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Lorraine Taylor
Fort Lewis College

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Mountains and Marijuana: Motivations of Visitors to Colorado

A Budding Industry

Legal sales of retail marijuana began in Colorado on January 1, 2014. At this time a new market of marijuana tourists was born. The purpose of this study was to better understand marijuana tourists: their characteristics, behavior, and motivations. Marijuana stores and the tourist destinations where they are located can benefit from targeting this niche market. As more states continue to legalize retail marijuana, this research can be useful in various geographical regions in the US.

Profiling Marijuana Tourists

The academic research on marijuana tourism is limited. Studies have considered drug tourists in international locations with different degrees of legality towards the purchase and use of marijuana. Researchers in Colorado have recently begun working to build the body of knowledge for marijuana tourism. Research has considered frequency of emergency room visits, managing the marijuana tourist market, and residents' perceptions of legalization.

This study responds to the call by the research community to understand the demand side of marijuana tourism by developing a profile of marijuana tourists. Data collection occurred in two phases over two years to over 400 tourists at marijuana stores in southwest Colorado. The survey questions included customer demographics, marijuana use, spending, travel behavior, and motivations.

Who are the Marijuana Tourists?

In Phase 1, the sample was very young (with 26.5% under the age of 26) and male (70.2%). Most members of the sample were daily users of marijuana products (62.5%). The majority had previously purchased legal marijuana (52.3%). On average, tourists spent \$103.87 per transaction. The most common information source was the internet. The average length of stay for tourists was 3.65 days. Tourists were asked if the ability to purchase and consume

marijuana was the primary reason for their visit to Colorado. Many tourists (49.5%) strongly agreed that marijuana was the main reason for their visit. However, there was 9.2% of the sample that strongly disagreed that marijuana was the primary purpose of their visit. The average score was 4.68 on a scale of 1-7, resting between neither agree nor disagree and slightly agree. These results demonstrate that tourists feel differently about whether marijuana was the primary reason for choosing to visit Colorado.

Phase 2 participants tended to be young (27.9% under the age of 26) and male (55.0%). Members of the sample were likely to be regular marijuana users (41.3% used daily and 27.1% used a few times per week). The majority (60.0%) had previously purchased legal marijuana. Tourist spending (\$92.51 per transaction) and average length of stay (3.28 days) decreased slightly from Phase 1.

How to Define Marijuana Tourism?

The conclusions drawn from this study help outline a definition of marijuana tourism. Previous scholarly research and industry definitions, assume that the ability to purchase legal marijuana is the primary motivation for the trip. However, the findings of this study suggest that marijuana tourists exist on a spectrum. There are visitors who chose the destination because of marijuana, but also visitors who did not plan to but happened to purchase marijuana during their visit. Other visitors may have considered marijuana amongst many reasons why they chose that destination. Marijuana has been called the “icing on the cake” in the context of tourism in Colorado where there are many other factors that may pull a tourist to the destination.

The author proposes a new definition of “marijuana tourism” that builds upon the foundational definition of tourism that tourism is the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs. The findings of this study support the definition of marijuana tourism as *purchasing with the intent to consume marijuana*

products while temporarily traveling away from one's normal place or work or residence. The new definition does not require marijuana to be the primary reason for travel. It also does not require the sale of marijuana to be legal which extends the definition to destinations that may vary in terms of legalization or decriminalization. By this definition, marijuana tourism would not include purchasing with the intent to sell marijuana or permanently moving to the area.

This new definition is an important contribution to the understanding of marijuana tourists. The definition helps marijuana stores and tourist destinations to have a better understanding of why marijuana tourists are purchasing and consuming marijuana when they travel. Managers can use this information to promote existing offerings or to develop new products and services to better meet their needs. Marijuana tourists do not all have the same motivations and practitioners with the most potential for success will appreciate this diversity and avoid stereotyping marijuana tourists.

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