

The Sociality and Liminality of Bangkok's Cannabis Cafés

Jack Fong

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, USA

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.21.3.01>

Keywords:

Bangkok; Marijuana;
Cannabis;
Decriminalization;
Ethnography

Abstract: In June 2022, Thailand became the first country in Asia to decriminalize cannabis, only to face opposition from conservative political forces that are now attempting to pass policies that will recriminalize its recreational use. My qualitative study conducted between summer 2022 and the conclusion of 2024 examines the sociality of 45 cannabis cafés in the capital Bangkok despite these developments, enhanced by my status as having grown up in the city and speaking the Thai language and local Chinese dialects. Employing urban sociological concepts such as Ray Oldenburg's third places and Lyn Lofland's notion of the urban experience as characterized by interactions with strangers, I describe Bangkok's cannabis cafés as third places that reduce the status of the stranger, and thus distress the actor in its lifeworld. These dynamics are argued to counter Bangkok's over-stimuli and stressor-filled experiences, now challenged by policy developments that place the continuing operations of cannabis cafés in a liminal state.

© by the author, licensee Lodz University—Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Funding Information: The Department of Sociology's 2022 professional development funds. **Conflicts of interest:** None. **Ethical Considerations:** The author assures that no violations of publication ethics have occurred and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication. **The percentage share of the author in the preparation of the work is:** JF 100%. **Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** Not used.

Received: 2024-12-05 Verified: 2025-03-14 Accepted: 2025-05-19



Jack Fong is a political, urban, and existential sociologist who publishes on themes related to how the interplay of power, history, and modern spatiality influence our existence in the late capitalist lifeworld.

@ jackfong@cpp.edu

id <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0746-5010>

In June 2022, Thailand became the first country in Asia to decriminalize the recreational use and sale of cannabis¹, making it the only country in ASEAN to challenge the bloc's mission to establish "drug-free" communities (Chalermphananupap 2023). On the same day, and in dramatic fashion, approximately 4,200 prisoners incarcerated for cannabis-related offenses were released. At the time, such a status implied the country was a sort of bellwether for eventual social acceptance of recreational cannabis use. Indeed, in 2018, Thailand had already become the first country in Asia to legalize the medicinal use of cannabis. One year later, the country amended the law to allow for cannabis research and development purposes (Deng, Slutskiy, and Boonchutima 2023:3). For a country that has seen 13 successful and nine unsuccessful military coups led by conservative forces, the continuing progressiveness of Thai culture is surprising.

¹ To prevent continuing stigmatization of cannabis as associated with deviant subcultures, respectable terms and phraseologies to reference cannabis were employed to replace informal language and slang. Thus, the term cannabis will replace marijuana, smoking cannabis will replace "smoking pot," inebriation (or the equivalent) from smoking cannabis will replace "being stoned," flower will replace "bud," and cannabis cigarettes will replace "joints." The term "budtender," however, is conventionally employed as an analog to the alcohol-serving establishment's bartender.

How can these larger political dynamics be seen as relevant to the development of Bangkok, and to a larger extent, Thailand's cannabis industry? For one, as noted by Askew's excellent work *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation* (2002), the city has become a site where power representations are articulated and contested by many loci of identities. Its citizens have historically—especially in the post-World War II period—staked their claim in its metropolitan landscape in ways that manifest their tolerance for differences in its experiences with modernity. Yet, this observation by Askew overlooks a more explicit detail about Thailand's capital city: Bangkok, capital of a country never colonized by any European power during the *fin-de-siècle* and 20th century, has thus effectively balanced its old with its modernity in ways that do not exhibit the angst seen by other Southeast Asian countries that experienced French, English, or Dutch colonial enterprises as they imposed their Judeo-Christian worldviews and inequalities upon indigenous cultures and their conceptions of stress. As such, Thailand—especially through Bangkok's status as a primate city, one that serves as the "front office" of the country, and also as a machine that exhibits the stressor-filled, over-stimuli of urban bureaucratic functions, division of labor, and inequalities (Jefferson 1939; Goldstein 1971; London 1977; Ayal 1992; Henderson 2002; Fong 2013)—infuses the old with the new, the past with the present, in ways

that allow it to absorb global forces while projecting them back to the local. As Askew (2002:58) notes:

In the 1950s Thailand literally *came to* [emphasis added] Bangkok. Communications made Bangkok increasingly accessible to the rest of the country, while also rendering the countryside more open to flows of images and commodities signifying status and modernity. In this way, Bangkok—acting as a conduit of new urban aspirations—also *came to* [emphasis added] Thailand.

Even during the late 1990s, the city's governor, Pichit Rattakul, described the city's character and, perhaps, exhibited prescience in how Bangkok should evolve, arguably foreshadowing the decriminalization of cannabis. Describing the city, he notes:

Bangkok is a city of villages, fifty different districts in all, and most of them are very different from one another. We are not just about temples and reclining Buddhas and street markets...Some areas are renowned for crafts, some for special traditions, some from a very distinct heritage going back many generations, some for certain kinds of foods. So, we are trying to bring out the best of each area. So, we are trying to present Bangkok as a multi-dimensional city, not a city with problems. [Askew 2002:300]

What must be acknowledged, however, is that the aforementioned processes also synchronize mainstream cultural forces—and to the consternation of many—with what are perceived as countercultural forces. The decriminalization of cannabis, then, needs to be contextualized as yet another attempt by the city and community to experiment with new economic sensibilities, one where readers

must also consider that holdouts for a more purist evolution of Thai culture (*watthanatham*), heritage (*moradok*), community (*chumchon*), and development (*kanphatthana*) are not sitting idly by (Askew 2002). The aforementioned coups, which historically express the voices of Thailand's conservative forces aghast at a threatening countercultural modernity, do have their politicized coterie of supporters in civil society as well as in the country's power structure expressing their discontents and indignations by promoting the need for policy changes that are designed to curtail, if not end cannabis decriminalization.

The process that resulted in decriminalization and its recreational use was therefore not sanguine. By late 2022, a few months after decriminalization, and likely unbeknownst to international patrons of cannabis culture, Thai conservative forces were busy trying to re-list cannabis as a dangerous and harmful narcotic, inciting over 200 protesters, investors, and staff to rally outside Bangkok's Government House. Joined by cannabis farmers and cannabis dispensary owners, Chokwan Chopaka of the People's Network for Cannabis Legislation in Thailand lamented how there is a probability that "cannabis may end up being illegal again" (Strangio 2022), although a draft bill forwarded to the Thai parliament at the time failed (Chen and Olarn 2024). Indeed, an ominous news report titled "Bangkok Becoming a Weed Wild West: Amid a Legal Vacuum, Vendors Enjoy High Times, But No One Knows How Long They Will Last" was published by the *Bangkok Post* on December 15, 2022, foreshadowing the cultural and political contestations still to come.

