

Cannabis Business and Tourism Impact at a Southern California Destination

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Cannabis has been legalized for both medical and recreational purposes in many states. Some tourists are drawn by the availability of legal cannabis that in turn, deliver economic benefits to the destination. Where it is legal, cannabis and related businesses attract new marijuana-motivated travelers as well as returning vacationers. Previous studies have shown that the legal cannabis industry can have a positive economic impact at a destination, including increased tax revenues and creating jobs. Additionally, hospitality and related businesses may see revenues increase from new and returning travelers who use it for various reasons, including trying it for the first time. This study focused on the cannabis business in a tourist destination.

Keywords: cannabis business, cannabis tourism, marijuana tourism, recreational marijuana

INTRODUCTION

Traveling to a location where cannabis use, possession, and sale are legal for using or purchasing the drug is known as cannabis tourism. Cannabis tourists are motivated to experience recreational or medicinal cannabis consumption within the local lifestyle (Kang, Miller & Lee, 2019). This kind of travel is typically associated with states like Colorado, California, and Amsterdam, all of which have legalized the recreational use of cannabis. Colorado and California are two locations in the United States that have legalized cannabis and have seen an increase in tourism as a result. Dispensaries, tours, and other tourist-oriented cannabis-related businesses exist in these states' thriving industries. However, the demand does not exist only for the domestic market as Americans would travel to Europe as cannabis tourists, with 65 percent saying they would travel to another country or city to experience a legalized cannabis market and 66 percent saying they would visit a dispensary or consumption lounge (Airguide, 2022).

Other definitions of cannabis tourism or "marijuana tourism" are "the act of traveling or vacationing to a place because of the ability to purchase cannabis legally with the intent to consume away from work or home" (Taylor, 2019). There are two primary classifications in the cannabis industry: recreational and medical. Medical cannabis is typically only available to patients who have a valid prescription from a licensed medical professional. Within recreational, cannabis-themed festivals are one of the fastest-growing

tourism segments for out-of-state visitors' understanding of motivations and activities, essential to proper planning and for community benefit (Kang & Lee, 2021). Medical cannabis is used to treat specific medical conditions, and in contrast, recreational cannabis is typically sold to adults over the age of 21 and is used for non-medical purposes.

The legalization of cannabis in some states has not only led to a growing market for cannabis-related products, including flowers, edibles, concentrates, and topicals, but it has also led to the growth of supporting businesses such as testing labs, security companies, and consulting firms. However, despite the legalization in some states, cannabis remains illegal under federal law, and the cannabis business is still facing a lot of restrictions and regulations that vary by state. The adoption of Cannabis Hospitality and Tourism by lodging, activities, transportation, culinary, and wellness experiences continues to transform. The industry will modify regulations to meet the demand for specific experiences (Newstex, 2017).

Palm Springs, California, has welcomed vacationers for decades, and neighboring Desert Hot Springs was the first city in the state to legalize medicinal cannabis in 2014. Subsequently, recreational marijuana was legalized, and the area embraced cannabis tourism early on. It now has several dispensaries, cannabis-friendly accommodations, and activities catering to cannabis consumers. Visitors can purchase cannabis products at dispensaries and consume them in designated smoking areas or cannabis-friendly hotels and rentals. Many dispensaries also offer tours and classes on cannabis cultivation and use. Additionally, there are cannabis-infused spa treatments, yoga classes, and other activities that are provided in the area.

The various sectors and industries involved in the cultivation, distribution, and sale of cannabis and products related to cannabis are collectively referred to as the "cannabis business." Dispensaries, cultivators, edibles manufacturers, and testing labs are all included in this category.

An example of planning for the changes in the law is Sonoma Hills Farm in Sonoma, California, which is bringing craft cannabis to the farm-to-table lifestyle with a premium "craft cannabis" positioned for discerning users, with plans to include high-end restaurants (Jennings, 2020). One argument for cannabis tourism is that it can have a positive impact by bringing job creation and other economic growth to communities where it is legalized. A destination that allows its use will attract visitors from other states or countries, increasing tourism revenue and, additionally, offering a service to provide access to cannabis products for those who may not have legal access in their home state or country. This can also deliver a positive impact on medical cannabis patients.

Established Tourism Market and Infrastructure

When cannabis was legalized in Colorado, the demand for services at hospitals had one impact. Emergency departments had a slight increase in visits from residents but a rapid increase from out-of-state residents (Kim, Hall, & Monte, 2016). One takeaway from that period was that for cannabis tourism to succeed, a successful infrastructure needed to be in place to manage the increased out-of-area tourism and demand for services. With disproportionate demand coming from visitors, how were awareness of cannabis usage and the adverse effects of overuse communicated and addressed? It was found that all education on cannabis education was focused on residents (Kim, Hall, & Monte, 2016). In hindsight, providing better education and availability for tourists at the point of purchase and other outlets utilized by tourists is a better tactic.

