

"SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE STIGMATIZATION OF THE REGGAE MUSIC SCENE AS ASSOCIATED WITH CANNABIS USE"

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Abstract

This study aims to examine public perceptions of the reggae music scene, which is often stigmatized as being closely associated with marijuana use. Such stigmatization is shaped by various social, cultural, and media factors that reinforce the association between reggae music, Rastafarian lifestyle, and cannabis consumption. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and labeling theory as the analytical framework, this research involved three categories of informants: reggae musicians, reggae listeners, and members of the general public. The findings indicate that negative public perceptions of the reggae scene are influenced by prevailing stereotypes and certain social experiences, such as the discovery of marijuana remnants after reggae concerts. However, some segments of the public recognize that not all individuals involved in the reggae scene are marijuana users and consider such stigmas to be unfair generalizations. The study concludes that the stigma surrounding the reggae scene is a result of social constructions imposed by dominant groups and has led to limited space for expression and reduced social acceptance of reggae culture practitioners.

Keywords: *stigma, reggae music, marijuana, public perception, labeling theory*

INTRODUCTION

Music is a medium or form of art that evolves in tandem with the progression of time. The development of music has always aligned with the advancement of human civilization. Therefore, music cannot be separated from human life (Soedarsono, 1992). As life and times continue to evolve, numerous new music genres have emerged each developing rapidly, characterized by unique features, and influencing various aspects of global life. One particular genre that has attracted significant public attention is reggae music. This genre originated in Jamaica and first emerged in the late 1960s (Pratama, 2021). The rise in popularity of reggae music, especially among Indonesian musicians, has given birth to a new style that characterizes the genre. Reggae is commonly associated with dreadlocks known in Indonesia as *rambut gimbal* as well as the red, yellow, and green flag, and the use of marijuana. These characteristics were popularized by Bob Marley, who is considered a central figure and icon among reggae enthusiasts. The development and introduction of reggae music in Indonesia began in the 1980s (Fadhil, 2016). Reggae music is often linked to the Rastafari movement, whose followers tend to live a minimalist, simple, and natural lifestyle. In Rastafarian belief, marijuana is viewed as a sacred plant with spiritual energy, often used to strengthen the connection with God, and not merely for recreational purpose. At its core, Rastafari is a spiritual movement that goes beyond religion—it is also a cultural force that influences music, society, politics, and many other aspects of life (Muhammad, 2021). In the context of reggae culture, the use of marijuana is often viewed as a symbolic expression of freedom, a form of protest against restrictive norms, and an act of resistance against injustice. However, this form of rebellion is frequently misunderstood and tends to generate negative stigma, especially in countries with strict regulations against narcotics (Waldstein, 2019). For instance, in Indonesia, individuals who dress in red, yellow, and green colors, wear dreadlocks, or simply enjoy listening to reggae music are often labeled by the general public as marijuana users. This has led to widespread misconceptions about reggae music and its cultural meaning (Pamungkas, 2018). The following are several reggae music practitioners who have been arrested by authorities over a period of time due to their involvement as marijuana users.

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List of Marijuana Cases Involving Reggae Musicians

Name	Location & years	Type of drug	Punishment
Jali Gimbal	Indonesia, 2020	Marijuana	Rehabilitation
Julian Marley	Amerika Serikat, 2002	Marijuana	Detained and realeased on bail
FyaVerse	Barbados, 2024	Marijuana	Detained
Eric donaldson	Montserrat, 2002	Marijuana	Deported and fined

Table 1 List of Marijuana Cases Involving Reggae Musicians

Source: (Yohana, 2020); (Staff, 2002); (Rahana, 2025); (Searchlight, 2005)

Given such cases, it is very likely that public perception toward the reggae music scene becomes negative, even though the issue was caused by an individual. It is unfair for society to generalize this perception to all individuals within the reggae scene. In Indonesia, marijuana is classified as a type of narcotic that is strictly prohibited by law for recreational use, medical purposes, or any other use. According to Law No. 35 on Narcotics, marijuana is categorized as a Class 1 narcotic, which means it is banned from being used, sold, or distributed in any form, whether for personal or commercial purposes. This classification reflects the assumption that marijuana contains substances with a high potential for abuse and that its medical benefits are not legally recognized. The connection between reggae culture and marijuana use is often misunderstood or taken lightly, especially among communities that are not familiar with the cultural context of reggae itself, which is deeply intertwined with Rastafarian beliefs. Rastafarianism is closely associated with the use of marijuana, and in Indonesia, many people adopt elements of this culture by embracing the reggae music genre.

This study aims to understand how society perceives the reggae music scene, particularly in relation to the practice of marijuana use by reggae fans and musicians, as well as to explore how the stigma associating the reggae scene with marijuana users is formed. This research applies labeling theory. Labeling theory is a method in social science that focuses on how society assigns labels or tags to individuals or groups, and how those labels can influence their actions and identities. This approach offers a different perspective in understanding deviant behavior, as it emphasizes society's response to certain actions rather than the actions themselves (Muallif, 2024). The uniqueness of this study lies in the cultural context it explores, namely the reggae music scene in Indonesia, which has rarely been examined academically through the lens of labeling theory. This research also offers a new contribution in understanding how the social construction of marijuana not only affects the labeling of individual users but also extends to the labeling of entire cultural communities.

