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Abstract

We studied a community of individuals who spend time in a single Dutch coffeeshop, i.e. a cannabis dispensary. We've sought to characterize and contextualize this group of people that society marginalizes due to their cannabis use. We’ve gathered users’ perceptions of social acceptability of cannabis use and have considered the nature of the community existing within the coffeeshop. We've found that it does offer a sort of 'safe space' where one can escape stigma and form community bonds if one wishes. This has implications for individuals’ sense of well-being. This works seeks to contribute to informed debates about cannabis in society from a standpoint of tolerance.

Introduction

Cannabis use in the Netherlands is tolerated, but not legal. Dutch public opinion has not been studied regularly or closely on attitudes toward cannabis use, but 2008 data suggest that around 40% of the Dutch public would support prohibition and that attitudes depend to a large extent on the personal use of respondents or the use of those inside of their social networks (Van der Sar et al., 2011). Meanwhile, coffeeshops are tolerated dispensaries and social spaces for the sale and consumption of cannabis, but the terms of their operation have become more scrutinized, restricted and tightly regulated (Brewster, 2017).

The importance of individual freedom in Dutch society has been reported to have been changing on a number of fronts, with tolerance shown to minority groups, including drug users, apparently diminishing (Garretsen 2010). Meanwhile, the plummeting public opinion of tobacco (Garretsen 2010) may contribute to negative attitudes toward around cannabis due to the tendency of users to smoke the two simultaneously as a joint.

We have endeavored to investigate how cannabis users in coffeeshops 'feel' or perceive the social acceptability of cannabis use in The Netherlands, as shaped by the attitudes and discourses they encounter. This has led to insights into how these perceptions influence the emotional life and behaviours of people who spend time at the coffeeshop under study.

Though members of Dutch society have a general feel of the social acceptability of cannabis use, this research attempts to show the other side of the story--how the marginalized, in this case, cannabis users, feel the impacts of the greater society's unacceptability of cannabis use and their feelings and behaviors in reaction. We've tied these insights, studied through interviews and observed practices with the perceived culture within Coffeeshop X to make further conclusions about the meaning the shop has for individuals spending time in it and consequently its internal culture.

Van der Sar et al. demonstrate that direct experience or indirect, e.g., social network mediated, experience of cannabis softens attitudes on its regulation in the Netherlands. Palali & Van Ours (2017) go further to suggest that direct experience is correlated with support for legalization in the Netherlands. However, the predominant governmental and public opinion shifts against smoking may influence the number of people who have this direct experience, especially given the
limited use of alternative methods of cannabis administration in the Netherlands. This is of concern if we are to have an informed consideration on the role of cannabis in society.

This study contributes to research which avoids stigmatizing cannabis. We consider cannabis users as marginal in society, therefore we eschew work that further stigmatizes the use of cannabis. Rather we seek to contextualize and humanize the practice without necessarily endorsing it. Following the idea that sympathetic exposure, i.e. use within one's social networks, promotes tolerance (e.g. Sznitman & Lewis 2017), we hope that our proposal can contribute to tolerance and understanding of the people who use cannabis.

The following report, therefore, aims to approach cannabis and some of its users with an eye for complexity and nuance, with an attitude to empathize and attempts to understand what this coffeeshop and cannabis mean for people and, further, how cultures around cannabis may be shaped by societal discourse and attitudes.

To reiterate, the research question at hand is thus: what shapes the culture and practices in Coffeeshop X and how does the social acceptability of cannabis feed into this?

### Theoretical Framework

Firstly, for this research, we've made a differentiation between customers who buy some product and leave and those who stay to smoke, whether for a long or short time. We've opted to call the latter group 'stayers' (because they stay) in order to clarify our focus on this group in particular in our analysis of Coffeeshop X and the former group merely 'patrons'.

Discussion of cannabis and coffeeshops in the Netherlands must necessarily include considerations of location. Location dictates if the use of cannabis is legally tolerated, i.e. home, a coffeeshop, or public places. Additionally, as will be shown in later sections, location also plays into more socially-situated determinants of a cannabis user’s likelihood to smoke in a particular place regardless of the law, as we all know that, in practice, laws are not absolute barriers. Location is also related to the types of scenarios and people one can discuss cannabis use with.

To conceptualize the meaning and use of different spaces, we focus on two theoretical concepts.

We approach coffeeshop culture through the lens of Ray Oldenburg’s (1999) concept of Third Place, a social place outside of home or work where participants find support and human connection.