Experience and Education

Leisure users of cannabis are going to continue using it while on vacation. Studies show that routine cannabis users will intensify usage while vacationing (Belhassen, Carla, & Uriely, 2007). (Carr, 2002) suggested a relationship between leisure users of cannabis and a more pleasure-oriented focus on drugs in tourism. The assumption is that repeat cannabis tourists (vs. first-time tourists) will have richer experiences in cannabis tourism destinations given the perceived benefits and constraints of recreational cannabis consumption based on interactions with other cannabis tourists, tourism practitioners, and recreational cannabis-related product providers (Wen J. K., 2022).

Interest in cannabis has grown globally, and countries are now considering or permitting its use for medical and leisure. Thanks to the shifting attitudes and support from younger, new voters, political leaders

have run on platforms to change laws that decriminalize and permit cannabis use in surprisingly fast ways. Thailand, for example, now permits recreational consumption that until recently had some of the world's harshest drug laws, with possession of cannabis then punishable by up to 15 years in prison (Campbell, 2023). Another country in East Asia whose market is among the largest in the world for outbound travel and tourism is China. The literature has noted that Chinese nationals interested in trying cannabis have been attracted to overseas trips for consumption experiences. A major factor for recreational drug use while on holiday is the perceived freedom and comfort of a destination that provides a sense of liberation not found at home (Wen, Meng, Ying, Qi & Lockyer, 2028; Ying, Wen & Shan, 2019). Therefore, understanding how to experience cannabis at the destination is vital in delivering a satisfactory experience for the cannabis tourist. Colorado and Oregon residents' perceptions were different on the positive impact of cannabis tourism. Colorado advertising as the "mecca of cannabis" puts higher expectations on the financial benefits that would be gained (Kang & McGrady, 2020). Information needs to be provided to both the locals who reside within the tourism market and the tourists to meet both expectations.

Not only is cannabis a motivator for travel in the United States, but it is growing in Europe and will also reap the economic rewards. Reporting on that potential, a cannabis market survey from the Bloomwell Group (Airguide, 2022) stated that 80% of respondents find cannabis companies as attractive investment options, and 61% revealed they would invest in European cannabis stocks. One projection calls for Germany when that market opens up to exceed international sales of USD 10 billion in 2026 for the cannabis industry. Airguide (2022) reported that Germany has 82 million inhabitants, more than Canada and California combined, two of the largest cannabis markets in the world, and potentially will become the largest market globally. Findings from the survey included respondents who were 87% in favor of worldwide legalization. Americans stated they would travel to a city or country to experience its licensed cannabis market at 65%, and more than 66% said they would visit a cannabis dispensary or social consumption lounge in Germany when legalized.

Bust?

Planning for the legalization of cannabis, American Green purchased a small town in California for \$5 million. Nipton, California, has a population of 15-20 individuals, and the infrastructure was purchased in 2017. The plan was to develop Nipton as a Cannabis Tourist retreat destination, "A Cannabis Wonderland" (Hasse, 2017). The goal was to own and develop the municipality, then lease out restaurants and other venues, but in 2022, the town was purchased for \$2.75 million by a group out of Las Vegas. Their plans for the town have not been revealed (Phenix, 2022).

Cookie Plug is a cookie franchise that sells cookies that use cannabis strains in names like O. G. Chocolate Chip, Nutty O.G., Purple Haze, Chocolate XTC, and Mac Daddy (Cookie Plug Menu, 2022). While the cookies have cannabis names, they do not contain any cannabis products. When visiting the store, it was just cookies, and the cashier answered that they were asked all day if there was cannabis in the cookies, which there was not. Will Cookie Plug be positioned to offer cannabis-backed goods without being a dispensary? Or will they run out of funds before new laws and legislation take effect?

When a state legalizes cannabis business it takes a while for the regulations and illegal market coexist. Companies that operate legally often compete with the illegal market that floods the market with cannabis. New York was not prepared when it legalized marijuana without properly educating users or sellers with the illegal market of unlicensed stores cannibalizing the legal market (Tolentino, 2024).