METHOD

The approach applied in this research is the qualitative research method. The qualitative approach focuses more on gaining a deep understanding of an issue rather than merely analyzing problems for the purpose of generalization. This method typically relies on detailed analytical techniques, examining each case individually, as qualitative research assumes that the characteristics of one issue may differ significantly from another. The qualitative method is used because the issue being studied is multilayered and dynamic in nature. Therefore, the information and data collected from sources are gathered in a more natural manner namely through direct interviews with informants in order to obtain authentic responses and answers (Iskandar, 2009). The data collection technique used in this study is typically applied by researchers to gather information related to abstract concepts that have no physical form and can only be observed. This is done in order to obtain relevant and accurate information and data. The study involved three informants: one from the general public, identified by the initial (R); one with a background in reggae music, identified by the initial (K); and one reggae music enthusiast, identified by the initial (H). Based on the sources of information and data collected, this study uses both primary and secondary data sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Process of Stigma Formation by Society

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Negative stigma toward the reggae music scene, particularly its association with marijuana use, is formed gradually through a complex social process rather than occurring instantly. Based on the research findings, there are three main factors that contribute to the formation of this stigma: the influence of direct interaction or social experience, a lack of public understanding of the cultural background of reggae music, and the role of the media.

1. Influence of Direct Interaction and Social Experience

The negative stigma associated with the reggae music scene and its perceived connection to marijuana use is often shaped by individuals' direct encounters and social experiences (Reid, 2020). This stigma commonly arises when members of the public interact with individuals who embody the typical visual characteristics of the reggae scene such as dreadlocks, Rastafarian colors, or reggae-themed clothing and who also happen to be marijuana users. These encounters can lead to the assumption that marijuana use is a defining feature of the entire reggae community. Such generalizations are further reinforced by observable incidents. For example, it is not uncommon for cleaning staff to report finding used marijuana joints after reggae music events. Although these instances may involve only a small number of individuals, they contribute to a broader public perception that equates reggae fandom with deviant behavior (DilaDB, 2011). Moreover, these perceptions are amplified through everyday social interactions such as casual conversations, rumors, and shared stories within communities that perpetuate the belief that reggae music is inherently linked to drug culture and nonconformity. This social reinforcement process contributes to the widespread labeling of the reggae scene as deviant. However, such assumptions fail to account for the diversity of individuals within the reggae community. As highlighted by Informant H in an interview: "Society must learn to see music as an expression of art and culture, not merely as a symbol of certain behaviors. A person can love reggae without having to adopt the entire lifestyle."

2. Lack of Public Understanding of Reggae's Cultural Background

The negative stigma toward the reggae music scene can also stem from a lack of public understanding about its cultural and historical roots. Many people are unaware that reggae originated in Jamaica and is closely associated with the Rastafarian faith, which regards marijuana as a sacred element for spiritual reflection and inner peace. Due to this limited understanding, the general public tends to perceive marijuana solely as an illegal substance, and anyone associated with it is quickly labeled in a negative light. This lack of cultural context causes reggae to be judged superficially (Brown, 2015). While reggae music often carries profound messages about social conditions, peace, and resistance to injustice, these meanings are often overlooked or ignored by the public, who focus instead on surface-level associations with drug use (Widiyatmoko, 2010). As emphasized by Informant K, a reggae musician interviewed in this study, reggae holds a deeper philosophical purpose: "According to Bob Marley, reggae music is news it should reflect current conditions and the surrounding environment. For me, that's what reggae is: a portrait of problems, a reflection of social issues."

3. The Role of the Media

The formation of negative stigma is also influenced by the role of the media (Naedi, 2021). In several films and news reports, reggae has at times been portrayed as part of a laid-back lifestyle and is often associated with marijuana use. Media representations hold significant power in shaping the perceptions of the general public, and in many cases, they contribute to reinforcing existing stereotypes. In Indonesia, a pressing issue is the prevalence of biased media coverage combined with the public's limited media literacy, which frequently leads to misunderstanding or misinterpretation of certain cultural phenomena (Rahman, 2024). This is evident in how many individuals develop negative perceptions of reggae simply because they have encountered such portrayals through mass media. As a result, rather than seeing reggae as a genre rich with messages of peace, social awareness, and resistance to injustice, the public often reduces it to a symbol of nonconformity and drug culture an image perpetuated by unbalanced media narratives.

Social Impacts of Negative Public Perception Toward the Reggae Scene

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Publicly held negative perceptions of the reggae music scene particularly due to its association with marijuana use have led to various significant social impacts. This labeling results in discrimination against both reggae musicians and fans, who are often perceived as deviant, lazy, or even criminal, despite the fact that many of them have never engaged in unlawful behavior. As a consequence, individuals within the reggae community face restrictions in their freedom of expression, both in musical activities and in broader social spaces. Furthermore, such stigma leads to harmful generalizations, in which all individuals within the reggae scene are presumed to be marijuana users, without consideration of their individual backgrounds. This generalization reinforces the narrative that everyone involved in reggae culture is a drug user, causing them to be frequently viewed with suspicion in certain social environments (Reid, 2023). As experienced by Informant H, he shared during the interview that he was once avoided by his friends due to his visible association with reggae culture.

