

# **Destigmatizing Cannabis: A Theoretical Exploration of Shifting Consumption Norms in the U.S. Legal Market**

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*This study explores the destigmatization of stigmatized consumption, focusing on the evolving landscape of legal cannabis in the United States. With global adult-use cannabis sales projected to surpass 33 billion U.S. dollars by 2025, the market's growth is undeniable. Despite its expansion, the legal cannabis market remains intricate and controversial. There has been a steep increase in support for cannabis legalization over the last two decades in the U.S. and around the world. This study combines the “stigma turbine” theoretical framework with normative social behavior and market co-optation theories, proposing a categorization of consumption practices from stigmatized to destigmatized to normalized to normatized. By examining the destigmatization process, this framework offers insights applicable beyond cannabis, aiding scholars in understanding the dynamics of stigmatized behaviors and guiding policymakers and brand managers in navigating evolving perceptions and responses. We offer a few public policy implications that advocate for more research in the cannabis field that would educate consumers and increase awareness.*

*Keywords: cannabis, stigma, destigmatization, normativization*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this study, we explore the destigmatization process of stigmatized consumption in the context of the legal cannabis market in the United States. In 2023, the global cannabis market generated total revenues of \$59.39 billion, with recreational cannabis accounting for 53% of the market (Conway, 2024). The United States and Canada led the market, generating \$39.59 billion and \$5.14 billion, respectively (ibid.). In the U.S., cannabis market revenue is expected to grow to \$42.98 billion in 2024 and \$49.56 billion by 2029 (ibid.). This growth is driven by increasing investments and a focus on regulatory developments and market expansion.

As of November 2024, adult cannabis use is legal in 24 states and the District of Columbia for both medical and recreational use, while an additional 14 states have approved it for medical use only (NORML, n.d.). Despite the significant growth of the legal cannabis market worldwide, it remains a highly controversial and complex market. Still mostly an illegal product around the world, cannabis has been consumed for centuries, going through a long history of commodification, illegalization, prohibition, decriminalization, and legalization.

There has been a steep increase in support for cannabis legalization over the last two decades (Schaeffer, 2023). By 2023, 70% of adults were in favor of legalization, more than double the share that supported it in 2000 (ibid.). As more research is emerging, the public perception of the risks associated with cannabis use has evolved. Increased access to information and education about cannabis (NIDA, 2020), its effects, and its potential benefits have contributed to a more informed public. Efforts to debunk myths and provide evidence-based information have influenced public opinion.

Building on the “stigma turbine” framework proposed by Mirabito et al. (2016), along with the theory of normative social behavior and market co-optation, we introduce a process-based model that categorizes consumption practices from *stigmatized* to *normalized*, then *destigmatized*, and ultimately *normalized*. This framework can assist researchers in analyzing other stigmatized behaviors and the evolution of public perceptions and responses. Consequently, it can guide policymakers, as well as product and brand managers, in responding proactively or reactively to these shifts.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

A deviation from behavior that is considered within normative boundaries might go through a process of becoming *tolerable*, *acceptable*, and *appreciated* through societal and market forces (Baldwin & Hecht, 1995). We use the lens of the following conceptual frameworks to delineate the phases cannabis consumption has been going through in the U.S. context: The Theory of Normative Social Behavior (TNSB) helps us make sense of the societal processes and forces, whereas the market co-optation theory provides insights into the market structures and dynamics. While our main goal is to shed light on the process of *normalization* of consumer behavior, we also explain the societal responses to the behavior in each phase as it moves from being *stigmatized* to *normalized*, *destigmatized*, and *normalized* behavior.

### **Stigma in the Marketplace**

Stigma is generally used to refer to a deeply discrediting attribute that diminishes the subject of attribution to a “tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963). For the purposes of describing consumption behaviors, we focus on a meaning proposed by Stafford and Scott (1986) as a characteristic “contrary to a norm,” where the norm is defined as a shared or expected act or belief in a particular context (Crocker, 1998, cited in Link and Phelan, 2001). Therefore, according to this conceptualization, *stigmatized consumption* only exists in relation to another, namely *normative* consumption.