Growth

As more states legalize cannabis, this provides a lot of growth potential for the cannabis market. California and Colorado are expected to continue leading in cannabis sales. California grossed \$1.2 billion in taxable sales during Q3 2021, down from the previous quarter's \$1.4 billion total. Colorado generated \$1.9 billion in sales between January and October of 2021. (Ward, 2022) Colorado residents were studied to find out how receptive they were to the legalization of cannabis and their support for cannabis tourism. The study found that Colorado residents positively supported cannabis-related tourism (Kang & Lee, 2018).

Due to federal law restrictions that do not authorize cannabis business at commercial banks. Banks' refusal to do business with cannabis retailers had relegated retailers to cash-only businesses without credit card acceptance (King, 2018). The local governments are taking back control of cannabis to promote tourism by providing licensing for the sales and consumption of edibles, allowing the preparation of foods that contain cannabis, and allowing separate smoking rooms on-site in addition to edible consumption (King, 2018).

Media outlets portrayed cannabis users depending on whether it was legal in the state and their political leaning. Media successfully implemented visuals in their communications, which are less likely to be questioned than the text. Before legalization, the media tended to stereotype users as poor minorities, pothead hippies, and criminals. After legalization, most images were normalized, providing a neutral stereotype. Studies have shown there is a significant difference in how cannabis users were portrayed before and after legalization. Before the legalization of media, images were negatively portrayed, while after, they became more neutral to normalize cannabis (Mortensen, Moscovitz, Wan, & Yang, 2020).

Legalized Markets

Recently, voters approved ballot propositions to legalize marijuana for recreational uses, which brings the total to 21 states. Moreover, one may deduce that close to half the country now approves of recreational cannabis, which in turn begs the question, how long before it becomes federally legal? The benefits of cannabis tourism or marijuana-motivated vacations are rooted in the potential economic benefits it can bring as destination-based new product offerings. The destination-based offerings are retail items, products, and services that may enhance the traveler's experience of an attraction, venue, hotel, restaurant, and more. Cannabis consumption continues to evolve with offerings in the form of leaf, oil, wax, vaping, beverages, ointments, and edibles that could elevate the experience of tourists. The different forms of cannabis provide usage opportunities for relaxation, medicinal, and enjoyment purposes—an opportunity to experiment in supplementing their hospitality experience in general.

The movement of leisure seekers to a faraway destination where cannabis is legal may be one component of defining cannabis tourism. An example would be Chinese tourists who are motivated to engage in cannabis due to the perception of it being fashionable and for gaining social prestige (Wen & Qi, 2020). The younger, educated Chinese travelers are cannabis enthusiasts who are looking for recreation and experimentation. A smaller, curious group of Chinese tourists seek wellness and stay low-key (Wen, Meng, Ying, & Belhassen, 2020).

Additionally, as cannabis continues to grow and laws change, food and beverage businesses may find the opportunity to add cannabis products to their menus, such as cannabis-infused meals and unique beverages, to increase sales and guest satisfaction (Newsfile 2017). While emerging, cannabis tourism is motivated by products, services, and experiences that have the potential to generate economic benefits for the destination. Beyond tobacco, spirits, wine, and beer, cannabis is an alternative. Cannabis can be paired and consumed in the form of edibles, gastronomic food pairings, tastings, aromatics, oils, flavors, and smoking to enhance socialization and relaxation enjoyment as tourists travel to new destinations to sample cannabis in all its different varieties.