Within this concept, other places are termed as such: (home as first place, work as second place, and general public spaces as separate from the third place or space. We use this concept to display the locational variation of social acceptability of cannabis use but also to signify how such variation fits within an individual’s life. We consider the nature of the different places in coffeeshop-stayers’ lives, how they navigate those different places, and how these relations may shape their decision to spend time in coffeeshop X.

Application of the concept of third place has helped uncover the meaningfulness of what happens in people’s free time when they gather. For example, community gardening, when seen through this spatial lens, goes beyond a hobby pursued for its own productive ends but, rather, to become a space for community networking and development of social cohesion (e.g. see Firth et al.
(2011); Veen (2015)). This approach helps to evaluate these hidden activities for their own sake and consider their contribution to social well-being.

We focus on commonalities in coffeeshop stayers’ lives and experiences. Therefore, we make a separation between the words ‘place’, i.e. third place, and ‘space’. The word place has a more specific connotation than space, which reads more symbolic. Therefore, from here, we refer to ‘space’ rather ‘place’, e.g. Oldenburg’s traditional term third place. Therefore, as we’ve used ‘spaces' to frame the results section, we refer to people’s home environments as first space, workplaces as second space, and general public spaces as separate from the third space, which in this case is Coffeeshop X.

The reality of stayers’ lives in other spaces feeds into the utility of the third space, i.e. of Coffeeshop X. The concept of safe space has mostly been applied with reference to LGBTIQ+ communities but has been used to analyze many other situations of marginality (The Roestone Collective 2014).

The third place concept emphasizes the need for connection outside of formal structures, but not so much the need for safe spaces of support and interaction for those in minority or marginalized groups. Our preliminary research suggests places, where cannabis smokers can feel comfortable and act freely, are important - a core element of a safe space (Kenney 2001).

To reiterate, our guiding theoretical concepts include (1) Oldenburg’s ‘spaces’ in order to orient the meaning of Coffeeshop X within stayers’ lives and (2) we adopt the concept of safe space to understand the use and meaning of the particular third space that is Coffeeshop X.

**Choosing the Field Site**

Since our motivation is to expose what may be hidden, simplified or misunderstood, we have aimed to learn from those patrons of Coffeeshop X who stay to smoke within the shop, many of whom may stay hours at a time. The latter likely also represent those cannabis users least understood by society because of the central role that the substance plays in their lives. These observations made during participant observation and analysis of interviews led us to connect the idea of societal acceptance of cannabis use in The Netherlands with the creation, use, and meaning of the third space that is Coffeeshop X, how it constitutes and reflects in the culture of the place.

We selected an Arnhem coffeeshop, reported by an informant as in an area once famed for its coffeeshop and cannabis culture. We consider the site suitable for participant observation due to its small, accessible size and open layout as well as the access offered when we introduced ourselves as students.

This coffeeshop has a strong social feel, with regulars who are present at relatively predictable times, lending itself to the formation of trust and relationship over time. Additionally, preliminary research suggested that coffeeshops in the city center may be frequented by more tourists, leading us to favor those a little away from the center as cannabis tourism was not our particular interest.
Methodology

In this study, we utilized ethnographic field methods after having done preliminary research through reading news articles and academic literature.

Our research questions have two points of focus. The first relates to the perceptions of social acceptability of cannabis use of the people who spend time at Coffeeshop X. We approached this through informal conversations and formal interviews with stayers and staff of the establishment. Thus, our understanding of this question is through the eyes of our informants, though we were able to collect data at different times to better understand how representative their views are.

Our second research focus is broader, seeking to understand how the space functions and what it means to the people who spend time in it. To come to an understanding about this we’ve conducted participant observation, interviews, and very public interviews that sometimes included a third person or someone chiming in from across the table.

With the benefit of hindsight--of both the empirical data thus far and the sense of the place that we now have--updated methods could include a protracted period of hanging out and observation to get a sense of the role of the place through people’s subjects of conversation. This fits the space well and means that we do not have to rely so much on what people directly report, but their actual behaviors. The usefulness of hanging out and observing in this setting will only be apparent after a far longer period of time than we had available. Additionally, our lingual handicap, i.e. not speaking Dutch, prevented this from being a more central role in the research.