Marketplace stigma is defined as the “labeling, stereotyping, and devaluation by and of commercial stakeholders (consumers, companies and their employees, stockholders, and institutions) and their offerings (products, services, and experiences)” (Mirabito et al., 2016, p. 171). Mirabito et al.’s (2016) “stigma turbine” is a conceptual framework that demonstrates how marketplace stigma emerges and operates within sociocultural and historical milieus and reveals the critical role that markets, and market stakeholders can play in the (de)stigmatization process. In this analogy, the individuals, society, and the marketplace are likened to the three blades of the turbine, and the sociocultural, historical, institutional, and commercial “winds” constitute the contextual currents fueling the stigma turbine. We adopt the conceptual frameworks of the TNSB, market co-optation, and Baldwin & Hecht’s (1995) approach to social tolerance of divergence to discuss the societal, marketplace, and individual forces for normalization.

### **Theory of Normative Social Behavior (TNSB) – Societal Forces for Normalization**

The TNSB explores the ways in which one’s perception of what is morally acceptable in society impacts one’s behavior (Manning, 2009). Consumption behavior is no different. We specifically discuss how a consumption practice evolves from one that is *stigmatized* to one that is *normalized* through the evolution of legal and moral norms of society in the context of the United States. To better understand the process of normalization of a consumption practice, we differentiate between two core dimensions of acceptance: *normalization* and *normalization*.

We use the term *normalization* to signify a quantitative measure of a consumption practice moving from a niche market to the mainstream, a sheer increase in the number of consumers adopting the behavior.

Normalization may be related to the social acceptance of the practice but not necessarily in all cases. In other words, a consumption practice may be widespread (normal) but not morally endorsed by that society's norms.

We differentiate *normativization* as the subjective measure of how morally acceptable a consumption practice is in a specific social environment. Normative associations with any behavior, specifically consumption behaviors, signal the norms one ascribes to, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, one may be virtue signaling through consumption (Berthon et al., 2021). In other words, they may be signaling moral standing through the proxy of consumption without explicitly stating the norm. Moral signals can be congruous (virtue) or incongruous (vice) with socially accepted moral norms.

Considering the two dimensions of *normalization* and *normativization*, we can determine four possible states and present them with examples in Table 1.

1. *Stigmatized or deviant consumption* refers to rarely encountered and morally reprehensible practices. These practices are generally not tolerated in society; therefore, those who engage in them tend to deny the practice. Cannabis consumption was stigmatized from the 1940s onward. The reflections of the stigmatization can be found in the language commonly used in the prohibition period, such as the label of a stoner and representations in popular media.
2. *Normalized consumption*, as introduced above, is the wide adoption of the consumption practice that is seen as morally reprehensible. While not accepted as part of the set of social norms, these practices may be tolerated by society simply because the number of people who engage in them would constitute a majority big enough to deter ousting them. While there is a clear push for legalization worldwide, cannabis consumption and cultivation are still illegal in most parts of the world. However, the rate of growth in the market and the expected growth in the industry indicate an expected increase in adoption by various markets, both end-consumer and industrial. Table 1 lists examples of the change in our language that indicate wider adoption of the product moving forward.
3. *Destigmatization* occurs when the practice is considered morally acceptable by society while the adoption rate is still at low levels. This may be an early stage in consumption becoming more integrated into the social fabric or simply where the process ends. Cannabis consumption destigmatization has been an ongoing process since it first became of medicinal interest. The 1996 legislation of medicinal legalization in California and, later, the 2018 law related to the legalization of recreational adult use have contributed to the realignment of societal values. Market forces through institutionalization have magnified the impact of legalization in terms of social acceptance.
4. Finally, *normativization* is achieved when consumption is widely practiced and morally endorsed by society. These behaviors are cherished and appreciated. Through this positive reinforcement, people might tend to over-report these consumption practices. Cannabis consumption is not yet at this stage. However, in specific contexts, cannabis consumption may be considered normative, such as the medicinal use context for cancer or epilepsy patients.

