בית הספר לבריאות הציבור • School of Public Health • مدرسة صحّة الجمهور

שם: יפעת בן ברוך

שם העבודה:

The association between cannabis trade via an App Supply Model and the normalization of cannabis use: investigating the implications for harm-reduction and public health.

מנחה: פרופ׳ שרון שניטמן

Abstract

Research question:

The normalization thesis suggests that an increase in cannabis use that has occurred in many places is part of a process in which cannabis use has shifted from marginal populations to the mainstream, with increasing rates of use by well-adjusted, socially integrated users. Cannabis use is, in other words, understood as a normalized activity. The use of apps for cannabis trade is a relatively new phenomenon applied by cannabis users. It may be contributing to the normalization process, and this form of cannabis trading has the potential to both increase and reduce harms associated with cannabis use. While a growing body of research has investigated drug trade through online encrypted markets, little research exists on how smartphone-enabled 'App Supply Model' (ASM) is utilized in the cannabis trade, and with what effects. The proposed research will examine whether buying cannabis through ASM is associated with a drug normalization process and whether it is associated with increased or reduced harm. More specifically, the research will examine whether involvement in ASM, as compared to the more traditional social supply model (SSM), is associated with socially integrated users, perceived availability, perceived risks, and moderate patterns of use.

Importance and innovation:

This study is one of the first to examine the association between ASM, harm-reduction strategies, and the cannabis normalization process. The study will contribute to theory by examining the specific mechanisms through which apps may lead to normalization. Previous normalization research has only tested the direct associations between drug use patterns and normalization. This study will examine mediation effects. Furthermore, the normalization framework has never been studied in the context of app-based models of drug supply. On a practical level, the study promises to provide empirical knowledge on harm reduction associated with ASM. Thus, it may improve our understanding of a novel form of cannabis trade by identification of risk factors and harm-reduction strategies. The results may serve to develop prevention and intervention efforts aimed at reducing the harms associated with cannabis use. From a harm-reduction perspective, evidence-based policy development for cannabis requires more informed and realistic goals of harm reduction, as opposed

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to crime prevention and the preoccupation with preventing use. Thus, the study may also be used to inform policy discussions related to how best to meet the demands of new technologies entering the illicit cannabis trade.

General study aims:

- Developing further the normalization framework by developing and testing mediated mechanisms in which normalization occurs.

- Examining the association between ASM, cannabis normalization and harm-reduction.

Study design:

After receiving approval from the ethical committee of Haifa University, a sample of current cannabis users will be recruited from the Israeli cannabis magazine (https://www.קנאביס.com) a popular online community. To examine the mechanism of normalization associated with ASM as compared to SSM, the proposed research will recruit buyers of both market forms. To address the study' aims, a mixed-methods approach will be used, combining qualitative, quantitative, and digital ethnography analyses. First, an online survey will be developed in Qualtrics and will be placed with a moderator announcement encouraging people to participate. The announcement will include a link to online screening questions, explanatory letter, and informed consent form. Eligible participants, who agree to participate (by choosing the option: "Agree" on the informed consent form), will be recruited to take part in the study. The online survey will focus on demographic data of the participants, apps that have been used to buy cannabis, the frequencies in which apps were used, and measures of normalization (see details below). Second, we will conduct in-depth interviews with at least 20 participants to gain essential qualitative data relating to the study's subjects' experiences of the use of ASM compared to SSM. Third, a digital ethnography study will be conducted by joining relevant groups in ASM and observation of the actions taking place.

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