The following research has been conducted over a mere month, with likely only fifteen hours spent in the field. This is a considerable limitation. Further, reaching the concept of the shop being a safe space was an inductive process. We did not have the concept of the shop as a ‘safe space’ in mind during our fieldwork, however, we’ve come to view it as such. Alternatively, throughout our research, a guiding consideration was the use of the space as a kind of alternative living space, largely driven by our first impressions of the shop’s decor and behavior of its customers, both patrons and stayers. Unfortunately, a drawback thus far is that we don’t know if our informants would agree about either of these claims, however, data suggests this as a plausible argument and one worthy of consideration. Further research could consider whether or not the claim is valid and how it fits in a larger political conversation about individual liberties and social cohesion.

Introduction to the Field Site

We describe Coffeeshop X on a Thursday afternoon as we first saw it. Here, we draw directly from field notes as much as possible to introduce the space and the social activity within it, which we found ourselves sharing in quickly. First impressions said a lot, and we feel this captures the atmosphere and energy well with hindsight.

It was early afternoon, and we were walking toward the area southeast of Sonsbeek Park in Arnhem that we had identified through internet searches as having a cluster of coffee shops. The one we eventually selected was based on the view we could catch from across the street through its
windows on the first floor. We could see some reassuring-looking homely furniture and plants. We had a better feeling about this place than the other shops we'd passed by as they didn't have such friendly vibes, so we gave Coffeeshop X a try. Through the door, there were steep steps with about a 50° incline and quite narrow. At the top of the stairs was a door clearly marked as the entrance of the coffeeshop.

Upon entering, Samson smiled at a woman with a buzzcut who looked as though she may have been working, or maybe not, but she said something to us in English and laughed--no recollection of what or why. Everybody looked at home and the atmosphere felt easygoing with seating for roughly twenty people to be comfortable.

It was about 15 degrees out that day but sunny, and the shop had its windows open. This made it not as smoky as one would imagine. It did smell a bit like cigarette/weed smoke, but it wasn't overwhelming like it could have been under colder weather circumstances.

The room was fairly quiet with a big communal table and a second sitting area by the open windows that was also focused around a low coffee table. We took seats in this spot which seemed ideal for observation, overlooking the room.

To one side is a large glass tank against the wall, the purpose of which was not immediately clear. Samson put his skateboard against the glass and was asked in a very friendly way to put it elsewhere for the sake of the animals. The tank was full of fake plants and with a faded print out of photographs of the various reptilian inhabitants. People seemed pleased when we acknowledged the geckos with interest.

The décor is fairly consistently eastern-themed, with floor standing southeast Asian statues beside the bar and on the walls as well as a cherry blossom mural, and lanterns hanging from the ceiling. It felt welcoming with its multiple sweets in jars and cannabis grinders on all the tables, along with lighters and ashtrays the size of a dinner plate. There are also hot water and cups in one more-cramped corner, with tea bags available underneath in a range of types, and cold water dispensed from a large catering flask--everything free, as was pointed out to us more than once as a perk of the place.

As we ventured to buy some cannabis, we met a rather large friendly dog. The next week, we learned he was called Billy.

Not long after arriving, Samson tried to go to the toilet but was told that he would need a key. The place was very social and merely observing was impossible from the outset as our first informal interview came to us and began almost immediately. A black man with tinted glasses, black and naturally grey locs piled on top of his head. He was a Canadian expat named Julian, who was perhaps fifty-eight years old. This kind of age seemed not far from the average, and certainly not unusual. We had been led to expect younger men as primary clientele and were pleased to see it was more mixed, despite the expected male dominance. Julian discussed many things with us. Sometimes we felt that he was talking with us, and sometimes talking at us.

Interactions in the shop are comfortable and jovial; at times rowdy. After speaking with Julian, Romy moved to the communal table to observe, and immediately a young guy with many smiles, with whom Romy had briefly interacted previously, engaged her in conversation, inviting Samson to join, and ensuring that Romy stayed well supplied with chocolate caramels. This lively guy, introduced to us as Godewyn, explained how one may think that everyone knows everyone, but
that is not so. Rather, the setup encourages chat and there’s not much getting out of it unless you choose a place in the corner.

People almost continually come and go; some briefly for a transaction, some for a quick purchase; then roll-and-chat, and some getting comfortable and involved. A pair of less chatty young men played *T’en Fais Pas* at the main table but manage to keep more or less to themselves and later move away to a quieter spot by themselves. All the while different people use the space behind the arch, the little annexed room, totally connected but not quite the main event.

We note the extreme difference between the tiny amount of mellow product Samson rolled up, and we shared, and the piles of weed going into everyone’s spliffs that seem to be almost constantly rolled.