During March 2024, the Thai government, constituted by a new conservative coalition, acted to "urgent-

ly move a bill to ban recreational use of cannabis," although feedback from the public was encouraged and welcomed (Chen and Olarn 2024; *France* 24 2024). Such a ban, if realized, will halt advertisements of cannabis and cannabis-related products, such as their edibles, as well as ensure that any cannabis product containing more than 0.2% THC would be deemed illegal. Initial enforcement of such a ban would include fines of 60,000 baht (\$1,700 USD) (ASEAN Now 2024). In spite of the conservative backlash, within two years of its decriminalization, thousands of cannabis dispensaries and cafés were established across the country. Despite the scrutiny, cannabis entrepreneurs and their establishments, along with local and global patrons, have undoubtedly been riding a wave of euphoria. The growth of the industry was impressive given the short amount of time since decriminalization, with mobile dispensaries, deliveries, street stalls, and cafés augmenting the sales of a plant so perennially misunderstood and persecuted by many states throughout the 20th century.

My research was undertaken during a contentious period when cannabis cafés in Bangkok emerged in the multitude, watched by the country's progressive, conservative, and public health forces, as well as neighboring countries, with different narratives offered on the merits of decriminalization. However, my article does not exclusively center on analyzing narratives and policies emerging from the public spheres of the political arena and public health—these are mentioned insofar as they can provide a brief chronology and a set of contexts for understanding what is being assessed—so that the article can focus on describing the sociality, and in the conclusion of the manuscript, the functionality of cannabis cafés as destressing environments to counter the over stimuli of Bangkok.

Theoretical Foundations

To realize the goals of this study, I harness the concept of the *third place*, a term coined by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999), to refer to needed places in urban environments that help city residents decompress from the toxic stimuli of the lifeworld. In the classic work, *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg defines third places as informal public sites—pubs/bars, hair salons, or coffeehouses—that allow citizens to engage in recreative communication in ways that release stress and build some semblance of community in the process. In such environments, community is built through communication and leveling of social statuses. Indeed, Oldenburg (1999:10) argues that urban sociologists fail to appreciate how “relieving stress can just as easily be built into an urban environment as those features which produce stress.” This observation thus channeled my focus on how cannabis cafés can function as an extension of Oldenburg’s premise in that these community environs can be seen to destress urban residents by enabling different forms of sociality to surface. In the process, there is an *undoing of stigma* associated with recreational cannabis use, a vindication of certain arguments made by Thaddeus Müller (2024) about how communities can reshape negative narratives about themselves into a more positive framing.² Here, the realms of the home (identified as the

² It should be noted that in his study, Müller (2024) tied notions of doing/undoing stigma to a spatial territory—a residential environment—of a Dutch neighborhood, primarily its aesthetics and quality of life as seen by insiders and outsiders, thus behooving residents to undo the stigma, or to undo the neighborhood’s reputation when it is negatively viewed. However, my article shifts the center of gravity somewhat, choosing to argue that doing and undoing stigma is not a spatial problem. Instead, this research highlights how a burgeoning cannabis culture is politically viewed by conservatives as a cultural issue, not primarily an issue of location; that is, there is no “territory” to stigmatize per se since thousands of cannabis venues are already dispersed all over Bangkok—in upscale and middle class environs—thus rendering a territorial stigmatization a non-is-

first place) and work (identified as the second place) differ from third places in that the former are *informal* but *private* spaces while the latter are *formal* but *public spaces*—both of which for Oldenburg detract from community-building in the city. Indeed, in the first place, we are aware that the home environment is a sort of quasi-fortress, an almost opaque world where unresolved issues are attended to, unfettered emotive expressions are conveyed, cultural values are reproduced, and informal routines of everyday living are practiced. Second places, on the contrary, require conformity to procedural details and organizational culture and scripts, as well as deference to protocol and vertical relationships based on titles and seniority. Free expression here is narrow and targeted toward institutional survival, not enhancement of community. In contrast to first and second places, third places are environments that are *informal* and *public*. Additionally, employment of Lyn Lofland's urban sociological concepts from her important works *A World of Strangers* (1973) and *The Public Realm* (1998), to be elaborated shortly, will be synchronized with Oldenburg's theory throughout my manuscript.

Lofland's *A World of Strangers* (1973) asserts that most daily encounters in urban settings involve interacting with strangers. Lofland, however, does not harbor a disdainful view toward the stranger, acknowledging them as a facticity of urban life simply because most individuals do not have time during a frenetic day to get to know one another (thus enabling her views to be symbiotic with Oldenburg's assertion that urban environments require third place sociality to foster communi-

ty). More interestingly, Lofland argued that being strangers to one another did not negate the fact that "communication" can continue unabated, although in a blunt manner. She notes how city dwellers, even in quietude, are always "not only picking up information about the other," but they are also "simultaneously and interrelatedly giving off information about themselves which the other codes and acts upon" (Lofland 1973:97) be it through what one wears, that is, *appearational ordering*, or knowing approximately from where one hails, as in observing a subway passenger disembarking at a station in an impoverished or wealthy part of town, that is, *spatial ordering*. To ensure that the minimization of strangeness does not generate unpleasant interactions, behavior that generates some boundaries between urbanized strangers such as *civil inattention*, *audience role prominence*, and *civility toward diversity* are also employed by urbanites, as noted in Lofland's *Public Realm* (1998:33). Relevant for our study is her notion that even in *public solitude* there can be community, one based on people watching or listening, or one based on acknowledging everyone else's desire to experience alone time without feeling lonely due to the presence of "surrounding bodies" (Lofland 1998:88).

For Lofland, all these psychic and interactional dynamics daily work together in the mental mapping of urbanites: through civil inattention, the actor will not become engrossed toward those they do not know to the point of making others uncomfortable; by fulfilling an audience role prominence, the actor knows when to only people watch, thus granting those they do not know a respectable space; by enacting civility toward diversity, the actor remains unfazed by those who are culturally different from them, again, granting those strang-

sue. By not focusing on territorial stigma, I believe I can still make operative the practices of doing/undoing stigma by examining the sociality of cannabis café patrons as well as their welcoming staff—both of which offer acceptance and embrace of the cannabis culture, creating community in the process.

ers their space for the full expression of self and perhaps, their community, all of which minimize strangeness in some fashion because actors appreciate other people's careful negotiating of their boundaries and therefore relax. Finally, by experiencing urban dynamics through one's enjoyment of public solitude, persons may "reside in the comfort of being surrounded by the hum of conversation" (Lofland 1998:89).

With their concepts harnessed, I hope to demonstrate that Bangkok's cannabis cafés are contexts where ideas of Oldenburg and Lofland are visibly lived. My exploratory research thus attempts to highlight sociality patterns seen at Bangkok's many cannabis cafés as third places that allow appearational and spatial ordering to create some semblance of community in ways that minimize strangeness, be they through civil inattention, audience role prominence, civility toward diversity, and/or public solitude dynamics, all of which are posited to destress patrons and create community while simultaneously—along the lines of Müller's persuasion—undoing the stigma associated with cannabis culture as one that promotes countercultural and/or deviant behavior. Focusing on such qualitative attributes will be undertaken with an urban sociological lens that relies on non-interactive observations—that is, as a researcher, I too employed my audience role prominence of cannabis café patrons to examine their sociality at randomly sampled venues located in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region. To undertake this task, following the literature review, an ethnography and site analyses of Bangkok's cannabis cafés will thus: a) employ concepts by Oldenburg and Lofland to b) make visible the sociality of cannabis café patrons, and c) discuss how the configurational and spatial environments of cannabis cafés enable sociality to emerge in ways that can

be framed with the concepts of Oldenburg and Lofland. Formal one-on-one interviews of patrons and staff were not undertaken due to the ethical concern that they may, through this publication, be incriminated in the future should a repeal of decriminalization policies ensue to some degree, a scenario that appears likely at the time my research drew to a close in late 2024. It should be noted that the incrimination of observed actors that may entail legal consequences and/or incarceration is *highly improbable* given that cannabis café proprietors and staff have been diligent in complying with regulatory measures established by the Thai government since decriminalization in June 2022 (e.g., cannabis cannot be sold to those under 20-years-old, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, and/or while smoking and vaping are prohibited in public areas) (Stuart and Bush 2024).³ Fully aware of Thailand's unique status as the first country in Asia to decriminalize the use of cannabis, advocates and entrepreneurs of such operations, along with their patrons, appear to tread this new cultural freedom carefully. Because of such compliance, should conservative forces revoke the decriminalized status of cannabis use, the anticipated outcome is that cannabis cafés will simply be shut down by decree while their operators will not be penalized due to their compliance since decriminalization.