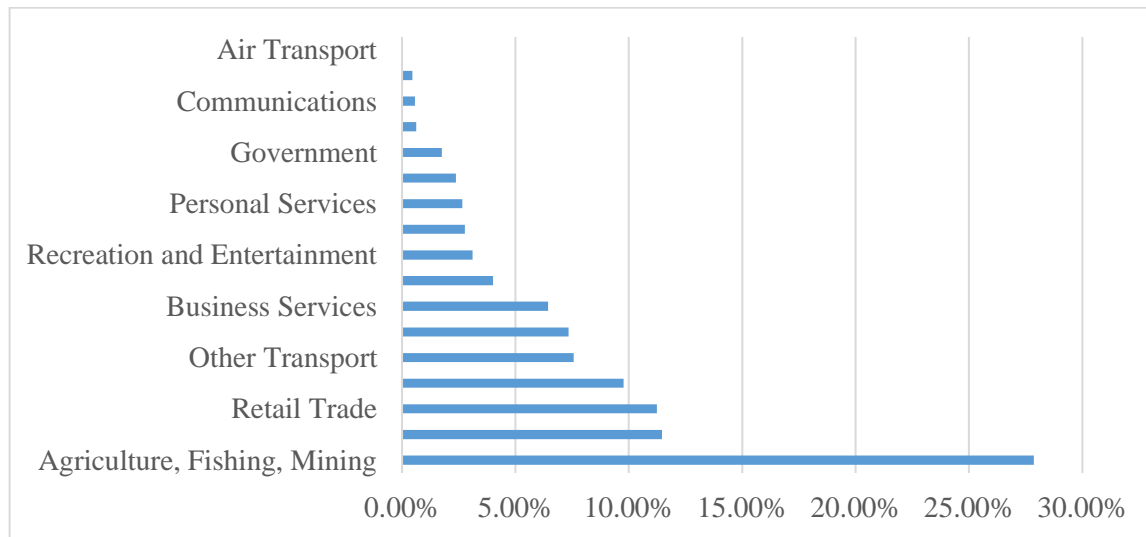
Some insights about the attitudes of consumers were gleaned from (Yakowicz. & Kelleher, 2022) who wrote that fifty percent of millennials stated that access to recreational cannabis is essential when choosing a vacation destination, and more than four in ten millennials (43%) say they have specifically chosen a cannabis-legal destination based on a Harris Poll. They further reported that recreation users skew toward millennials or younger (63%), with a college degree (59%), a job (82%), and an average household income of \$87,000. Moreover, according to a report from the Cannabis Travel Association International (CTAI), most future travelers will be from this segment. (Bologna, 2022) cites a global survey by MMGY that revealed: "... 37% of the active leisure travel audience in the United States are cannabis-experience motivated, up 8% from 2020," "Cannabis, hemp, and CBD sales soared during the pandemic as people needed to cope with difficult and unpredictable situations. Today, 70% of Gen Z travelers say that legal access to cannabis while on vacation matters." Destinations will continue to change with economic and

legal modifications to meet consumers’ demands and their consumption cultures (Keul & Eisenhauer, 2019).

Current Businesses Affected

Some of the 2020 economic impact study findings showed that several industries were positively impacted by cannabis tourism and reaped economic benefits, as provided in Table 1. Not surprisingly, agriculture is growing, and retail selling, shipping, and other services, including hospitality, followed the prosperity trail. The rental market, such as Airbnb, is self-identifying as “420” friendly, which allows specific usage of cannabis at the location (Keul & Eisenhauer, 2019). However, recent news has shown a different story, with adverse effects on smaller cities at the destination due to competition and other economic burdens for business owners. More to come on this later, which is expounded upon in the results and findings section of the paper

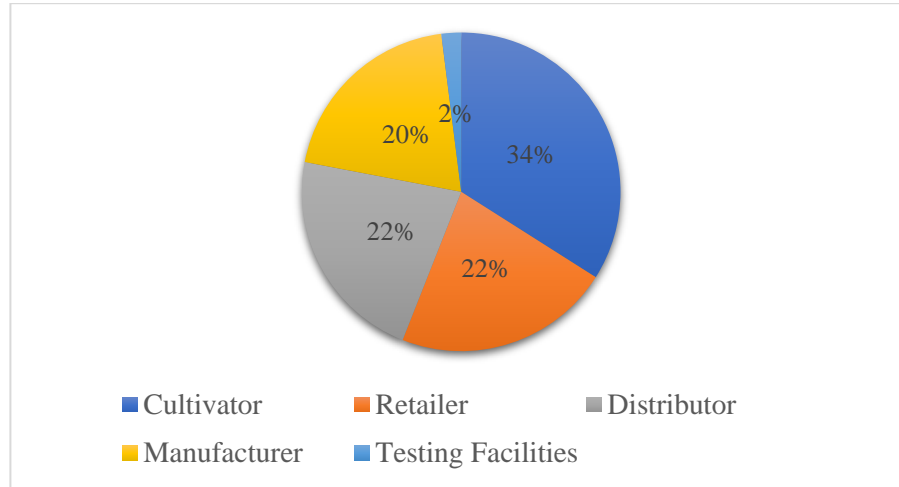
**TABLE 1
INDUSTRIES IMPACTED BY RECREATION CANNABIS**



New Cannabis Businesses

For new licenses awarded to operate cannabis and related businesses, a data review showed that over 400 new licenses were issued in the region. Five sectors of that group emerged, all catering to local and transient visitation alike. Not surprisingly, five cannabis business sectors identified in the survey were grouped as Cultivator, Retailer, Distributor, Manufacturer, and Testing Facilities. The respective business licenses in percentages are presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2
NEW CANNABIS BUSINESSES**



A Cultivator engages in the business of planting, growing, harvesting, drying, curing, grading, or trimming cannabis. The retailer sells cannabis and cannabis products directly to a consumer. Distributor focuses on procurement, selling, and transporting cannabis between cannabis businesses, such as a cultivator, manufacturers, or retailers. A manufacturer produces or prepares cannabis or cannabis products at a specific location where they package or repackage cannabis products and label cannabis containers. Testing Facility is utilized to analyze and certify the safety and potency of cannabis products.

