

Introduction

The cannabis industry in Canada is on the cusp of massive changes, from a highly stigmatized and criminalized **underground market** to a world of **gleaming factories** owned and operated by powerful corporations as federal legalization fast approaches. This development from the illicit to everyday use has occurred in a very short period of time and **women have been central players** in this shift in attitudes.

Based on five in person interviews with women leaders from various sectors of the cannabis industry in Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia, this paper explores how **gender, racialization, and class** are being employed by participants to uncover how those identities are functioning to **legitimize** and **normalize** cannabis products in the context of a generalized shift to corporatization.

Research Question

“The marijuana industry is blue ocean right now, blue sky. There’s no reason for us to even treat each other like competition because the market is going to be large enough that there is room for everyone right now” – Jazmin Hupp, Co-Founder of Women Grow¹

This is a dominant discourse which suggests women have an unfettered opportunity to become leaders in the cannabis industry as legalization approaches. However, there is little recognition of the significance that gender roles and social constructs play in deciding where women fit in the industry.

This research project asks, how is gender operating in this industry and how gender is involved in normalizing cannabis?

Method

To assess the gendered and intersectional dimensions of the cannabis industry, I conducted qualitative in person and audio recorded interviews with women activists with long careers in various cannabis businesses in Vancouver and Victoria. The research participants included:

- **Jamie Shaw:** Past president of the Canadian Association of Medical Cannabis Dispensaries and past director of the BC Compassion Club Society.
- **Sarah Campbell:** Co-founder and director of The Craft Cannabis Association of BC.
- **Brandi Woods:** General manager of the Victoria Cannabis Buyers Club.
- **Mary Jean Dunsdon (a.k.a. Watermelon):** An online media personality, baker, and cannabis activist.
- **Ashley Abraham:** Founder and director of The Green Ceiling Vapor Lounge.

Race and Corporatization

- Decades of government propaganda developed an image of **cannabis as a harmful substance** distributed by gangs and criminals. From the outset, then, cannabis prohibition disproportionately affected the lives of **racialized communities** who make up the majority of prison populations for marijuana related charges.²
- Cannabis activism sought to challenge prohibition, the Stoner Bro stereotype, and the association with gang culture by emphasizing the **medicinal uses of cannabis** and drawing on the legitimizing power of whiteness.
- Canada’s proposed model for regulation prioritizes Licensed Producers wherein wealthy white businessmen will reap the benefits of impending legalization. I argue that this model reinvests in **male dominated, corporate culture that feminists are working to dismantle**.

Boobs and Bongs

All research participants discussed the **sexualized representation** of women in cannabis that dominated cannabis communities throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s as an issue for women.

- Watermelon has been a centerfold for *High Times* magazine three times and saw these images as a source of **empowerment** for women in the industry.
- Jamie Shaw was critical of the use of sexualized images to sell cannabis products and saw it as an example of the **objectification** of women in our male dominated consumer capitalist culture.
- Brandi Woods and others recognized that this phenomenon is **shifting** to incorporate a wider variety of images.
- I argue that this **shift** from Boobs and Bongs imagery to women industry leaders in power suits is intricately tied to the **corporatization** of the cannabis industry as it moves into the liberal free market.

Martha Stewart of Weed

- Women do not fit the visual image of the stoner stereotype and their involvement with cannabis functions to **normalize** cannabis use because it forces the public to question the prohibition of cannabis when white women are involved with the cannabis community.
- Watermelon explained that her **Disney mom look** helped her when she was involved in three provincial trials for distributing marijuana edibles in Vancouver.
- Sarah Campbell explained that women dominate the **value added industry of edibles** and tinctures, which aligns with dominant discourses of the **female gender as healer**.
- These representations invoke the power of normative white femininity to normalize cannabis because they are drawing on the privileged power of white middle-class femininity. I argue that this raced, classed and gendered representation aligns with the **corporatization** of cannabis which reinvests in **capitalist regimes of power**.

Conclusion

- As a passionate feminist scholar and an outspoken cannabis activist, it is a dream to see **women leading the charge** in this industry. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the cannabis industry does in fact represent a “blue skies” market and that women from all backgrounds have a **voice** in shaping this multi-billion dollar industry.
- Before this can happen, however, we must not dismiss the racialized, classed, and gendered **histories and social structures** in which the cannabis industry was and continues to be embedded. We must be mindful of the power of **capitalist, mass produced, male dominated corporate culture** to take over the cannabis community.
- Women will influence the shape of this burgeoning industry, but **critical feminist and intersectional** analyses are necessary to make sure that the future of this industry is attentive to **large scale systems of power** that influence us all.

References

[1] *Cannabist, The* (2016, January 6). How are women and minorities fairing in legal marijuana? [Videofile]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wg4yFx1QSY&index=3&list=PLElanICRbpIISfO6GpCh77sxxh3bQWSp>.

[2] White, K., & Holman, M. (2012). Marijuana Prohibition in California: Racial Prejudice and Selective Arrests. *Race, Gender & Class*, 19(3/4), 75-92. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43497489>.

Women in Weed. (2016, February 16). Urban Greenhouse. [Photograph]. Retrieved from <http://urbangreenhouse.com/women-and-weed/>

Contact

Research conducted and written by Jacqueline Kittel.
Reachable by email at jackkittel@gmail.com.

Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank Annalee Lepp for her support in supervising and producing this research project.

“The cannabis industry is a brand new legitimate industry, but it is not a new industry” – Ashley Abraham. It has a history, and that history is gendered.