THCmania: An Anthropological Exploration of the First Legal Canadian Grow Cup

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01. Introduction

Cannabis cups emerged from Amsterdam in the 1980s as underground meetups where cannabis growers would get together to exchange seeds, clones, and cultivation techniques. They would also judge cannabis dry flowers based on cultivation practices, smell, taste, appearance, texture, and overall experience of the 'high' induced by the plants. These underground meet-ups gave rise to a culture of cannabis connoisseurship. Today there are multiple cups held across the globe each year, all united in the pursuit of growing the best cannabis.

The most notable grow cups/cannabis cups include High Times Cannabis Cup, Emerald Cup (California), Aloha Cup (Hawai), and Bio Cup (Vancouver Island).

While cannabis remains an illegal substance in most of the world, G7 countries, like Canada are legalizing recreational cannabis giving rise to a "new" market with economic opportunity. Interestingly, the legalization of recreational cannabis in Canada has been based on court ruling and not scientific evidence. Thus, to ensure safety and quality assurance cannabis companies must disclose quantitative measures that can inform the consumer about the product without explicitly selling them an experience.

Due to these restrictive guidelines, the only way the recreational market can "promote" cannabis to a Canadian audience is by informing the consumer about its risks and "intensity" (quantified by THC and CBD percentages) which are meant to educate the consumer about the product following the Cannabis Act. What is interesting about this public health approach is that drug effects and experience are quantified based on a percentage number that is associated with two out of 100+ molecular compounds found in the dry cannabis flower. It is then assumed that since THC is associated with psychoactive experiences, the higher the percentage is, the more intense the "high" (experience) will be. This way of knowing cannabis would be accurate if it were a single-molecule compound, which is not. Thus, we are presented with a new human-cannabis relation where the emphasis on THC percentages outweighs the plants' entourage effect. The seriousness of this problem became visible throughout the grow cup.

For my thesis project, I participated in the first Canadian legal grow cup organized by 34 Street Seed Co. an ANC Cannabis seed and genetics brand based in Alberta. The event took place from April 2, 2021, to October 30, 2021. The contest was open to home growers from Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario of legal age. Participants had to purchase 34 Street Seed Co seeds to participate, making the competition lawful and fair to growers. The following cultivars were available to compete: Pink Lemonade, Power Kush, Bubba Kush, or Pineapple Express. The top four cultivars from each province in terms of THC percentage and total terpene content won a prize.

02. Research Question

This research poster is based on my MA thesis that seeks to understand how cannabis is (un)known through its legalization/standardization. I explore how ways of knowing/sensing are enacted and standardized through the first cannabis cup in Canada (3 years after the legalization of recreational cannabis), asking the following specific question:

How do skilled home growers know/sense cannabis, and how does this fit the contest's quality criteria (or not)?

03. Objective

To understand the sensorial ways of knowing cannabis and contrasting with those based on distant measures.

05. Methodology

The methodological approach is centred around an apprenticeship with my mentor Jack whom I met online. During the days I was not with Jack in the garden, I conducted online fieldwork, as the grow cup took place online due to the pandemic. I thought following the cannabis cup would be easy and straightforward as the organizers had created a designated space for the competitors and hashtags to follow. However, there was not much happening on the selected digital platforms, which caused me anxiety and frustration. By conducting online participant observations, I noticed how the competitors themselves created content and promoted the cannabis cup. For instance, Jack created posts about his plants and growing methods to upload and tag the company. However, most of his posts were not reshared, which made him feel like he was not being appreciated as a gardener. Halfway through the flowering stage, Jack stopped sharing weekly posts as it was apparent to him that "the cup is something they threw together to promote their seeds."

Throughout the cannabis cup, the organizers posted five times on the digital platforms to remind competitors of deadlines.

Data was collected using:
- **Perceptual skills: visual, olfactory, auditory, gustatory, and tactile as part of a sensorial toolkit (2)**
- **Informal and Formal Interviews**
- **Online and in-person Participant Observation**
- **Photography and Video**

04. Conceptual Framework

Anthropologist Diana Gibson argues that plants, in their relationship with humans, "have histories, are mobile and can bring about political and other effects" (1). Certainly, the legalization of medical and recreational cannabis in Canada has brought about a new knowledge system which has shifted the way the plant is understood socially and culturally. Cannabis, in its relationship with humans, has secured its own survival through cultivation as it is primarily known to be one of the oldest cultivated fibre, food, medicinal, and sacred plants in the world (5). However, when plants relocate or are transferred to a new context, their use and the knowledge systems within which they existed can shift, adapt to places, and transform them (1). Anthropology, allows us to take these human-plant relations seriously and study them.

