

Symbolic Sustainability and Sustainable Consumers Interest in Hemp Based Products

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Presentation Type: Part of thesis research

The contemporary environmental challenges facing us are marked by both urgency of addressing complex sustainability issues and the proliferation of symbolic sustainability, where sustainability is often more represented than realized. In the wake of such challenges Critical Realism (CR) offers ontological grounding for understanding the complex social world. This paper engages with the emergence of hemp in the US following its reinstatement in 2018. Hemp has been represented as a regenerative, climate friendly alternative across multiple industries. This representation has attracted the growing niche of 'sustainable consumers. Yet these representations are symbolic and may obscure the supply-side contingencies that ultimately determine hemp's sustainability trajectory. Using the emergentist theory of behavior within a CR framework, this study moves beyond superficial accounts of consumer interest in hemp, to examine how discursive sustainability norms, norm circles and agency interact to shape interest in hemp-based products. Through qualitative interviews and focus groups, the research traces how hemp sustainability becomes reflected in framings used by consumers and how these symbolic meanings either reproduce or resist dominant sustainability narratives. The aim is not only to uncover the mechanisms that generate consumer interest in hemp but also to assess their implications for navigating pathways toward genuine sustainability.