noticeably more engaged and curious about it than other topics presented as a comparison. It also became clear to the instructors that the way in which this sensitive and controversial topic was introduced and discussed had a significant impact on student reactions and outcomes. The MEA position presentation would share the curriculum basics, the pedagogical approach, and our initial thoughts and findings.

### **Primary Research on Student Perspectives**

Based on the results from the module in the Social Awareness and Ethics course, Drs. Conley and Seaborn are developing primary research to study business student awareness, beliefs, attitudes and intentions about the cannabis industry. A variety of classes will be surveyed – undergraduate and graduate, Marketing and Management - through an anonymous online tool. Questions and analysis are based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Cheng & Chu 2012, Ajzen 1991.) The first set of questions ask respondents to evaluate the relative harmfulness of a list of items that include alcohol, gambling/betting, and tobacco, as well as student comfort in discussing these topics. Then respondents are asked a series of questions regarding their beliefs on the cannabis industry. At this point respondents are provided with a list of factual statements regarding the industry. A number of the same questions are then repeated to gauge the impact of the new information on beliefs, if any. Respondents are also asked whether they have any interest or intention of pursuing a career in this industry.

We anticipate this research will help determine how stable student beliefs are regarding the cannabis industry, which student beliefs have the strongest effect on overall attitudes and intension, which specific beliefs are potentially most altered due to exposure to content and data, and ultimately what are some suitable techniques related to the cannabis industry (and other harmful products) that are critical for high education to consider.

References Available upon Request