Organic, Fair Trade Pot? Ethical Consumerism and Legal Cannabis in the United States

Cannabis Legalization in the United States

Although Cannabis is federally illegal, some states have voted to decriminalize cannabis-related offenses, legalize medical consumption, and/or legalize “adult consumption” (non-medical). In all states where cannabis is legal, growers and dispensaries are licensed by the state and consumers must be over 21 years old.

- 1996 - California is the first state to legalize medical use
- 2012 - Colorado is the first state to legalize (any) adult use


Cannabis in Global Perspective

Under international law, cannabis is a controlled substance, meaning its production, possession, and trade are only permitted for medical and scientific purposes. However, a growing number of countries have decriminalized cannabis possession. Since 2012, several countries and subnational regions (e.g., states) have decriminalized possession and/or legalized for medicinal or any adult consumption. Some examples of countries relaxing policies in the last few years:

- Czech Republic: No longer punish personal possession of small amounts
- Costa Rica: Legalized cultivation, sales, purchase, and consumption for medicinal and adult use
- Uruguay: United States (some states)

Study 1: Ethical Purchasing Initiatives: Comparing Cannabis to More Typical Sectors

Study 2: Ethical Consumerism: Before and After Cannabis Legalization

Study 3: Sustainability Certifications for Cannabis: Who establishes them? Are they robust?

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Research Question: Six months after adult use cannabis became legally available in Oregon, have ethical purchasing activities emerged? Why/not? In what ways is ethical purchasing in cannabis similar to/different from other sectors? How can findings from cannabis extend theory on ethical consumption?

Methodology: Most of the data were collected in March 2016 through structured visits to a random sample of half of Oregon’s dispensaries (64 of 128). Two researchers entered each dispensary as consumers, asked four questions, and recorded responses after leaving. These data were coded twice and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Additionally, US census data and GIS mapping were used to understand the demographics of each location. Finally, notes from interviews, media, and events (25,000 words) were reviewed.

Select findings: 81% of dispensary staff reported that cannabis is ethical, same as conventional production.

Analysis

Ethical purchasing in cannabis is similar to other sectors:

- Demographics: Ethical products were most likely to be requested/available in high-end dispensaries and in more White, wealthy, educated neighborhoods.
- Priorities: Environmental issues were discussed more often than labor issues.
- Green-Feeling: Retailers and brands overstated claims.

Ethical purchasing in cannabis different from other sectors:

- Leadership: Initiatives led by the private sector—not social/environmental organizations.
- Product diversity: No direct trade, worker coops, community supported agriculture or codes of conduct. Initiatives limited to tracking growers and one label.
- Ethical framing: Marketing materials did not identify social and/or environmental problems related to conventional production.

This case highlights three ways in which legal status may affect political consumption: 1. Goal – The objective of political consumption may shift from normalization and legalization to addressing ethical issues related to methods of production. 2. Form – Political consumerism before prohibition may manifest as alternative lifestyle politics; in an effort to frame engagement as socially acceptable, ubiquitous, and mainstream—and shift toward ethical purchasing and marketing after legalization. 3. Leadership – During prohibition, supply-side actors may be less likely than consumers to engage in public advocacy; leadership, and organizing because their participation in illegal activities may be more difficult to deny/obscure and consequences may be greater.

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