³ Since none of the establishments in Bangkok, or Thailand overall, operated illegally due to the decriminalization of cannabis use, the actual names of the establishments are listed non-pseudonymously in this manuscript. However, to ensure protection for café staff from potentially being incriminated should the Thai government reverse its stance on decriminalization, faces of patrons and proprietors, when clearly seen, are thus barred to ensure anonymity. No persons were specifically named at my café visits. That said, photographs seen herein were provided by café proprietors as public material used for their promotional efforts (e.g., on social media, through flyers, on Google reviews, etc.). With the exception of one photograph, Image 6, none were taken by your author.

Review of Literature

Given that Thailand has only recently decriminalized and allowed recreational use of cannabis, research literature on the sociality dynamics specific to *Bangkok's cannabis establishments following decriminalization* did not exist during the administration of my exploratory study. The following review of literature thus begins with a focus on global examples that pertain to cannabis decriminalization and/or recreation. It will then funnel and cascade their pertinence toward examination of Thailand's path toward decriminalization in ways that can then frame the sociality of Bangkok's cannabis cafés, a process undertaken to generate cautious extrapolations about third place social interactions that will be made visible toward the conclusion of this exploratory study. With such a trajectory, we will thus move from the global toward the local by employing concentric contexts of cannabis decriminalization developments to frame the sociality of cannabis cafés in this study.

Following from the aforementioned trajectory, Korf (2019) addresses cannabis-based tourism in the Netherlands by highlighting a surprising reality for those who remain unaware: cannabis remains an illicit drug, that is, technically illegal in the country, yet its use is decriminalized for personal enjoyment, resulting in the embeddedness of cannabis cafés in the country, an ambiguity that continues to influence and shape Netherlands' discourse on cannabis. Keul and Eisenhauer (2019) focus on cannabis tourism in the state of Colorado in the United States, noting how its cannabis tourism industry grew by concomitantly challenging laws and political developments to change the discourse toward recreational cannabis use. Kang and McGrady (2020) offer a comparative assessment of Oregon and Colorado's

tourism dynamics, revealing that Colorado residents' sentiments toward cannabis tourism tended to be more favorable, likely owing to the more sophisticated practices engaged by Colorado guides, like their use of driven tours to different recreational cannabis venues, an outcome supported by Keul and Eisenhauer (2019). Not all findings on cannabis decriminalization are sanguine, however, with Carliner, Brown, Sarvet, and Hasin (2017) warning that the increase in adult recreational use of cannabis has resulted in use disorders in the US. Cox (2018) traces Canadian public policies leading to the *Cannabis Act* that ultimately decriminalized its use in July 2018, making Canada the first G7 country to legalize cannabis, a status welcomed by Dupej and Nepal (2021) who saw its decriminalization as promoting cannabis tourism to the country, one that served to normalize and destigmatize its use, thus changing the discourse on what it means to enjoy cannabis.

Funneling our gaze toward the local in the case of Bangkok at the time of this writing, research before and following decriminalization amounts to only seven publications that specifically focus on the country's cultural and socio-political developments regarding use and sales; six are peer-reviewed (Katsila 2022; Deng et al. 2023; Ehambaranathan, Murugasu, and Hall 2023; Meeprom et al. 2023; Phucharoen et al. 2023; Terdudomtham 2023), while one is a dissertation from Thailand's prestigious Chulalongkorn University (Matsushita 2020). These Thai-centric scholars will be addressed in ways that can help us frame the proliferation and alacrity of patrons recreating at Bangkok's cannabis establishments.

Bangkok's cannabis café owners were optimistic when their venues opened to international patrons in 2022, a not-unrealistic expectation given the city's

global reputation as a welcoming and party-friendly city. Although medically legalized in 2018, the decriminalization of cannabis took place, perhaps not coincidentally, during the post-COVID-19 pandemic when tourists were expected to return to Thailand. Thai proponents of decriminalization along with its academic advocates seized the historical moment. Bangkok's Rangsit University offered, at the time of this writing, the first Bachelor of Marijuana Science Curriculum—perhaps inspired by data from scholars such as Terdudomtham (2023:9) who is critical of the country's incarceration practices for cannabis offenders and views decriminalization as a “sensible alternative for Thailand.” Rangsit's offerings enroll students in courses related to agricultural cultivation, production, and distribution of the plant as notes Associate Professor Dr. Banyat Setthiti, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural Innovation, College of Agricultural Innovation, Biotechnology, and Food.⁴ The major also explores the plant's ability to function as an herbal remedy as well as its potential for alleviating cancer symptoms (Katasila 2022). Its Facebook⁵ page displays a video of students in lab coats from the Faculty of Agricultural Innovation diligently attending to the growing, cultivation, and pruning of the plants at university facilities and in the field. The webpage optimistically cites the merits of a “growing medical marijuana career that is in high demand in the labor market both domestically and abroad” (2023).

In the northeast region of Thailand, Khon Kaen University embarked on an in-depth study examining the motivations for consuming cannabis-infused foods as a means toward well-being (Meeprom et al.

2023) while in the south of the country, the famous island of Phuket and its associated university, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket campus, has seen its scholars examine the “green rush” on the island, employing sophisticated ArcGIS mapping techniques for engaging in hotspot analyses that illuminate how cannabis-selling establishments are strategically located near key hotels catering to an international clientele (Phucharoen et al. 2023). Their cautious conclusions advocate for public policies that regulate yet accommodate the proliferation of such establishments to ensure the staying power of the island's wellness industry in ways that imperatively “establish legal boundaries [for] ensuring the sanctity of educational, religious, or other sensitive establishments in hotel-rich areas to mitigate adverse consequences” (Phucharoen et al. 2023:547). For Phucharoen and colleagues (2023:547), the goal of such accommodations is to focus “on the strong relationship between hotels and cannabis stores” so that “policymakers can develop more effective strategies to manage...adverse externalities from the green rush phenomenon toward the community and ensure a well-balanced approach that benefits stakeholders.” During the same period in Bangkok, further validation came from Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister, Anutin Charnvirakul, a well-known advocate and media presence encouraging the mass production of cannabis for medical and health benefits, as well as promoting cannabis as a new cash crop for Thailand's agriculture sector (Katasila 2022).

Detractors of decriminalization would not sit idly by, however. By September 2023, the country's newly appointed prime minister, Srettha Thavasin, threatened to curtail the entire industry by advocating for the reinstatement of stricter measures against operations enabling recreational use as well as contesting its decriminalized status. Thavasin's maneu-

⁴ See: <https://www2.rsu.ac.th/sarnrangsit-online-detail/News-Cannabis>. Retrieved July 04, 2025.