Industries impacted in the study are listed in Table 1, and the government was ranked as the seventh most economically impacted at a growth level of 2.5 % in revenue increase. On a national basis, a look at state governments where cannabis is legal showed that all reaped positive tax benefits on licensed recreational cannabis. Taxes in 2021 generated an impressive cash flow for all and the top ten states, as shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 3
TOP 10 CANNABIS TAX REVENUE STATES**

1	California	\$1,031,879,926
2	Washington	\$468,810,000
3	Colorado	\$387,480,110
4	Oregon	\$183,134,448
5	Illinois	\$174,884,334
6	Nevada	\$123,683,509
7	Massachusetts	\$81,734,083
8	Michigan	\$31,000,000
9	Alaska	\$24,213,296
10	Maine	\$1,552,332

California ranked first, followed by Washington, Colorado, and Oregon. Taxes collected on the sale and purchase of cannabis included medicinal cannabis sales in markets (Baktari, 2021). In general, the collective number of states stands to grow as more states legalize cannabis use. If cannabis is federally legalized, the rules and regulations could change, including a federally levied tax.

Lounges

Tourists may be able to purchase cannabis legally, but finding a space to consume is another matter. Take Colorado and Nevada, for example, where few locations exist to smoke it except in one's home, except that tourists generally do not own a home, and that is the dilemma. Furthermore, hotels do not allow smoking, as are actual bars and restaurants, and smoking in public is prohibited. What occurred in Las Vegas were sidewalks smelling like cannabis and concerts such as Snoop Dog that provided the opportunity space to smoke, albeit not legally. Fast forward, Las Vegas is now opening smoking lounges to provide a place for consumption (Kline, 2022).

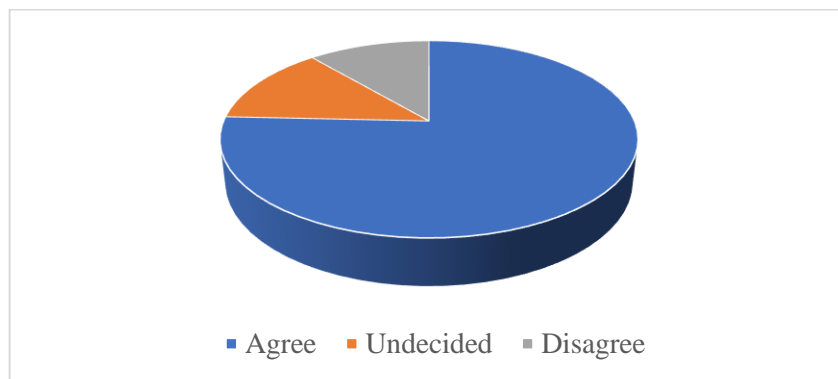
RESULTS

A tourism business survey was provided to businesses in a Southwestern tourist destination. A professional data collection agency provided, distributed, and collected the survey. The raw data was shared with the researchers, showing that 98 businesses participated in the survey. Being a tourist destination, not surprisingly, the most significant number of respondents (68%) were from the lodging industry, which consisted of hotels and short-term rentals. The rest of the respondents (32%) fell into the category of local small businesses. The survey was anonymous, self-reported, and distributed through a business professional organization.

Cannabis Education

The study asked about the importance of education on the cannabis travel trend as an essential first step in building a tourism strategy, with 76% of the respondents agreeing, 13% undecided, and 11% disagreeing. There was no significant difference between hotels, rentals, or local businesses in their attitude toward the importance of education on cannabis travel, $\chi^2(4, N=98) = .861, p = .930$ Table 4.