**TABLE 1**  
**FOUR STATES OF CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR WITH EXAMPLES FROM THE U.S.**  
**CANNABIS MARKET**

| The U.S. Cannabis Market |                                     | Normativization  |   |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|
|                          |                                     | Vice Signaling   | Virtue Signaling  |
| Normativization          | Low Market Share or Slow Diffusion  | <b>Stigmatized consumption (1)</b><br>Deviant consumption<br>Not tolerated by society<br>Recreational use pre-legalization<br><u>Consumers Labeled:</u> Stoner, pothead<br><u>Products Labeled:</u> Weed, Ganja, Marijuana, Spliff, Joint, Blunt, Kief, Shatter, Wax, Mary Jane<br><u>Sales:</u> Underground, Drug dealers<br><u>Media Representations:</u> Harold and Kumar, Cheech and Chong, Dazed and Confused | <b>Destigmatized consumption (3)</b><br>Morally accepted by society<br>Medicinal use in minors<br><u>Consumers Labeled:</u> Patient (Seizures, Extreme chronic pain, Muscle spasms uncontrollable through other treatments)<br><u>Products Labeled:</u> Medicinal use<br>CBD oils in liquid, tablet & capsule forms<br><u>Sales:</u> Dispensaries with doctor approval<br><u>Media Representations:</u> Documentaries, TedTalks |
|                          | High Market Share or Fast Diffusion | <b>Normalized consumption (2)</b><br>Morally tolerated by society<br>Recreational use post-legalization<br><u>Consumers Labeled:</u> Cannabist, Connoisseur of Cannabis<br><u>Products Labeled:</u> Cannabis, Flower/bud, Concentrate, Edible, Vape<br><u>Sales:</u> Retail stores (e.g. MedMen)<br><u>Media Representations:</u> Joe Rogan, Bill Maher  | <b>Normativized consumption (4)</b><br>Morally endorsed<br>Appreciated by society<br>Medicinal use in adults<br><u>Consumers Labeled:</u> Patient (ADD, AIDS, Anxiety, Cancer, Eating Disorders, Insomnia, Pain Management, PTSD)   |

The TNSB perspective helps explain the impact of societal forces such as moral norms. Yet, changes in what is considered virtuous or vice are not limited to history, institutional structures, and shared cultural values, as outlined through this sociological lens. Market dynamics, such as the co-optation of previously marginalized values into an industry, may make consumption practices more acceptable.

**Normativization by Market Co-Optation – Market Forces for Normativization**

The general landscape of cannabis consumption is changing through media depictions and ad campaigns (Coskuner-Balli et al., 2021). The move to reposition cannabis consumption from a stigmatized to a normalized one requires the power dynamics to shift from the hands of anti-drug policies to the free market economy. Indeed, understanding the shift in symbolism, labels, and the meanings attached to those symbols is possible only by observing the effects over time, if any.

Cannabis consumption and consumers are going through a normativization process through the legalization of recreational use as well as market co-optation of the product. Market co-optation theory views the marketplace “...as an ideological force that assimilates the symbols and practices of a

counterculture into dominant norms” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 135). The shift of power from policymakers to the market due to, first, the decriminalization and now the growing legalization of cultivation, sale, and use of cannabis is normalizing consumption.

As with any subculture, the cannabis consumer culture is eventually being inducted into the mainstream culture of the times. “A key premise of co-optation theory is that the capitalist marketplace transforms the symbols and practices of countercultural opposition into a constellation of trendy commodities and depoliticized fashion styles that are readily assimilated into the societal mainstream” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 136). Through the entertainment industry and media depictions, cannabis is now becoming an acceptable consumption practice in large economies active in the international market, pushing ‘Big-Canna’ for larger adoption. In other words, cannabis consumption in certain parts of North America is becoming more commonplace and, therefore, is normalizing. One thing is clear: market forces are now driving the normativization process.