Two and a half hours after arriving, we took our leave and were wished goodbye by more than one person.

It appeared later that we’d both conceived the shop as a second living room.

These observations from first venturing into the field site stand true about the character of the place. Moreover, the questions which the people and space directed us to altered our initial research question of social acceptability to focus more on the space itself, rather than just the individuals found there. We chose the space initially out of convenience but found a place that was actually formed through more complex social processes than expected. The environment, energy, and interactions we’ve described inform much of both our and others’ understandings of the place, which we detail further under the heading "third space" and in the discussion section.

**Results**

We order the results of our research under three sections. The first section shares perceptions of social acceptability of cannabis use in The Netherlands from the perspective of people who spend time and/or work in Coffeeshop X. Then, we offer data-driven impressions for perceiving the social (non)acceptance of cannabis in the spaces of our lives. Finally, we contextualize the use and meaning of the space in Coffeeshop X for the people under study.

**Social Acceptability**

We consider expressed boundaries, prejudice, attitudes, and trends which help form a picture of the social acceptability of cannabis use in The Netherlands. In the discussion, we relate these factors with the goings-on in Coffeeshop X.

**Boundaries**

Before describing informants’ perceptions of broader attitudes, here we draw attention to some comments illustrating how our informants themselves define boundaries for acceptable cannabis use.

Godewyn describes his own experiences with his smoking and his parents’ opinions. Respecting his parents’ preferences, he does not bring his habit ‘into their home’.
Bastiaan emphasized boundaries and common sense, stating that public smoking--this is illegal outside of a coffeeshop--should be in very secluded spaces and that children should not be exposed. Maarten also mentioned agreeing with bans on public smoking, although some of his subsequent comments may contradict this. Cees offered the same opinion about smoking around children, with reference to people of his neighborhood.

This points to their perceptions of age-appropriateness of contact with or influence of a mind-altering substance. Bastiaan said, “I don’t want children below the age of-- I think I’d draw the line somewhere around sixteen. I don’t want them to know or see drugs.” Independent of that conversation, Godewyn also suggested that 21 might be a better age limit because at age 18 young people are still developing.

According to Cees, conversations about cannabis and social attitudes or the law are common in Coffeeshop X-- daily according to Rafael, and generally in favor of legalization, aside from the fear that costs may consequently rise.

These comments help to contextualize perceptions of broader attitudes in terms of these individuals’ personal opinions as well as the flexible boundary of what is considered acceptable and unacceptable. Additionally, it confirms that even cannabis users and proponents consider the drug’s harmful effects and cognitively exist in and relate with broader social attitudes.

**Prejudice**

Prejudice came up a number of times with informants suggesting that assumptions about someone as a cannabis smoker influenced individuals’ behavior toward them. For example, Lucas reported that “they judge you before they know the whole story”, and “they won’t listen”, leading him to confide that “for that [reason], I don’t talk about it”.

Maarten talked with us about growing plants and the issue with this as a public sign of cannabis association. He responds with the following comment to Samson’s story about his housemates’ reservations about growing cannabis in the sunny front garden, open to the street:

> You put that in front of your house and people are just assuming all kinds of things that are true or not, but that’s not the point. Just because of that plant, people will put a sticker on you or say things. It’s just what the police do with typecasting.

These concerns paint a picture of how cannabis use is generally considered within the greater society and the marginality this it confers upon users.

**A Space-Based Approach**

We use the concept of places/spaces to differentiate and order aspects of people's lives. Each of these is related to the social acceptance of cannabis use in the Netherlands. Differentiating between first, and second places, as well as public space, allows us to consider them in pieces, which seem all to work together in explaining the function of the third space, i.e. this particular coffeeshop to its regular patrons. Our fieldwork was almost all carried out within the space of the
coffeeshop. Therefore, we contextualize the use and purpose of the third place, i.e. Coffeeshop X with its customers’ accounts of first and second places and public spaces.

First place refers to an individual’s home, second refers to work, and third refers in our case to Coffeeshop X. Public is here considered to be everywhere besides home, work, and the shop.

**First Space: Home**

Most of the people we talked to did, and were comfortable with, smoking marijuana in their homes. Moreover, there are more customers of Coffeeshop X that come in to by product and go than those who stay and hang out, which means they likely smoke at home. Differing, particular socio-material home contexts may account for people using cannabis in home spaces or not, so we cannot reduce these choices to preference or the way people compartmentalize their lives and cannabis use.