⁵ See: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=Nif5oz&v=137224675252482. Retrieved July 04, 2025.

ver was undertaken not long after his political rival Anutin announced a year earlier that cannabis and hemp would be removed from the drug control list. Indeed, since Anutin's 2022 announcement, the Thai government "has successively added many regulations" (Deng et al. 2023:2). For example, the country's Ministry of Health attempted to issue decrees to ensure that cannabis-selling establishments were not located near "schools, shopping malls, streets, and crowded places" (Katasila 2022:2192), while the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) launched information campaigns that warned about cannabis dependency and disorders stemming from recreational use. Such state expressions of discontents were reinforced by some segments of the country's international visitors, with Chinese tourists, especially their netizens, citing concerns that there was inadequate regulation and information about cannabis use in Thailand that could endanger its visitors, thus contributing to a "negative perception of Thailand as a travel destination...[for] cannabis" (Deng et al. 2023:5-6), further adding that "*caution should be exercised when discussing cannabis tourism and its potential economic benefits*" (Deng et al. 2023:7).

During this period, many other Southeast Asian countries, especially those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations trade bloc (ASEAN), began offering their views toward cannabis decriminalization. Malaysia's Home Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin warned that:

Malaysians traveling to Thailand would be easily exposed to cannabis-based products in the form of food, drinks, and supplements sold there. Furthermore, cannabis-based products in the form of food, drinks, and supplements may be smuggled into [Malaysia]. [Malaysia is] concerned that some [Malaysians] may

become addicted to cannabis because they had unwittingly consumed such products. [Basyir 2022]

Singapore, infamously known worldwide for its harsh drug laws, exhibited an uncharacteristically measured response through its Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Kasisviswanathan Shanmugam: "Freer availability of cannabis in Thailand, to which a lot of Singaporeans go to and from, where a lot of tourists come to Singapore, is going to present more challenges" (Min 2022). The Thai Embassy in Indonesia, fully mindful that the country maintains one of the strictest anti-drug laws in the world (where more than 1 kg of cannabis may result in life imprisonment or even the death penalty), proclaimed: "The Royal Thai Embassy in Jakarta warn [sic] Thai people not to carry cannabis, hemp, or products with cannabis or hemp ingredients into Indonesia. Violators of the law could face a fine of at least 5 years to life imprisonment, capital punishment, or a fine of roughly 2.4 million baht (approximately USD 67,800)" (Ehambaranathan et al. 2023:116).⁶ The only ASEAN country where views toward Thailand's decriminalization of cannabis were stated in a more accommodating fashion was Cambodia, with Khan Samban of the country's Ministry of Agriculture noting "while cannabis cultivation will be still illegal here, the government could consider lifting the ban. It is an easy crop for planting and can grow in many areas, the government would consider amending the law for special cases" (Olszewski 2022).

Detractors of decriminalization at the time of this writing, such as the country's incumbent Health Minister, Cholnan Srikaew, were aggressively agitat-

⁶ At the time of this writing, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the Republic of the Philippines offered no official statements.

ing for a return to some semblance of regulatory control. An anti-decriminalization narrative emerged: those against decriminalized cannabis were arguing that medicinal cannabis use had always been a political camouflage to ultimately segue the country toward accepting cannabis use recreationally, an act that would result in moral degeneracy. Thus, push-back emerged not only from the conservative political forces of Thai society but from a coterie of physicians constituting the Medical Council of Thailand. Yet, current control measures are piecemeal, and the industry continues to generate revenue since cannabis plants were reclassified as “controlled herbs,” a benign category reserved for plants that deserve “protection and promotion” due to their role in enhancing “Thai folk wisdom in traditional medicine,” upon which cannabis’s veracity will be determined by the country’s minister of public health (Chalermpananupap 2023). Because cannabis plants are now categorized under the less malevolent category of “controlled herbs,” they are “no longer under the purview of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB)” (Chalermpananupap 2023).

Despite the continuing alacrity and discontents surrounding issues related to cannabis decriminalization, I do not intend to promote any pieties toward the relaxation of regulations *or* regurgitate alarmist views from detractors that frame its recreational usage as “marginal or deviant behavior, a lifestyle found in developed nations” (Deng et al. 2023:1). My article only attempts to illuminate how cannabis cafés are the newest third places in Asia, and how they have been able to build community locally and transnationally despite or because of the aforementioned geopolitical and localized political developments, a quintessential expression of *glocalization*—a term popularized by sociologists Roland Robertson and Zygmunt Bauman to mean the simultaneous coexis-

tence of universalizing (global) and particularizing (local) tendencies in society (Robertson 1992; Robertson 1995; Bauman 1995). Thus, through primarily the ideas of Oldenburg and Lofland, I argue that third places in the guise of cannabis cafés can further be appreciated as destressing urban environments inflected by local and international sociality in ways that contest caricaturized and deviant images of cannabis smokers. Thus, dynamics from my aforementioned discussion of how conservative forces in Thai society are *doing stigma* against cannabis decriminalization will be shown to have generated an opposite dynamic where international and local patrons and supporters of cannabis decriminalization are *undoing stigma* by practicing law-abiding consumption and socialities at cannabis cafés.

Site Visits

During the summers of 2022 and 2023, and spring 2024, I visited 45 cannabis cafés in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR) to conduct my observations of sociality. The BMR region includes not only the capital city of Bangkok but small adjacent provinces of Nakhon Pathom, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, Samut Prakan, and Samut Sakhon. Because of the fast proliferation of cannabis-selling establishments, the decision was made to focus on a plurality of venues (n=45) for the sake of drawing cautious extrapolations about the dynamics of cannabis cafés based on reliability rather than focusing on the dynamics of one venue repeatedly for the sake of ensuring validity. A random number generator was employed to assign a numerical value to each establishment. From this list, 45 cannabis cafés were selected, filtered by identifying those environments that provided tables and available seating. The value of 45 was determined based on funding parameters and logistical feasibility of my site visits. A map that identified locations

of cannabis-selling venues, *weed.th*, was employed to list the $n=1,873$ establishments that at the time sold cannabis in the BMR. This map remains the most comprehensive map displaying establishments selling cannabis in Thailand. However, it should be noted that the list of establishments mapped by *weed.th* did not (and still does not) discern between walk-in shops, counters inside malls that sell cannabis, street stalls, or actual cannabis cafés with seating. The random sample of 45 cannabis cafés are located across some of Bangkok's districts and one province of Samut Prakan (part of the BMR) (see Table 1). Some cafés are franchises, while the majority of the venues in the sample operate as independent venues.⁷

Additionally, budtenders at some of the establishments I first explored noted that early afternoon hours and evening hours would draw different types of visitors, with the former seeing more mellow patrons. Indeed, such insight substantiates sociologist Murray Melbin's (1978:3) classic study where he demonstrates how humans occupy time like they occupy space, with trends showing how evening hours draw out the less inhibited and more garrulous toward settings that resemble "social life on former land frontiers.". Thus, for each establishment, I visited twice per day, between noon and 1:00 PM and the evening hours of 7:00 PM and 8:00 PM, in hopes of being able to discern different types of sociality between daytime and evening patrons that visit the cafés (see Image 1).

