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NSLC breaking federal rules on cannabis advertising, prof says

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An artist's conception of what a newly renovated NSLC cannabis store will look like. (NSLC)

A Dalhousie University professor is accusing the Nova Scotia Liquor Corp. of violating federal rules on advertising for cannabis.

Simon Sherry, who teaches in the department of psychology and neuroscience at the Halifax school, says signage in the NSLC's newly renovated stores encouraging customers to "discover your experience" with cannabis and "relax," "unwind," "enhance" and "centre" violate the Cannabis Act's sections on promotion.

The NSLC's cannabis signs also promote various cannabis strains as "soothing" and "relaxing and calming" or involving "livelier experiences" that "invigorate the senses," Sherry said.

NSLC president Bret Mitchell unveiled the branding at [a media tour](#) of one of the new retail sale locations last month.

The Cannabis Act explicitly prohibits promotion of cannabis by presenting it in a manner that associates it with "a way of life such as one that includes glamour, recreation, excitement, vitality, risk or daring," as well as prohibits promotion that is "likely to create an erroneous impression about its characteristics, value, quantity, composition, strength, concentration, potency, purity, quality, merit, safety, health effects or health risks."

In an emailed statement, Sherry said he has written to federal Health Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor asking for further investigation.

Sherry said he believes signage that "glamourizes" cannabis is especially ill-advised, as Nova Scotia already leads Canada in percentage of cannabis users, percentage of cannabis use disorders and grams of cannabis smoked per person, according to Statistics Canada.

"Recreational cannabis is not a health product or a benign substance, which leaves the NSLC's cannabis signs at odds with evidence linking cannabis to psychosis, depression, suicidal behaviours, anxiety, addiction, and cognitive problems," he said.

Rather, Sherry said, the NSLC should post accurate signs that include factual information such as THC levels and up-to-date, evidence-based health information.

NSLC spokeswoman Jennifer Gray said the Crown corporation has been in regular communication with Ottawa about its branding.

"We are having regular conversations with Health Canada and we are very mindful of the legislation, both provincial and federal," she said.

"This is the first time we've heard any concerns about our signage."

According to Gray, the signage and terminology used by the NSLC aims to explain various strains of cannabis in a meaningful way and help customers make an informed choice, not to glamourize the product.

“The THC and CBD (content) will be on the product label, but a lot of customers may not know what that means and how it will effect them, Gray said.

“These categories help define the dialogue so that our employees can offer products to customers that will deliver the experience they're looking for.”

Gray also said the terminology is also related to a Discovery Guide to inform customers about different products, similar to guides the NSLC distributes for wine, spirits and beer.

Moreover, she said, when customers walk into NSLC cannabis stores, the first thing they will see is responsible-use messaging called Need To Know, which contains tips for the safe and responsible consumption of cannabis.

Sherry said he believes the signs should be taken down as they have the potential to influence customers' attitudes and behaviours.

“Unfortunately, the NSLC's cannabis signs appear more appropriate to a spa day or to a yoga retreat than to a drug with established links to many serious problems,” he said.

This isn't the first time Sherry has spoken out about the province's marijuana sales regime. Last month, [he expressed concerns](#) about Nova Scotia being the only province to co-locate cannabis and alcohol in the same store, citing a number of public health worries.

After Oct. 17, Nova Scotia will sell all recreational cannabis using a store-within-a-store model at 11 existing NSLC locations, as well as one standalone store. The province will also have a system for online cannabis sales.

Provincial Justice Minister Mark Furey defended the system, saying the province has “full confidence” in the NSLC's ability to retail a regulated product.