### **From Intolerance to Appreciation – Individual Forces in Response to Normativization**

The evolution of stigmatized behavior to a normatized one, meaning one that is an acceptable or cherished practice, resembles that of Baldwin and Hecht’s (1995) multilayered process, by which diverse perspectives become adopted into society. In a different context, authors suggest diversity in a society goes through the stages of *not being tolerated*, then being *tolerated* and *accepted*. Adapted from their work, we propose that the stages of *tolerance*, *acceptance*, and *appreciation* fit the individual responses at each phase of the proposed normativization process of cannabis consumption as well. While its consumption has been considered intolerable by the majority since the late 1960s (McCarthy, 2018), tolerance has been afforded by law enforcement increasingly. According to Pew Research (Schaeffer, 2023), public opinion on cannabis legalization has shifted through time as a proxy of legitimacy, suggesting that individuals have become more tolerant and perhaps accepting of its consumption and cultivation in the past four decades.

### **DISCUSSION: THE NORMALIZATION OF CANNABIS CONSUMPTION**

Combining the analogy of a stigma turbine by Mirabito (2016) with the explanations provided by the theoretical lenses introduced in the theory section, we posit the following (See Table 2 for a summary):

1. When a consumption practice is *stigmatized*, it deviates from social norms and is not tolerated as it is considered a vice.
2. *Normalized* consumption refers to behaviors that are practiced by many regardless of their misalignment with dominant societal norms and expectations. At this stage, there is little acceptance of the practice, but it must be tolerated somehow; otherwise, there would be no consumption at these high levels. While worldwide cannabis consumption cannot be considered normalized, the use of the plant, even during prohibition periods, suggests a level of tolerance. Perhaps more significantly, the increase in market sizes where the consumption is legal suggests normalization is mainly curtailed by prohibition and as much by social stigma in most of the U.S.
3. A consumption practice is *destigmatized* by aligning the perceptions related to that consumption with the moral values within the context of a given society, regardless of the rate of adoption in the society or market. These behaviors are accepted in society and, therefore, are not considered vices that need to be tolerated.
4. Consumption behavior is considered *normative* when it is appreciated and expected to be the default or prevalent behavior. These behaviors are both aligned with the dominant values system and practiced by many in that society. Co-optation of cannabis subculture and the subversion of countercultural values through branding, advertising, and institutionalization efforts might result in acceptance of cannabis consumption. However, it may be a stretch to consider moral appreciation or expectation that one engages in this practice in society at large.

**TABLE 2**  
**THE THREE FORCES OF THE STIGMA TURBINE IN THE**  
**PROCESS OF NORMALIZATION**

| Process of normativization          | Three core contexts in the Stigma Turbine analogy<br>(Mirabito, 2016) |  |                                    |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|------------------------------------|
| Phases                              | Societal forces   | Market forces                                    | Individual forces                  |
| <b>1. Stigmatized consumption</b>   | Deviation from societal norms   | Low market adoption                              | Not tolerated                      |
| <b>2. Normalized consumption</b>    | Deviation from societal norms   | Increased market adoption, through co-optation   | Tolerated                          |
| <b>3. Destigmatized consumption</b> | Aligned with societal norms   | Low market adoption                              | Accepted                           |
| <b>4. Normalized consumption</b>    | Aligned with societal norms   | Increased market adoption, through co-optation   | Appreciated                        |
| <b>Theoretical lens</b>             | Adapted from TNSB   | Adapted from Market Co-optation (Kozinetz, 2002) | Adapted from Baldwin & Hecht, 1995 |