Alex, a bright, confident woman in her early thirties, cited smoking marijuana as “something we can do to relax,” as opposed to a party drug. This rings true with others who mentioned it as an after-work activity. Lucas also identified it as a relaxing solo activity to partake in, saying, “I’m smoking at home in front of my stereo, my television.”

Some people qualified their at-home smoking with certain behavioral particulars. One informant said that aside from smoking at this coffeeshop, “the only other place is at home at night and then outside because no one else smokes at home.”

Julian told us that he smoked on the balcony at home but outright said he is unfriendly to his neighbors.

A conceptual ‘space’ closely related to the first space transcends the physical spaces in people’s lives: that space we consider to be filled by family and possibly friends. We don’t go into this in detail as a category in itself for the sake of brevity but recognize that it potentially plays a strong role in various aspects of individuals smokers’ lives and the formation of what is perceived as acceptable at home, work, and public environments.

**Second Space: Work**

Everyone we asked seemed to say that it’s best not to be open about smoking marijuana to work colleagues or future employers.

Regarding whether or not to be open about it, one informant, Jeroen, who had worked internationally in the oil business implied that it was something you have to feel out but is also related to your competence at doing your job.

"In my last work, I didn't call it out that I smoke. You know it, but you don't talk about it...And the jobs before that I didn't talk about it. Don't tell...it's better. It's not accepted. Alcohol is accepted if you are fresh in the morning. If you are doing your thing and you are doing your work well you can smoke."

Godewyn went deeper into this subjective concept during our interview:
Romy: Do you think that smoking weed affects people’s job opportunities? Godewyn: In a way. Because your first question is do you think the Dutch society accepts weed. So, if you would work on the east side of Holland and you would tell your chef, for example, ‘I am smoking’ he will already look differently. Like everything will.. what you are gonna do, another person could do too, like a failure or not having their day will be, like, put on smoking.

Romy: Yeah

Godewyn: For the other [person] ‘Ah do you have a bad day?’ But if you’re smoking ‘did you smoke too much yesterday night?’ You get like those kinds of moments...so yeah there’s a difference. But for example... I’ve been working in west side of Holland....and people tell each other while eating breakfast before work with their colleagues “I've been doing this and that yesterday night man, I still feel fucked up hahahaha”; everyone laughing about it, and an hour passed... Okay everyone is working; no one will mention it again.

He implied that, in his experience, the aspect of an individual’s life that is most salient to a boss is the perceived negative influence of cannabis, but also that the degree to which this is true may vary across regions of The Netherlands.

One of Coffeeshop X’s employees has navigated around this prejudice, telling Romy that the association is not necessarily a danger to future employment, saying about their CV, “Because I didn’t advertise it as such. I just said horeca.”

What's implicated here is that marijuana users are marginalized in working environments because of the perceived acceptability of cannabis in society. This marginalization limits individuals’ range of choices through conceptions of legitimacy. Something we didn’t go into detail about was the type of use. Two informants admitted to working while high on the drug; however, it seemed that the concern within workplaces was less about the explicit fact of whether an employee was high during work hours but rather the general fact that an individual is a cannabis user as shown in the above conversation with Godewyn.

In the next section, we explore how legal constraints physically push individuals to the margins, attempting to make them unseen.

Public Space

Though it’s not allowed to smoke in public, many people seem to do so, but primarily in secluded areas. However, it also seems that the acceptability of public smoking fluctuates with more than one person saying they noticed its acceptability lessening in recent years while also varying person to person. However, the prevalence of public marijuana consumption could also vary according to location, as Godewyn and Alex posit, referring to poorer communities in both the Randstad and Arnhem as more likely to smoke more freely.

Speaking about the eastern side of the Netherlands, Godewyn gave a general example. “If you walk around with your joint in the street people will look at you like--whoa. What are you doing? That’s very bad.”

From a more personally-motivated angle, we cite two informants as saying they didn’t want to smoke around children. This implies that individuals make and have their own rules about acceptable and unacceptable behavior regarding cannabis. Further, Cees told Romy he wouldn’t
want to smoke regular tobacco cigarettes in front of children: “If I’m on the street; if I see a baby, I tend to go to the other side of the road.” On another day, Bastiaan told us that if he smokes marijuana in public he does so “out of the reach of people so I don’t bother them. I try to seclude myself, especially when I see children or something.”