⁷ Randomly selecting over 30 cannabis cafés ($n \geq 30$) enables the central limit theorem (CLT) to provide rudimentary insights into emerging patterns of sociality, at least for the scope of my study, that could—were such research to transition toward a quantitative orientation—make inferences about the larger population (Mascha and Vetter 2018). Moreover, I am sensitive to the condition, shared by Wisz and colleagues (2008:763), that with a small sample size of $n < 30$, one must be "highly conservative" in making predictions and "restrict their use to exploratory modelling."

To display courtesy as a patron, I purchased one cannabis cigarette, coffee or soft drink, and snacks per visit to become a bona fide patron who can then *inconspicuously* observe the setting's social dynamics. There are three reasons why no interviews of patrons were conducted: a) to ensure that patrons do not feel violated when embarking on the ritual of enjoying cannabis; that is, I wanted to observe natural and unscripted sociality. Additionally, b) a researcher violating patrons' respective desires to alter their consciousness would do more to detract from cautious extrapolations about consistent sociality patterns—the primary goal of my study—rather than add to it. Finally, c) I did not want to risk driving away patrons from the cafés. Such approaches not only ensured continuing sales for the establishment, but more importantly, generated goodwill in the process which during my second visit in the evening would result in some staff recognizing me and ensuring I had a nice seating location for continued observation of our evening patrons.

Image 1. At left, budtenders at Green Day Dispensary sharing samples with patrons during evening hours



Source: Courtesy of Green Day Dispensary staff, summer 2022.

Table 1. Cannabis Cafés Visited

Bangkok district/province (in alphabetical order)	Number of cafés visited per district or province	Establishments visited
Bang Na (district)	2	Coughing Apes Mabu High Weed Dispensary
Bang Rak (district)	5	Cannabis Kingdom Weed Shop Bangkok HAF HSM Silom Cannabis Weed Café Pakalolo Surawong — Café Dispensary No Man's Land
Khlong Than Nuea (district)	1	Choo Choo Hemp Weed Shop
Khlong Toei (district)	7	Green Day Dispensary I Feel Good Café Slow Burn Cannabis Dispensary Thai Cannabis Club — Thonglor Weed 4 Less Boveda Official Thailand DANQ Cannabis Dispensary Sukhumvit
Phra Khanong (district)	1	Wellgreen 101
Phra Nakhon (district)	2	Gram by Gram Cannabis Club Highland Khaosan
Ratchathewi (district)	4	How High Cannabis Café Karma Canna Café Dispensary Mellow Weed Snoop Puff
Sampanthawong (district)	2	Cannabeast Ratchawong-Chinatown-Yaowarat Green Day Dispensary-Chinatown
Samut Prakan (province)	1	WeWeed Cannabis Café (near Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport)
Sathon (district)	3	High Society Cannabis Club Suan Plu Leaf Cannabis Café Oumi Organic Café
Suan Luang (district)	1	Café Munchies
Watthana (district)	15	420 Café x Booze 21 Algrene — Cannabis Dispensary, Art, Café Hempmade — Cannabis Store & Chillin Hub Highfive Dispensary Cafe & Bar High Supply 99 Dispensary Dream Galaxy Goja Green Elephant 420 Dispensary High and Dry Dispensary Prime Botanica Marley's Bar & Café Heaven of Weed High Thai Weed THC Thonglor Hemp Club Tropicanna Cannabis Dispensary & Café
Yannawa (district)	1	Kushies Cannabis
Total Cafés Visited	45	

Source: Self-elaboration.

Like the pattern of service sector development Phucharoen and colleagues (2023) make visible at Thailand's tourist destination of Phuket, the vast majority of cannabis establishments in the BMR were located in districts near famous streets. In this study of cannabis cafés in the BMR, Sukhumvit Road is such a famed street. Sukhumvit Road, especially where it traverses the city's central business districts, along with its associated *sois* (roads that are directly linked to a major street), are densely clustered with many large malls, temples, and dining and retail establishments based out of shophouses. The surrounding areas also contain numerous hotels and hostels ranging from five-star, ultra high-end establishments to those located across the street from some of the city's infamous brothels and go-go bars. Sukhumvit Road's length allows ingress into the capital from the country's east and southeastern provinces, and egress toward the last province adjacent to Cambodia, over 303 miles, or 480 kilometers, away from Bangkok. In the BMR, accessing the high densification of cannabis cafés in the area means patrons are only walking distance or a short motorcycle taxi ride from the city's efficient public transportation rail lines such as the Bangkok Mass Transit System, locally referred to as the BTS, or its subway, the Bangkok's Metropolitan Rapid Transit (MRT).

Some cannabis cafés, but not all, sell food and alcohol. All cafés in our sample have seating areas for patrons to smoke. Such configured spaces can be seen at shops like HSM Silom Cannabis and How High Cannabis Café. Some of these environments have creative arrangements, such as Wellgreen 101 with its dance floor, Goja's inclusion of a DJ area where they play music for patrons during evening hours, the Thai Cannabis Club and its billiards area, and Algrene Cannabis and its art gallery viewing area. Some venues have comfortable sofas for patrons to play video games while viewing game imagery on

a wall-mounted big screen television, while still others will have a stage with a microphone and a guitar on a stand for those who dare to perform.

Image 2. I Feel Good Cannabis Café and Bar in a shophouse format



Source: Google Street View, January 2024.⁸

Many cannabis cafés have their smoking areas above street level on the second floor or rooftop made possible by the shophouse configurations of the establishments, as in No Man's Land and its rooftop smoking area with vistas of the Bangkok skyline; indeed, the vast majority of cafés in my sample operate in facilities based on shophouse configurations. A shophouse is the vernacular architecture of the Far East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, often constituted by

⁸ See: https://www.google.com/maps/contrib/106582868073073336481/photos/@13.718989,100.5761315,3a,75y,90t/data=!3m7!1e2!3m5!1sAF1Qip-PaaqJOcmjWc3bjtE6eFQk7QR1e0_Mwscuyuadp!2e10!6shttps:%2F%-2F!h5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipPaaqJOcmjWc3bjtE6eFQk7QR1e0_Mwscuyuadp%3Dw365-h486-k-no!7i3024!8i4032!4m3!8m2!3m1!1e1?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MDk1wOC4wIKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D. Retrieved December 21, 2024.

narrow buildings with multiple floors—usually with two or three floors—that have the proprietor/s dwellings at the top floor, while the business operations are conducted on the ground floor. In essence, such structures serve as a home and place of business for the proprietor (see Image 2). Proprietors of businesses in such configurations do not commute to work in a car—they wake up in the morning on the upper floors and descend to the ground floor to open their shops and welcome staff and patrons for the day.

Cannabis Cafés During Evening Hours

During the evening hours of the establishments visited, patrons tended to gather around tables as strangers, although some arrived as friendship groups. In more spacious surroundings, tables often seat a half-dozen patrons, many in dyadic and triadic groups. One often hears English of many accents and proficiencies used as the first language to engage in conversation. Many of the international patrons, upon enjoying their first inhale, which is acknowledged with solidarity by other strangers at the table, may be asked where they are from. Over the two-year study period, I have heard tourists informing others that they are from Sweden, the Netherlands, China, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, France, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany, to name but a few. These often mingle with Thai patrons at some point during their visits, given the somewhat densified seating environments of many cafés (see Image 3). Smiles and laughter are plentiful as the panoply of patrons pack their pipes and smoke their cannabis cigarettes, with some purists preferring to roll their cigarettes. Frequently, selfies were taken with different patrons' new associations as well as between patrons and the venues' budtenders and/or servers, evincing how civility toward diversity is practiced at cannabis cafés functioning as third places.