## **PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The shifting landscape of cannabis consumption, moving from a once-stigmatized practice to one increasingly normalized and, to a certain degree, accepted, holds important consequences for public policy. The recent trends in legalization for both medical and recreational use indicate a broader change in societal attitudes toward cannabis. The relationship between cannabis legalization and marketing is a growing area of interest, particularly regarding the role of regulatory frameworks in shaping the strategies of cannabis companies. As more countries and states move towards legalizing cannabis, the marketing practices of cannabis retailers have evolved in response to both market demands and policy restrictions. One of the most significant challenges has been balancing effective marketing with public health concerns, as cannabis marketing often influences consumer behavior, particularly among youth and vulnerable populations. It is beyond the scope of this study to delve deep into the public policy implications of cannabis marketing and consumption, but we summarize some main points below.

### **Public Health and Safety**

With cannabis use becoming increasingly normalized, public health and safety policies must evolve accordingly. It is vital to enforce strict quality and safety standards for cannabis products, which involves thorough regulations on labeling, potency, and testing, as well as monitoring and managing potential health risks.

Research highlights how cannabis marketing strategies have adapted to various regulatory environments. For example, Winfield-Ward (2024) analyzed the differences in cannabis marketing across jurisdictions in the U.S., finding that cannabis marketing practices differ depending on the strength of local laws and restrictions. Regions with stricter regulations saw a reduction in the visibility of cannabis marketing, which correlates with lower consumption, particularly among adolescents. This indicates that marketing regulations play a crucial role in moderating the public's exposure to cannabis-related content.

Cannabis branding and packaging influence public perceptions and consumer behavior. Reboussin et al. (2024) conducted a study analyzing the packaging of cannabis edibles in the U.S. market, revealing that

many products use colorful and enticing imagery, which could appeal to younger demographics. This highlights a potential conflict between commercial interests and public health policies aimed at reducing cannabis consumption among minors.

Moreover, the transition from illegal to legal markets has not been seamless. Andresen (2024) notes that high taxes and strict regulations in the legal cannabis market can inadvertently push consumers back into the illicit market, where cannabis products are cheaper and more accessible. This creates a significant policy dilemma, as stringent regulations aimed at protecting public health may inadvertently sustain the illegal market, undermining the goals of legalization.

### **Social Equity and Inclusion**

Policy efforts should aim to correct the historical injustices linked to cannabis criminalization (Adinoff & Reiman, 2019). Key actions include ensuring equitable access to the legal cannabis market, expunging past cannabis convictions, and providing support to underrepresented communities within the growing industry.

State cannabis retail regulations are vital for consumer protection. Due to the impact of cannabis marketing on perceptions and use (Whitehill et al., 2020; Trangenstein et al., 2021; Rup et al., 2020), certain marketing and policy restrictions are essential. Cannabis products and ads highlight attributes like safety, quality, and CBD/THC content, along with claimed health benefits (Luc et al., 2020), which reduce perceived risk and increase appeal, especially among targeted groups such as youth and racial/ethnic minorities (Trangenstein et al., 2021). Retailers also use price promotions, like discounts and loyalty programs (Nicholas et al., 2021), which attract and encourage price-sensitive populations, including young adults and those with lower incomes. Certain sociodemographic groups may face higher cannabis retail exposure and fewer protections (Berg et al., 2024). Studies show that lower-income and Hispanic neighborhoods often have more cannabis retailers, including unlicensed ones, which tend to promote more to vulnerable populations and impose fewer youth restrictions (Firth et al., 2020).

Progress is being made in addressing historical injustices. Minority groups, including African American and Hispanic individuals, have historically faced disproportionately high rates of arrest and incarceration for cannabis possession (Adinoff & Reiman, 2019). In states where cannabis is now legal, there is an increasing movement toward policies aimed at expunging criminal records for those with prior cannabis-related convictions (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2024).