Surprising Romy, Eef, another fixture in Coffeeshop X and employee, as well, said that she wouldn’t want smoking allowed in public for the “safety” of the smoker.

Some context for this might be recognized in what Alex told Romy: “It’s funny when I see people in the city, I have to watch their body language.” She noted that not everybody shares with their families their cannabis use or that they go to Coffeeshop X, so acknowledging her may blow a secret.

**Third Space: Coffeeshop X**

It seems that smokers are increasingly marginalized, both in people’s attitudes and pushed to the margins of space. Society doesn’t want to see them. They should stay at home or, in the case of cannabis smokers, in the coffeeshop.

In this environment, it seems sensible that a coffeeshop can act as a safe space for smokers. However, through our fieldwork, we realized that the shop we chose is a little atypical as well. It was clear that more was going on than merely the smoking of cannabis in an acceptable place to do so. Therefore, we explore how this particular space is used and what it means to the people who use it.

From the first visit, we each independently noted that Coffeeshop X could function as a home away from home or an alternative living room. One large table in the center of the room encourages interaction without obliging it. It’s very common for people to enter or leave Coffeeshop X with a greeting. Though it seems generally common in the Netherlands to greet people, even those one doesn’t know, in our experience, this is less typical in business establishments. This leads us to believe that there’s a particular type of community that has formed in this space. However, as it is a business, it seems that the community is a continually morphing one, more a shared idea connected to the space than people explicitly connected with each other.

Godewyn was one of the first people we met at Coffeeshop X. Romy initially thought he might work there because he was cleaning up a lot. He also told us that he didn’t introduce the fish in their aquarium to Coffeeshop X but that he takes care of them.

He’s not the only one to do something like this. After a few weeks, we finally figured out who is in charge of taking care of the geckos, an older man of Austrian origin with a punk haircut, whom Alex described as “like furniture in the shop. He’s part of the interior.” These individuals, though not employed by Coffeeshop X, have made the shop a part of their lives, and the little lives in the shop depend on them. Moreover, their efforts contribute to the design and atmosphere of the place. Though it is a business, the space clearly exists for more than just making money.

Alex described Coffeeshop X as “a place where you’re more comfortable because you know we’re all a little bit more weird than other people say they are. We have more trouble hiding it. We find it more trouble to wear that mask and we can lift it a little bit there.”
This idea led us to understand Coffeeshop X as a kind of safe space. We had the idea that people feel more able to be themselves there than in other spaces because the cannabis element goes unquestioned.

Alex and I talked about the meaning of Coffeeshop X to patrons that spend time there.

Alex: A lot of people--well, what I see is that they really like to participate but are unable for some reason.
Romy: In what?
Alex: In the community, in the general civilization, and they feel they're rejected or--and it's not for all the people that come in cause it's especially people who sit down a lot, who stay there for a while. They're in search of, I think, something that gives their life meaning. For them, it's kind of like a living space. Where you come home to.

Cees told me that at other shops it’s more likely that groups of people go into a shop and leave together, not interacting too much with others. He says Coffeeshop X is unique in how it facilitates interaction. However, it is still a fairly anonymous and free space. It seems people are respectful of people’s space and choices. We believe this can make it accessible to many types of people.

Alex said that the boss who died two years ago did want to create a kind of living space. She said, "He also liked to help people who were just on the fringes, maybe homeless." That is, he tried to create a space for everybody.

Attitudes Toward Smoking & Tobacco

An aspect of Maarten’s account of evolving attitudes was the rise of general anti-smoking sentiment in both governmental and social attitudes, and how this was wrapped up with the changing sentiment toward cannabis since it is usually smoked. Alex alluded to this also. Both mentioned that in some way that drugs have become more accepted (Maarten with his example of ‘happy pills’), yet cannabis has suffered due to its smoking association.

Alex: And of course, there are ups and downs in general in the society. How people think about drug use. Right now it’s getting easier, but still, the smoking part is--for a lot of people-- it’s like that’s really doing drugs.

Alex suggested that medicinal cannabis may make a difference to this stigma, but we observed that the cannabis used in Coffeeshop X was exclusively smoked, with tobacco, and not for prescribed medicinal purposes.

Community
We suggest that issues from the 'outside' (i.e. social acceptability) reflect on the 'inside', (i.e. Coffeeshop X), not only as material for discussion in this safe space but also informing the sense of community we observed.