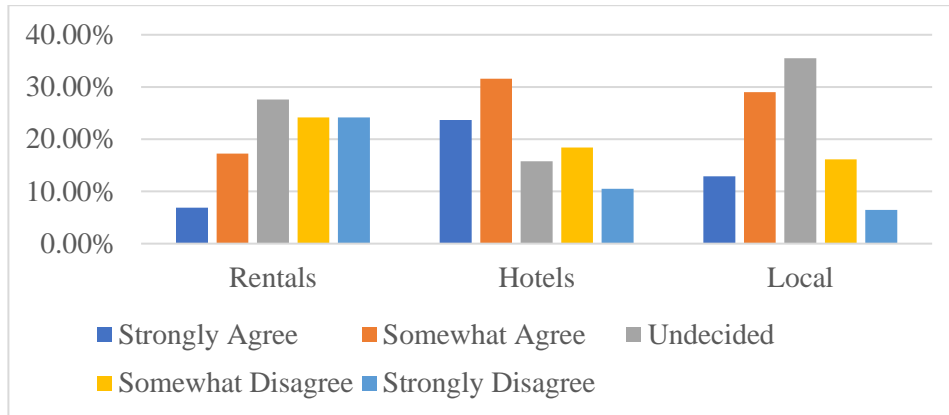
TABLE 4
CANNABIS EDUCATION IMPORTANCE



Cannabis Traveler

While Understanding the Cannabis Traveler was not a statistically significant difference between hotels, rentals, and local businesses $\chi^2(8, N=98) = 11.66, p = .17$. The graphing shows that hotels may possess a better understanding of cannabis travelers than both rentals and local businesses. Understanding cannabis travelers for both rentals and local businesses had a high percentage of undecided, with rentals having the slightest understanding of cannabis travelers Table 5.

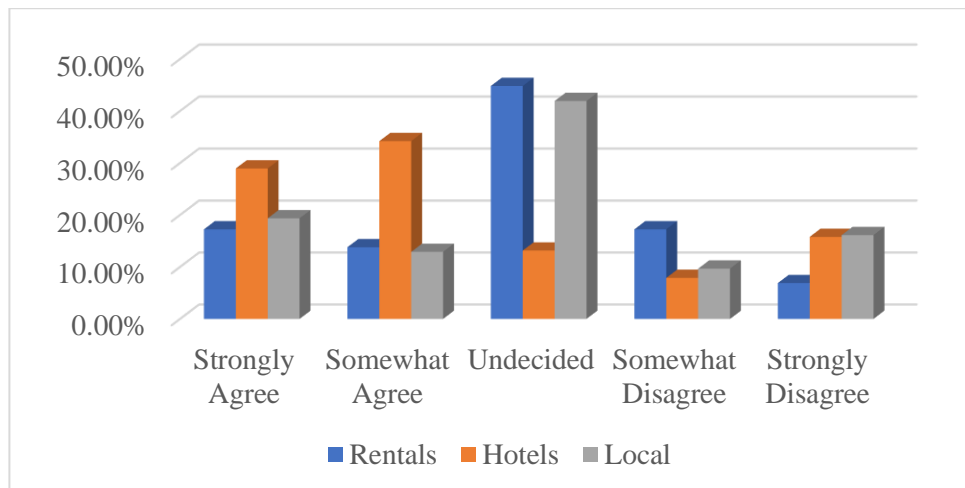
TABLE 5
UNDERSTANDING CANNABIS TRAVELER



Wellness

Wellness showed a significant difference $\chi^2(8, N=98) = 15.3, p = .05$ between the attitude of rentals, local businesses, and hotels. Hotels recognize the wellness factor of cannabis. Hotels had a 63.16% recognition of cannabis experience for wellness, while rentals were 31.03% and 32.26% for local businesses. Disagreement on the value was even across groups from 24-26%. The undecided group has rentals at 44.83%, local businesses at 41.94%, and hotels at only 13.16% Table 6.

TABLE 6
CANNABIS RECOGNIZED FOR WELLNESS



STUDY

Methods

A total of 468 participants took part in an online survey (Median Age = 25-34 years old, 56.2% female). To gauge participants' perceptions of cannabis tourism in comparison to other types of tourism, three questions were asked: "The following food pairings would enhance tourism – Distilleries (vs. Wineries, Dispensaries, Breweries)," and "The following food pairings will enhance local experiences – Distilleries (vs. Wineries, Dispensaries, Breweries)." Additionally, participants' feelings toward distilleries, wineries, breweries, and dispensaries were measured by asking, "My feelings toward food pairings with local