Stigma Analysis of the Reggae Music Scene Using Labeling Theory

To understand the stigma attached to the reggae music scene particularly concerning marijuana use labeling theory serves as an appropriate and relevant analytical approach. This theory explains that social deviance does not arise solely from the act itself, but rather from society's reaction to that act. In other words, individuals or groups are considered deviant not because they have objectively violated social norms or rules, but because society assigns a negative label to them (Bernburg, 2009). In the context of the reggae scene, the negative labeling found in society stems from the association between reggae music and marijuana. Based on interviews with musicians, fans, and members of the general public, it becomes evident that this labeling arises not from the fact that all individuals involved in the reggae scene use marijuana, but from a cultural stereotype that has been collectively attached to reggae as a whole.

The labeling process begins with the influence of power or dominant groups in society such as law enforcement, mass media, or public figures who determine what is considered deviant behavior (Roofinata, 2023). In this context, the consumption of marijuana had already been labeled as a criminal or problematic act. When reggae music later became associated with marijuana whether through the physical appearance of its musicians (such as dreadlocks), lyrics that address Rastafarian spirituality, or the public's superficial understanding of Jamaican culture the entire reggae scene came to be perceived as deviant. This labeling is further reinforced by the public's social experiences, where encounters with individuals dressed in reggae-style clothing and seen using marijuana become the basis for forming the opinion that the entire reggae community uses marijuana. However, based on interviews with reggae musicians, not all individuals involved in the reggae scene use marijuana. Many of them, in fact, use music as a platform to promote peace, resist injustice, and express social solidarity. Within the context of the reggae music scene, the labeling process aligns with Edwin Lemert's classification of deviance: primary deviance refers to the initial act that may be considered outside social norms, while secondary deviance occurs when the individual internalizes the deviant label and begins to identify with it.

Primary deviance refers to initial actions that deviate from social norms but do not yet result in a deeply ingrained social identity or stigma. In the context of the reggae music scene, examples of primary deviance include: a distinctive lifestyle such as wearing dreadlocks, the use of Rastafarian symbols, or the use of marijuana for spiritual or relaxation purposes by a small segment of individuals within the scene. At this stage, society begins to recognize differences, but has not yet applied a comprehensive negative label. Such behaviors are generally viewed as eccentric or unconventional rather than deviant. Secondary deviance occurs when individuals have accepted the societal label of "deviant," and that label begins to shape their self-identity and affect their social interactions. In this case, public stigma becomes increasingly entrenched (McKee, 2024). An example would be the collective label of "marijuana user" that is applied to reggae musicians and fans, regardless of whether they actually use marijuana or not. This situation can trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which individuals within the reggae music scene become increasingly marginalized and may, in turn, exhibit more openly deviant behavior as a form of self-expression or resistance to the imposed label (Nickerson, 2023).

In relation to the negative stigma toward the reggae music scene as being associated with marijuana use, labeling theory through the concepts of primary deviance and secondary deviance explains that deviant behavior is not necessarily an objective fact, but rather a product of social construction. Primary deviance refers to cultural expressions and alternative lifestyles that, at first, are not considered serious problems by society. However, through processes of stereotyping and social judgment, these differences gradually evolve into secondary deviance, where a label of "deviant" is attached and begins to be internalized by the individual (Kurnianingrum, 2018). A society's tendency toward uniform

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and judgmental perspectives accelerates this labeling process, thereby reinforcing the marginal position of the reggae community within the broader social order.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of interviews conducted with three informants from different backgrounds a reggae musician, a reggae listener, and a member of the general public it can be concluded that perspectives on the reggae music scene largely depend on an individual's background and level of involvement within the scene. Reggae enthusiasts and practitioners view the music as a medium for creativity, a form of expression, a spiritual belief system, and a symbol of social struggle. Those within the reggae scene who use cannabis believe that its use is rooted in historical values and the teachings of Rastafari, a movement originating in Jamaica. Among those who are unfamiliar with reggae music, there is a tendency to generalize the perception that reggae is always closely associated with cannabis use. This reflects the influence of mass media and socially constructed narratives that cause the wider public to view reggae in a narrow way, leading to stereotypes against those involved in the music scene. There is a significant gap in understanding between individuals who are actively engaged in reggae culture and those who are not directly involved. This difference in perspective highlights the need for an educational approach that enables the public to understand reggae more comprehensively not solely through the lens of cannabis, but also by appreciating the positive values it promotes, such as peace, unity, and social struggle. The negative stigma surrounding cannabis reinforces the unfavorable image often attached to the reggae music scene. This demonstrates how social labeling can shape public perception of a cultural group. Cannabis has become an overly emphasized symbol, overshadowing the deeper messages that reggae music conveys.

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