Our short sessions at Coffeeshop X are not enough for us to be confident in describing the sense of community there from our own experiences, but our early observations and growing sense of involvement with an engaging group of people complement informants' comments about Coffeeshop X as a community space.

Romy: Do you think people in the shop find that lost community there?
Alex: Yeah, a part of it... It's a substitute. I don't think it's complete. I don't think it's all they need, but I think it fills in a little bit of that stuff.
Romy: It seems like this could be a place I could maybe be more comfortable than my own place, almost a kind of family
Alex: Yeah, it's a substitute family, and it comes with the same problems you can have with family because you don't get to choose them. That's the funny thing. You think you choose it, no you choose the space or the atmosphere or the energy. That's something you can choose, but not people... It's the same as with families. They just stay there or bicker it out. Sometimes they fall apart and they disappear... I don't think this is a really safe place like your family, but it's something in between.

A sense of community was rarely cited as a prime reason to choose Coffeeshop X, with the economy, quality, and service more frequently pointed to. However, the experience of being there and the comments that pertained to ‘community’ position some notion of community as central in understanding the culture within the shop.

Alex has referred to sharing of emotions, sharing of ideas, and provision of a comfortable place for those who don't fit so well in typical society as central to Coffeeshop X, going on to contextualize it in a previously poor neighborhood. She also pointed to individuals timing their visits to when they know which of the staff should be working, suggesting that social connection is a factor.

Lucas comments on the cannabis community in general:

With people who smoke, whether black, yellow, always [there is] some kind of community and we want to learn from each other. We take time, heh? We talking now. It's very rare nowadays.

Others likewise emphasize the lack of connection they can trace as society has evolved around them. For example, Rafael noted coffeeshops as an important social site to counteract this tendency.

The Roestone Collective cites Day (1990:321) with the idea that a safe space can go beyond providing an environment safe for people of the relevant shared identity but a place that “also supports otherwise marginalized identities” (1352). The following snippet of Romy’s conversation with Alex illustrates this connection.
Romy: Can you name that energy that you feel there?
Alex: That’s difficult... Maybe because it’s viewed as that weird place, as a fringe society. I think that creates a place where you’re more comfortable because you know we’re all a little bit more weird than other people say they are. We have more trouble hiding it. We find it more trouble to wear that mask and we can lift it a little bit there.
Romy: Because there’s already that one thing in common
Alex: Yeah
Romy: That marginalizes people
Alex: Yeah
Romy: They can be the rest of themselves maybe
Alex: Yeah yeah, and if it's questioned there it's not that scary or that confronting. In the back of your mind, you can say “Eh they're all crazy.”...It’s more accepted I think. That’s a part of it, yeah.

This last piece of Romy’s interview with Alex makes clear the position that the coffeeshop has the potential to take in the stayers’ lives. Individual choices come into play, but there is a sense of freedom within the space that perhaps is not offered with the other people and places of stayers’ lives.

Discussion

In this section, we show how we’ve analyzed our data, and what it means in context. The interactions of space(s) and social acceptability are examined here. We nuance our understanding of what the data represent with the following consideration: there is an interplay and balance between researcher-sought and subject-generated ideas about what is relevant, and it must be acknowledged that our presence and definition of a research question may already select for and shape the data. The overall effect of these factors may have induced patrons to produce an artificial narrative. In general, however, we are satisfied that our interpretation of the coffeeshop’s patrons is credible, and inside of their diverse interpretations, certain patterns and threads could be identified that may help in understanding the formation of community as an aspect of the culture of Coffeeshop X.

We include four main contextualizations which contribute to the idea of the coffeeshop as a safe space, an alternative living room, or at least a loosely-bound community: (1) perceptions of social acceptability of cannabis use gathered from various spaces of individuals’ lives push them into a coffeeshop and/or create a need for a safe space; (2) the culture and community in Coffeeshop X may be shaped through both its location and history; (3) informants share motivations of cannabis use, which are largely coping mechanisms; (4) the culture and community of the place cannot be divorced from the nature of the drug itself. These elements include relationships between social acceptability and the use of the coffeeshop as a third space.

Firstly, understanding the coffeeshop as a third place or safe space, we can reflect that home environments between patrons probably differ in socio-material conditions, so we cannot
generalize about these home environments systematically influencing their involvement with Coffeeshop X, however, we can speculate that these may shape people's behavioural patterns and feed some requirement for a third place or safe space.