Following the minimizing of people's stranger status due to parties disclosing their domiciles, patrons often return to speaking their native languages, a transition that sometimes includes a polite gesture whereby an ashtray or lighter is transferred between one cultural group to another. Some groups remained cliquish if they were large, choosing instead to communicate among themselves if they were able to claim a sizeable seating area, although none of the members in the group were antisocial to those outside their coterie. This is not surprising because one must realize that for many patrons, from the Global North and Global South, Thailand being the first and only country in Asia to decriminalize cannabis use has provided for our patrons a significant cultural and legal allowance to emancipate their recreational relationship to cannabis in ways their home countries would never allow. The experience for such patrons may thus be a rite of passage of sorts, and the alacrity, joviality, and community expressed by our evening patrons, through their civility toward diversity, is not surprising.

Image 3. A gathering of local and international smokers at Choo Choo Hemp Weed Shop



Source: Image courtesy of Choo Choo staff, provided during summer 2023.

Image 4. Patrons at Heaven of Weed inspecting flower samples



Source: Image courtesy of Heaven of Weed staff, provided during summer 2023; faces are barred to ensure anonymity.

At one of the establishments visited in Wattana District, one patron at a table from Japan found out another patron was from the Netherlands and immediately asked in English whether Bangkok is the “new Amsterdam,” to which our Dutch friend jovially affirmed, further noting that he was impressed with the quality of the flowers. At another café in Sathon District, a group of patrons, upon learning that some were from Germany and others from the United Kingdom, were engaged in a spirited discussion comparing the different playing styles of football exhibited by the Bundesliga and the English Premier League. Because I was raised in Thailand prior to my emigration to the United States, I am conversationally fluent in Thai and Mandarin, and was thus able to observe cross-cultural solidarity forged when a Mandarin speaker complimented on the quality and potency of her cannabis cigarette through Google Translate to a nearby Thai patron. Pressing a button on the

app and recording her sentiments in Mandarin, she subsequently pressed the speaker icon that then voiced back the message in Thai to our Thai patron sitting a few chairs from her. Delighted with our Chinese speaker’s message and responding with smiles and nods, our Thai patron then spoke the Thai language into her handheld translation device, Fluentalk, with the device vocalizing her message back in Mandarin to our Chinese visitor. Both broke out in affirmation and laughter in their altered states of consciousness. With such apps, I was also able to observe a Hindi-speaking patron querying a budtender about differences in pricing and potency of different flowers. Indeed, the surprising star of sociality in the age of globalization is the power of translation apps and devices in building a semblance of community in ways that break down communication barriers when different languages are spoken in the same setting. In the context of this study, once a patron’s geographical information set off by language becomes known, the strangeness of the stranger is minimized since awareness of the other’s spatiality functions as a communicative lubricant that enables more amicable social interactions.

Although the bane of Oldenburg’s conceptualization of a quality third place, many cannabis cafés during evening hours frequently employed music to saturate the environment’s soundscape. In Oldenburg’s analyses of American third places, such music overpowered quality conversation, drowning out patrons from being able to establish a healthy line of communication. Interestingly, at many cannabis cafés in Bangkok that played music, these venues did so with music projected at moderate volume. The key reason for this tact is that patrons, upon arrival, often expend time communicating with budtenders about the dif-

ferent types of flowers available for smoking—in the process, different jars with flower samples are opened and closed, and the act includes handing over such jars for the patron to smell different flowers' aromas, a gesture that often engenders in patrons verbal affirmations and/or commentary on the flower types (see Image 4). Loud music would detract from such communication. Some exceptions can be seen at Goja and Highfive Dispensary Cafe & Bar where techno dance music, or at Wellgreen 101 with its salsa music, is played at louder volumes.

At Wellgreen 101 with its dining tables, for example, the arrival of the evening would see international and local patrons enjoy a Thai dinner, with some consuming beers or wines in superficial amounts.⁹ After dinner, some tables would be moved to increase the size of the dance floor. Joyful patrons, their friends, and locals then dance with one another—with both the salsa music *and* the aroma of cannabis diffusing into the *soi* due to the propping open of the establishment's corner entrance doorways. Some couples display amorous body language during dance, opportunistically relishing in how the loud music draws them closer so that they can whisper to each other. Those patrons who are arrhythmic or less literate with dance (or maybe because of their inebriation) watched with alacrity, perhaps vicariously enjoying the bonds being formed through their audience role prominence and civility toward diversity (see Image 5). Cannabis cafés during evening hours are frequently happy, boisterous, and garrulous places.

⁹ However, in the cafés that sell alcoholic beverages, all patrons give pride of place to smoking of cannabis, and alcohol consumption seen at the establishments was a rarity. That is, I did not once witness a drunken patron during visits to my sample of cannabis cafés.

Image 5. After dinner, Wellgreen 101's patrons dance at the café's "Latin Night"



Source: Image courtesy of Wellgreen 101 staff, provided during summer 2023.

Cannabis Cafés During Daylight Hours

Daylight hours at cannabis cafés tend to be an environment where solidarity between cannabis aficionados is established by what I term as solitaires, each on their favorite table as they quietly enjoy their smokes, their own company. Daytime hours at cannabis cafés function as a different frontier from the evening, where the latter draw in younger, louder, and more garrulous patrons. Daylight hours draw in more adults, sometimes as partners. However, patrons tend to be primarily individuals, mostly men. In the premises I visited during daylight hours—my favorite being the Karma Canna Café—the more subdued environment allowed me to converse with Thai budtenders; their curiosities almost always prompted them to first query where I am from, frequently followed by weather-related queries, paraphrased along the lines of: “So what is Los

Angeles weather like this time of year? I bet it is not as humid as Thailand.” On many occasions, after such introductory spatial ordering and the minimizing of the stranger status were completed, complimentary flower samples were generously offered.

Cannabis cafés during daylight hours build a different type of community, one borne through a solidarity between those who accept how those around them, taken by personal matters, are enjoying their alone time after the effects of THC take hold. Indeed, a relatively quiet third place can just as effectively prime the environment to be a community enhancement space defined by, counterintuitively, solitaires appreciating their own company if not the ability to partake in audience role prominence, that is, people watching other solitaires around them. Patrons during daylight hours do exhibit some etiquette, usually manifesting as a stoic nod between a seated smoker and an arriving patron seeking an ideal table, a simple gesture that is employed followed by the practice of respecting one another’s public solitude, a behavior often seen at Karma Canna due to the beautiful layout of the environment replete with comfortable chairs and nice tables. Patrons are rather brief in their exchanges as seen in my daylight Karma Canna visit, with a recently arrived European patron sitting at his table asking with a rising lilt “Good?” to another European patron, as the former had yet to begin smoking but was busy packing his pipe, while our other patron, having been seated much longer, responds with a smiling nod and a “Yeah.” Solitaires are cognizant of their social boundaries and ultimately return to their solitude, perhaps enjoying the quiet Loflandian “hum of conversation” emanat-

ing from the establishments’ staff speaking with one another about their tasks for the day as they work behind their counters. Such a hum is heard because many of the visited venues during daylight hours do not play music. At another café, I witnessed younger phenotypical Far East Asian solitaires quietly working on their laptops. When they conversed, they often spoke in low volume in ways that dignified the quiet, but denied me the privilege of hearing from which geographical womb they hail. Digital nomads from Mongolia, China, South Korea, Taiwan, or Japan? Or Thais on their day off from work? Unemployed Thais preparing their resumes or maintaining their social media accounts? In the spirit of civil inattention, no one asked and no one cared (see images 6 and 7).