### **Education and Awareness**

Cannabis education and awareness are essential for fostering informed decision-making and promoting safe consumption practices, especially as legalization expands globally. Policymakers should focus on creating thorough, evidence-based campaigns that promote responsible use, inform about potential health impacts, and offer harm reduction strategies.

Research shows that people with a college education show the lowest rates of use, while individuals at or below the poverty line have higher usage rates compared to those earning twice the federal poverty level (NASEM, 2024). In areas where warnings on cannabis product packages were mandated, awareness of health risks was higher, suggesting that labels may improve knowledge of cannabis-related health risks (Goodman et al., 2022).

In the Consensus Report prepared by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), it is recommended that cannabis regulators should mandate training and certification for all cannabis retail staff who engage with customers (NASEM, 2024). This training should cover cannabis' effects on health, preventing sales to minors, warnings about impaired driving, risks during pregnancy, information on high-potency products, and recognizing signs of impairment. The trainings' effectiveness should be regularly evaluated, and content should be updated as new scientific insights on cannabis emerge (NASEM, 2024). Developing and evaluating education campaigns requires major resources, which requires CDC leadership to guide states in developing these campaigns. The Consensus Report recommends that the CDC, alongside other agencies, should create and assess public health campaigns aimed at parents and vulnerable groups (youth, pregnant individuals, and adults over 65) to raise awareness of cannabis risks.

These campaigns should focus on recognizing risky behaviors, like combining cannabis with alcohol or prescription drugs, and offer risk reduction strategies, including safe storage and guidelines for lower-risk use. They should also discourage unhealthy practices, such as mixing cannabis with other substances or using high-potency products.

### **Research and Data Collection**

Research on the health effects of cannabis has been limited in recent years due to significant obstacles, including strict regulations studying it. Cannabis is classified as a Schedule I substance, which is defined as “drugs with no currently accepted medical use and high potential for abuse” (DEA, n.d.). The White House Office of National Drug Policy is not allowed to study the impacts of legalizing cannabis, even though it is legal in many states (Huang, 2024). It is recommended that Congress remove the restrictions on research for the Office of National Drug Policy (NASEM, 2024). Policymakers should support research efforts to gain a clearer understanding of the long-term effects of cannabis use, its impact on public health, and its broader societal impact.

As the shift from stigmatization to normalization and acceptance of cannabis continues, public policy should evolve to establish a well-regulated and socially responsible framework. This progression provides an opportunity to create a more equitable, informed, and safer environment for cannabis users, producers, and society as a whole. With these points in mind, we hope our insights serve as a foundation for future policy discussions and research, especially in emerging cannabis markets. The changing landscape of cannabis consumption offers a unique perspective on how societies manage the transition of a once-stigmatized activity into one that is increasingly accepted and regulated. Understanding this process is not only of academic interest but also has practical significance for society, policymakers, and industries entering this rapidly developing space.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this study, we proposed a conceptual pathway to normativization of a previously stigmatized consumption practice that can be implemented and tested for consistency in other types of deviant consumption. Other contexts for inquiry may include the change in psychedelics research and the use of psychedelics among high-functioning professionals.

We described how stigmatized consumption practices can be normatized over time at the societal, marketplace, and individual levels. The legal cannabis market in North America is currently undergoing a transformation, focusing on reshaping its image, reducing stigma, and redefining the product category. Unlike the countercultural movement driven by consumers in the past, today’s shift in the cannabis market is led by marketers and supported by legislation passed through consumer votes. Despite growing public support for legalization, the stigma around cannabis persists. It is still too early in this process of destigmatization and commodification to make definitive predictions about the future. As legalization spreads across the U.S., we expect an increase in the number of cannabis brands, greater brand awareness, expansion in product lines, and differentiation in both recreational and medicinal uses. Over time, as cannabis becomes a mainstream commodity, the public stigma is likely to fade. This development may mirror the historical shift from an anti-establishment hippie counterculture to a multi-billion-dollar commercial market.



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