Knowledge in Western scientific thought is predominantly concerned with empirical data that can abstract complexity into manageable models. Knowledge is thus based on the measurement of information gathering rather than through "participation in the world" (6,7). Anthropology starts with observation, however, it does not start with rigid prior judgments about what is important or normal, instead, it tries to listen and learn with almost childlike wonder (8). This does not mean that anthropologists only use open-ended observations; they also frame what they see with theory and look for patterns (8). In other words, anthropologists aim to begin with an open mind and broad lens. "This approach can be irritating for scientists, who typically seek data that can be tested and/or replicated on a large scale. Anthropology is about interpretation and sense-making; it typically looks at the micro-level and tries to draw big conclusions. But since humans are not like chemicals in a test tube or even data in an AI program, this deep, open-ended observation and interpretation can be valuable; particularly if we keep an open mind about what we might find" (8).

There are three central concepts that emerges from my research project:

Knowing

In this research, 'knowing' is understood in an Ingoldian sense, as a process of active following, and going along (4). Thus, I situate my study outside of the constraints of the lab. By participating as an apprentice I was able to know/sense, from my own bodily perception, how cannabis seems to find a way to escape the contest quality criteria by "attuning attention to entanglements of people and things in-the-world" (6).

Sensing

By actively engaging with my mentor and plants in close proximity I placed human perception at the centre of my analysis. 'Sensory Knowing' which draws on Ingold's "ideas of Gibson and Merleau-Ponty to suggest (among other things) 'that eyes and ears should not be understood as separate keyboards for the registration of sensation but as organs of the body as a whole, in whose movement, within an environment, the activity of perception consists'" (7). In other words, the senses/sensing do not belong to one category, instead, "our sensory perception is inextricable from the cultural categories that we use to give meaning to sensory experiences in social and material interactions" (7). Thus, by placing human perception at the centre of my analysis I was able to attune attention to the ways my mentor and I came to know/sense cannabis.

Skills

Skills are "capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic being (indissolubly mind and body) situated in a richly structured environment" (3). Skills are thus both biological and cultural and "are not transmitted from generation to generation but are regrown in each, incorporated into the modus operandi of particular tasks (3). Thus, by situating myself as an apprentice I was able to participate in the grow cup by active following and observing how human-cannabis relations in everyday life do not involve reducing the plant to its molecular compounds (although it can be helpful). Instead, knowing cannabis entails a bodily sensitivity to the environment in which the plant and growers engage in close proximity.

06. Results/Findings

1. The contest criteria (highest THC and terpene profile in terms of percentage) reflect the legal/standardization framework of the Cannabis Act and Health Canada. As a result, quantitative measures are giving rise to a new phenomenon; THCmania (the rush to produce highest THC in dry flowers).
2. Knowing/sensing cannabis from a legal perspective is associated with single molecules as a measuring instrument to educate the consumer about the product without explicitly selling them an experience. Which is (un)doing human-cannabis relations by (un)shaping cultivation and marketing practices that focus on single molecules as a selling point (creating human desire).
3. A skilled home grower knows/senses cannabis based on the growing environment, soil, nutrients, fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides, smell, taste, texture, the colour of leaves, flowers (buds), trichomes, harvesting methods, trimming methods, and curing techniques. Although THC and terpene profile percentages can be helpful to know cannabis. A skilled home grower knows/senses cannabis from living in close proximity to the plants and is able to identify the "quality" of dry flowers based on sensorial engagement. For instance, how terpene profile (NOT THC) will influence the experience of the "high." Also, a skilled home grower or connoisseur can identify the quality of the dry flowers from the way it burns. Light grey, indicating, that the plant was properly cured for human consumption.
4. The skilled home grower's knowledge/sensing of cannabis did not fit the contest's quality criteria. Instead, it was dismissed and reduced to THC and terpene percentage.
5. The organizers were not active online due to the legal sensitivity of marketing and promoting cannabis online. Thus, leaving the participants to engage amongst themselves while providing the platform and "seeds."

07. Conclusion

Although the cannabis cup was not what I expected it to be (a competition in pursuit of growing the best cannabis), it did provide the grounds for further inquiry regarding the legislative framework of the Cannabis Act that is worthy of further exploration. Canada legalized recreational cannabis on the basis that it would protect young Canadians by keeping the plant out of the hands of children and youth, keeping profit out of the hands of criminals, and protecting public health and safety by decreasing the risk and reducing the potential damages surrounding cannabis. Yet, with such harsh regulatory measures and the focus on single-molecule measurements the rush to produce the highest THC is on the rise, overshadowing other ways of knowing cannabis.

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