Image 6. Solitaires at Royal Queen Seeds (not in study sample, but visited on my own time)



Source: Photograph by author, summer 2022.

Image 7. Solitaires at Danq braving the heat and humidity



Source: Image courtesy of Danq staff, provided during summer, 2023.

During daylight hours, the effectiveness of enabling a nourishing quietude between solitaires can be contrasted to the evening hours' patrons, since the latter group, as Oldenburg observed, claim social presence through body language, volume of speech, and histrionics based on their desire to be the center of attention. The lack of such garrulous strangers during daylight hours is, in my view, just as important a means for enhancing the community. Indeed, as a scholar, my most reflective states were experienced during visits to cafés before the late afternoon or evening hours, allowing me to appreciate others around me who appear to peacefully inhabit a similar atmosphere.

Cannabis consumption during daylight hours tends to bring the actor into a contemplative state where they are frequently taken by personal matters without their social finesse being scrutinized.

I am of the view that even when a multitude of solitaires are gathered in such fashion, the lack of garrulousness between patrons *in no way* cheapens the third place's ability to still promote community enhancement. This premise may appear to be counterintuitive. However, cannabis cafés during the day were observed to be a unique type of third place: one that welcomes solitaires enjoying their solitude and quietude, perhaps a needed function for actors to destress and distance themselves from Bangkok's noise pollution and over-stimuli contributed by *tuk tuks*, the arriving and departing BTS skytrains overhead, dilapidated diesel buses with flatulent-sounding exhausts, and 250cc motorcycles that add to street congestion (Fong 2016).

Voluntary solitude, then, exhibits its leveling like the garrulous third places of Oldenburg's persuasion—perhaps even more so—since patrons, fully aware of one another, nonetheless respect the “other” from a healthy distance, enabling the building of a community of solitaires. Although outdoor seating remains available for many of Bangkok's cannabis cafés during daylight hours, the high humidity and heat often keep visitors inside air-conditioned facilities, further providing a space for acknowledgment of fellow cannabis solitaires to surface. Thus, daytime cannabis cafés are bona fide third places despite their solitude-enhancing dynamics. It is a community enabled by welcoming a gathering of its solitude-loving patrons, all of whom appear to enjoy the presence of other solitaires in their midst without the expressed need to be garrulous. To deny that quiet third places with less or no sociality can still enhance community is analogous to denying that monks in deep meditation within a temple can experience community with one another.

During daylight visits to the cannabis cafés that played music, sounds within these venues were often exemplified by what the Millennial generation, Generation Z, and progressive music listeners would identify as “downtempo,” “lofi,” “lounge,” and/or “ambient” music (although more creative terms abound). Downtempo, lofi, and ambient music tend to be long-duration compositions—mostly instrumentals—that are meant to, first and foremost, create an atmospheric state for the listener by employing repetitive musical structures that frequently sample melodies and/or vocalizations from other songs. Daylight soundscapes can be contrasted to dance-oriented music with upbeat tempos that are heard at venues during evening visits. Thus, daylight cannabis cafés frequently play electronically-composed music where virtuosos of instruments—as in charismatic guitarists who display their skills through emphatic solos or riffs often heard in different genres of rock and heavy metal—did not dominate the composition. Although some vocalists or bands with “pop” credentials are heard, the music is primarily mellow, relaxing, and exceptionally atmospheric, thus allowing cannabis smokers to smoothly segue into their altered states of consciousness—while appreciating that other solitaires are in the same mindset of drowning out the cacophony of urban sounds emanating from Bangkok’s congested streets. Thus, whereas Oldenburg was highly critical of loud third place environments in the United States, observing that such venues are taken over by vulgar—especially if too much alcohol is consumed—cliquey college students gesticulating to pop/rock music being played, the musical backdrop of cannabis cafés during daytime hours projected music at lower volumes, allowing it to function as background music to frame our com-

munity constituted by a comparatively more contemplative coterie of patrons.

Conclusion

Bangkok’s cannabis cafés, rendered in this manuscript as a new type of third place to emerge in the city’s contemporary urban landscape, offer their patrons a unique means to experience the city’s urban stimuli in ways that enable destressing and some semblance of community building. Although major cities around the world are experienced through their historical areas, landmarks, street configurations, gridlock, and cacophony through its densification and gradual dispersion into adjacent regions, such entities serving as cauldrons of stressors for their citizens and visitors now offer an antipodal environment as seen in the examples that are Bangkok’s cannabis cafés functioning as third places. Patrons at such cafés appear to welcome a destressing disengagement with the well-known global city that is Bangkok, rendering the establishments an antipode of what urbanites frequently encounter in the urban experience: exposure to frenetic urban energies that colonize the day and night as sociality frontiers. Yet, at Bangkok’s cannabis cafés, such a process of becoming a less stressed actor in a frenetic city through contemplative solitude with minimal sociality (daylight patrons) or garrulous sociality (evening patrons), enables community to be created by undoing the stigma associated with cannabis culture, whether it is accomplished by practicing civil inattention, audience role prominence, civility toward diversity, or public solitude. I believe Oldenburg and Lofland would be delighted with Bangkok’s birthing of another iteration of the third place made visible in this study in a region of the world with which they have not engaged in urban analyses.

What can further be appreciated about our patrons is how they employ cannabis cafés to fulfill their roles in uniting communities of the global with the local. With different languages heard, different races and ethnicities of patrons seen, different cultures engaged, Bangkok's cannabis cafés also reinforce Lofland's view that awareness of one another's place through spatial ordering allows the modern urban resident to contextualize persons and thus minimize their strangeness, except that in the case of Bangkok, this minimization of strangeness crosses international boundaries. For Lofland (1973:82-83), in the modern city, "a man is where he stands," creating a culture where city dwellers can link "who" to "where." In the case of Bangkok's cannabis cafés, patrons can immediately have a cultural and/or political narrative about someone, albeit blunt and generalized, by simply knowing from where cannabis aficionados hail. To what extent the amicable encountering of actors with different worldviews improves one's mental health will be an interesting trajectory for future studies on the effects of cannabis cafés when compared to, say, bars or pubs.

Unlike bars or pubs that serve alcohol—a mainstay of many communities around the world—I posit that cannabis cafés, as destressing environments, are arguably healthier social spaces. Establishments that exclusively serve alcohol, so often celebrated by Oldenburg, unfortunately offer beverages that, when consumed in great quantities, frequently regress a person's sociability into crassness, and frequently, hostility and anti-social behavior. A key distinction that can be made is how cannabis café patrons remain noticeably more coherent in these environments than in alcohol-serving establishments. For many of us who have had experience attending bars, one is aware that in the case of those alcohol-inebriated, community-building and sociality can break

down, resulting in stressors being *added* to the third place environment and the public at large—a scenario ignored by Oldenburg's overall sanguine analyses of bars or pubs functioning as third places. Yet, because Oldenburg clearly privileged the art of communication as a most important attribute of third place dynamics, that one can explicitly see this exhibited in different forms of sociality at Bangkok's cannabis cafés is thus a welcome sign.