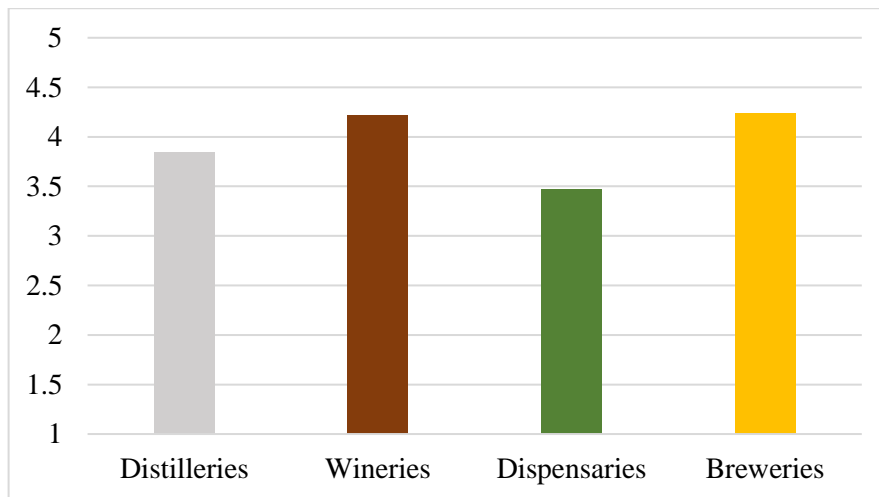
distilleries (vs. Wineries, Dispensaries, Breweries) are bad-good, unfavorable-favorable, negative-positive, not important-important” using a 5-point scale.

RESULTS

Perceived Influence of Dispensaries on Tourism

The findings revealed variations in perceived influence among different establishments. Participants demonstrated relatively high perceptions for breweries ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .91$) and wineries ($M = 4.22$, $SD = .98$), with slightly lower ratings for distilleries ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.10$). Dispensaries received the lowest perceived influence ratings ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.30$).

TABLE 7
FOOD PAIRINGS WILL ENHANCE TOURISM

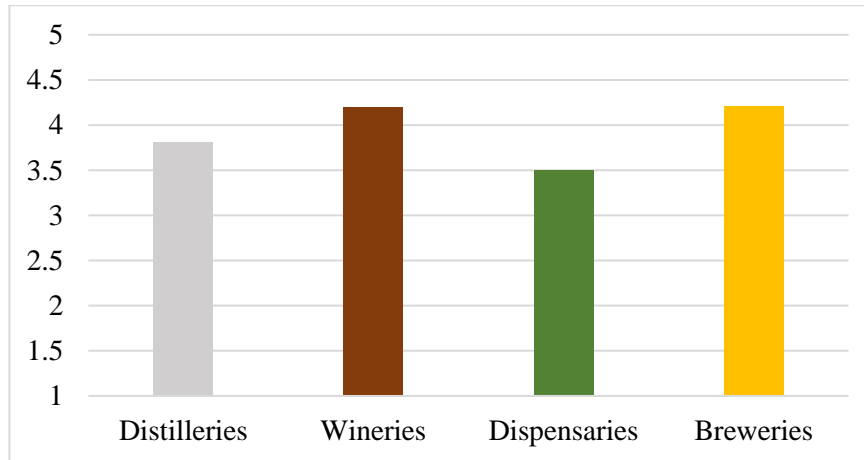


To test whether the means differ significantly, a repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction determined that means differed statistically significantly between establishments ($F(2.46, 1146.84) = 84.36$, $p < .001$). A post hoc analysis using a Bonferroni adjustment showed that the perception of influence on tourism is significantly low for Dispensaries compared to Distilleries ($-.37$, (95% CI, $-.55$ to $-.20$), $p < .001$), Wineries ($-.75$, (95% CI, $-.93$ to $-.57$), $p < .001$), and Breweries ($-.77$, (95% CI, $-.93$ to $-.61$), $p < .001$) Table 7.

Perceived Influence of Dispensaries on Local Experiences

For the perceived influence of local experiences, the results exhibited a similar pattern to participants' perceptions of tourism. Similarly, Breweries ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .94$) demonstrated the highest perception of local experience, followed by Wineries ($M = 4.19$, $SD = .98$), and Distilleries ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.14$). Once again, Dispensaries received the lowest perceived influence ratings ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.31$).