Work environments may provide a place in which cannabis users can gauge broader attitudes and perhaps adjust the ‘visible’ prominence of cannabis in their lives. These kinds of impressions could be reflected in how and where cannabis users smoke when, and may, therefore, be relevant to their individual presence or absence from coffeeshops. Another way these impressions may impact culture and community is in the recycling of these impressions in conversation among coffeeshop patrons, helping to collectively define broader attitudes on acceptability, and perhaps in some cases establish notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Stayers’ statements about their cannabis-related behavior in public places can be seen as an indicator of their perception of acceptability, and may reflect different priorities or values such as minimizing harm against themselves in terms of judgements or prejudice, or minimizing exposure of cannabis or tobacco to minors. It can also indicate changes in societal attitudes among older users who perhaps report different approaches to smoking in public in the past. However, it should be noted that cannabis and smoking can be hard to separate, and the broader attitudes toward smoking and not just cannabis may influence public behaviors.

Secondly, the community we observed may be understood partly in terms of its specific location and history in a formerly poor neighborhood with previously many coffeeshops and a strong cannabis association, according to one informant. Since the regular clientele at our times of visiting was mostly above fifty, the community there may partly represent a continuation with the past. An idea which seems to be linked is lost community. It has been suggested that Coffeeshop X plays a role in filling a gap.

Thirdly, the culture and community of the place cannot be understood without reference to the nature of the drug itself. It must be understood as a drug of habit, shaping the patterns of shop patronage and the regularity of regulars. The other salient aspect is the psychoactive nature of cannabis, as a broadly social drug with different effects depending on strain and dose. These could be observed, with some people stoned and withdrawn, but most commonly people were relaxed, lucid, talkative and friendly.

We, some informants, and general discourse about the drug confirm that cannabis, though not harmless to individuals, is very much a choice that primarily affects individuals and their intimate social relations. For this reason, a more benevolent view of cannabis users from the general society would likely improve users’ quality of life by decreasing their marginalization.

Finally, we can begin to understand the particular motivations of patrons at the times we spent there in terms of personal factors. Interview data suggested that a number or stayers self-medicate with cannabis to manage hyperactivity, symptoms of autism, pain, and to help them relax. This commonality may inform the forms of connection between patrons. It may also identify them as marginal in various ways, which could feed into the notion of Coffeeshop X as a safe space.

Interesting about the space considered in this way is that though it offers a safe space even though it was not formed to be one from legal retribution and social disapproval or aggression, it is a safe space formed by a system seeking to push cannabis users to the margins. Therefore, while it is safe it is also a moderate exile. Because coffeeshops are situated in this cognitive space, they cannot be purely a sanctuary for cannabis users.
Threats outside of the space are both real and imagined. Real, because the threat of legal penalization is possible if cannabis is used anywhere between the home and a coffeeshop but also a threat of social disapproval or aggression. These real threats seem to have been internalized by the individuals we’ve interviewed. It seems they feel marginalized and frequently talk about this in the shop. This means the reality has impacts outside of its factual and material reality but exists as a social imaginary of marginality.

This may serve to produce and reproduce the function, culture, and meaning patrons give to Coffeeshop X. We’ve found this to happen every day through the conversations, meeting of acquaintances, and caretaking of the animals among other things. The Roestone Collective considers this as "relational work" (1348) where through acts of creating and maintaining a space, the culture of Coffeeshop X is reinforced.

Continued research could look into how the coffeeshop fits into individuals' lives and what role they ascribe to it. Additionally, it would be prudent to conduct further inquiry into what else may be shaping culture and practices in Coffeeshop X.

### Conclusion

The use of cannabis in Dutch society is generally frowned upon. The use of the substance is permitted only in private homes and coffeeshops. This seems to make cannabis users increasingly marginalized in the society, both in attitudinal and spatial terms. Therefore, we’ve come to consider there to be a link between perceived social acceptance of cannabis use and the creation of a kind of community within the confines of the Coffeeshop X in Arnhem.

In the shop, we’ve found that people do feel marginalized. There are various reasons why they use cannabis, but whatever their reasons for smoking, the shop offers a space for stayers’ to feel comfortable using cannabis and offers the opportunity to socialize free of stigma. Individuals often go to the shop alone but don’t go there to be alone, a community that allows them to be just the rest of themselves.

We hope that this report has captured cannabis users in a meaningful way, contextualizing their lives in a way that gives the reader a more intimate look into the kinds of interactions and relationships occurring in this coffeeshop and the meanings that it has within their lives and the greater society.
References