TABLE 8
FOOD PAIRINGS WILL ENHANCE LOCAL EXPERIENCES



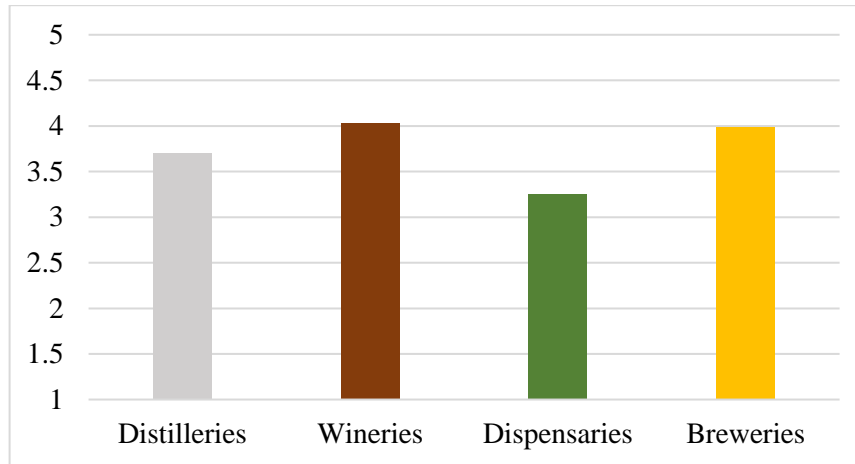
The results of a repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction showed a statistically significant difference between establishments ($F(2.44, 1139.06) = 77.98, p < .001$). A post hoc analysis using a Bonferroni adjustment further demonstrated that the perception of influence on tourism is significantly low for Dispensaries compared to Distilleries ($-.30, (95\% \text{ CI}, -.46 \text{ to } -.14), p < .001$), Wineries ($-.69, (95\% \text{ CI}, -.86 \text{ to } -.52), p < .001$), and Breweries ($-.71, (95\% \text{ CI}, -.87 \text{ to } -.55), p < .001$) Table 8.

Feelings Toward Different Establishments

Feelings toward Distilleries, Wineries, Breweries, and Dispensaries were assessed using four items (bad-good, unfavorable-favorable, negative-positive, unimportant-important) on a 5-point scale. The individual item scores were averaged to create a composite score. The repeated measure ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction results showed that participants' feelings toward establishments are statistically different ($F(2.24, 1046.71) = 95.89, p < .001$). The scores were highest for Wineries ($M = 4.04, SD = .95$) followed by Breweries ($M = 3.98, SD = .99$), and Distilleries ($M = 3.71, SD = 1.07$). Consistent with previous findings, Dispensaries ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.33$) received the lowest scores.

Further post hoc test with a Bonferroni adjustment revealed that the feelings toward Dispensaries are relatively negative compared to Distilleries ($-.46, (95\% \text{ CI}, -.61 \text{ to } -.30), p < .001$), Wineries ($-.78, (95\% \text{ CI}, -.96 \text{ to } -.61), p < .001$), and Breweries ($-.73, (95\% \text{ CI}, -.89 \text{ to } -.57), p < .001$) Table 9.

**TABLE 9
FEELINGS TOWARDS ESTABLISHMENTS**



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the first study, hotels, vacation rentals, and local businesses overwhelmingly responded to the importance of education on the cannabis travel trend at 76%. The key takeaway is that education is the essential first step in developing a tourism strategy. However, of the three types of establishments, hotels may possess a better understanding of cannabis travelers than rentals and local businesses, which scored a much higher undecided, or strongly disagreed answer. Regarding wellness, hotels had a 63.16% recognition of cannabis experience for wellness, while vacation rentals and local businesses were half that percentage, respectively. Disagreement on the value was even across groups from 24-26%, and the undecided group was much higher for rentals and local businesses than hotels, which affirmed the impression that hotels had a better all-around understanding of the importance of education, the cannabis traveler and the cannabis experience linked to wellness. In the second study we asked locals if food pairing and tasting with breweries, wineries, distilleries, and dispensaries would be a positive draw for tourism. Breweries and wineries ranked highest in tourism and local experiences as expected since they are common. Distilleries and dispensaries showed interest which currently are not available. California is currently looking at legalizing cannabis tasting rooms at growing facilities. This would be similar to wineries and breweries. The onsite availability would grow the acceptance and normalization of cannabis use (Siddiqui, et al., 2022).

In the greater Palm Springs area, cannabis business owners have dealt with financial hardships from high taxes, a saturated market, and competition with the illegal market (Gasparyan, 2024, Feb 16). To help mitigate the financial pressure, some cities have made changes aimed at helping the local cannabis industry, including business tax cuts, and permitting dispensaries to allow customers to consume the products on-site. Initially, the cultivation tax was \$10.20 per square foot but has been permanently reduced to \$5.75. Dispensaries can grow cannabis but are limited to 500 square feet for cultivation, allowing them to grow 99 plants (Gasparyan, 2024, Feb 7).

Cannabis tourism is expected to grow as more states decriminalize marijuana. The economic impact of cannabis tourism on existing and new businesses has proven to be an attractive proposition, and the tax revenue that the cities and states receive is a big incentive to promote it. The pandemic saw an increase in the consumption of cannabis and alcohol, which is also part of generational lifestyles. Policies and protocols must be modified as laws evolve, states increase regulation, and destinations promote its sale. Providing cannabis use education will benefit the users and the locals. Currently the cannabis industry is in a boom with more research needed.

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