The city can be a lonely and isolating environment for its people, with its concrete structures and urban configurations rendering inhabitants or visitors as cogs in the city's machine. Even documentaries that focus on the city, for example, begin with imagery of crowded crosswalks, exposés of pollution, and criminality—all of which need to be left behind lest we remain but ants in the proverbial concrete jungle.¹⁰ To what extent a glocalized urban environment can be seen to humanize rather than caricaturize all types of people therein, that is, to render them as subjects with agency rather than objects to be subsumed under the calculability of urban development, should be an important trajectory for examining how actors can begin reading anew, and ultimately, appreciating anew, a city's alternative third places. Thai cannabis cafés in our sample are fulfilling this role as they relish in their burgeoning industry by allowing new subjects that can build community to emerge, despite their liminal status as the Thai state is now beginning to reel in their operations. As such, future studies—should cannabis cafés remain a mainstay of Thailand's service sector—should focus on one establishment to tease out more sociality granularity in the setting—but

¹⁰ The 2017 documentary, *In Pursuit of Silence* (directed by Patrick Shen) is one example. Focusing on the hyper-stimulation of a city's acoustic environment, it shows the emancipation of its actors as those who leave the city or, at the very least, seek out pockets of quiet within the city.

given the fast growing industry one can witness across Bangkok and the rest of Thailand, my manuscript had opted to focus on the exponential growth and the plurality of venues as a context to draw my analyses of sociality, fully aware of the potential blind spots inhered in the current approach.

The degree to which cannabis cafés in Thailand can offer themselves as destressing third places of a garrulous, festive nature, or as non-garrulous and contemplative contexts of quietude, will depend on how they present themselves as bona fide destressing environments for the local and global population. In this regard, more emphases on how destressing spaces can be designed into urban environments in ways that minimize people's stranger status are not just intellectual pursuits worthy of sloganeering, but an ideal that can be pursued as public policy in ways that can continue to transform the city from being a stratifying, partitioning, and mechanical machine, into the city as culturally di-

verse villages and communities as noted by the former city's governor, Pichit Rattakul. In the case of Bangkok, such an ideal can be realized beyond the welcoming of the local and global at the city's many temples, ruins, floating market, night markets, food courts, and shopping malls, or through the riding of the *tuk tuks* to get to the aforementioned venues, but also through the act of visiting the city's cannabis cafés.

Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to colleagues in my department who helped me refine this manuscript with incisive comments and queries: Drs. Kathryn Daniels, Philippe Duhart, Caryn Gerstenberger, Sekani Robinson, and Alejandro Zermeno. My gratitude also extends to two students, Julia Gonzales and Enzo Gregeois. Their efforts in preparing content in this manuscript for conferences are much appreciated. Thank you to all the aforementioned for your support.

References

ASEAN Now. 2024. "Thailand Plans Year-End Ban on Recreational Cannabis." March 01. Retrieved June 09, 2024 (<https://aseannow.com/topic/1321241-thailand-plans-year-end-ban-on-recreational-cannabis/>).

Askew, Marc. 2002. *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation*. New York: Routledge.

Ayal, Eliezer B. 1992. "Thailand's Development: The Role of Bangkok." *Pacific Affairs* 65(3):353-367.

Bangkok Post. 2022. "Bangkok Becoming a Weed Wild West: Amid a Legal Vacuum, Vendors Enjoy High Times, But No One Knows How Long They Will Last." December 15. Retrieved De-

cember 23, 2022 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2461302/bangkok-becoming-a-weed-wild-west>).

Basyir, Mohamed. 2022. "Legalisation of Cannabis in Thailand a Challenge for Malaysia to Curb Drug Abuse, Smuggling." *New Straits Times*, October 05. Retrieved October 11, 2022 (<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/10/837717/legalisation-cannabis-thailand-challenge-malaysia-curb-drug-abuse>).

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1995. "Searching for a Centre That Holds." Pp. 140-154 in *Global Modernities*, edited by M. Featherstone, S. Lash, and Roland Robertson. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Carliner, Hannah et al. 2017. "Cannabis Use, Attitudes, and Legal Status in the U.S.: A Review." *Preventative Medicine* 104:13-23.
- Chalermpananupap, Termsak. 2023. "Dangerous Unintended Consequences Loom in the Wake of Thailand's Hasty Legalisation of Marijuana." *Fulcrum*, January 25. Retrieved January 27, 2023 (<https://fulcrum.sg/dangerous-unintended-consequences-loom-in-the-wake-of-thailands-hasty-legalisation-of-marijuana/>).
- Chen, Heather and Kocha Olarn. 2024. "Thailand Moves to Ban Recreational Cannabis Use, 18 Months after Historic Decriminalization." *CNN*, January 12 Retrieved January 22, 2023 (<https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/10/asia/thailand-cannabis-reverse-proposed-laws-intl-hnk/index.html>).
- Cox, Chelsea. 2018. "The Canadian Cannabis Act Legalizes and Regulates Recreational Cannabis Use in 2018." *Health Policy* 122(3):205-209.
- Deng, Shuang, Pavel Slutskiy, and Smith Boonchutima. 2023. "The Chinese Media Narrative of Thailand as a Tourist Destination after the Legalisation of Cannabis." *Heliyon* 9:1-8.
- Dupej, Susan and Sanjay K. Nepal. 2021. "Tourism as an Agent of Cannabis Normalization: Perspectives from Canada." *Tourism Review International* 25(4):353-369.
- Ehambaranathan, Eswaranathan, Shagesheela Murugasu, and Mark Hall. 2023. "The Effect of Thailand's Subcultures on Other Southeast Asia States' Countercultures." *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences* 6(3):108-121.
- Fong, Jack. 2013. "Political Vulnerabilities of a Primate City: The May 2010 Red Shirts Uprising in Bangkok, Thailand." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 48(3):332-347.
- Fong, Jack. 2016. "Making Operative Concepts from Murray Schafer's Soundscapes Typology: A Qualitative and Comparative Analysis of Noise Pollution in Bangkok, Thailand and Los Angeles, California." *Urban Studies* 53(1):173-192.
- France 24. 2024. "Thai Government Says Will Ban Recreational Cannabis Use." February 06. Retrieved March 19, 2024 (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240206-thai-government-says-will-ban-recreational-cannabis-use>).
- Goldstein, Sidney. 1971. "Urbanization in Thailand, 1947-1967." *Demography* 8(2):205-223.
- Henderson, Vernon. 2002. "Urban Primacy, External Costs, and Quality of Life." *Resource and Energy Economics* 24:95-106.
- Jefferson, Mark. 1939. "The Law of the Primate City." *Geographical Review* 29(2):226-232.
- Kang, Soo and Pavlina McGrady. 2020. "Support for Cannabis Tourism: A Tale of Two States." *Tourism Review International* 24(4):233-250.
- Katasila, Suriyasai. 2022. "Social Movements on Liberalization 'Free Marijuana' of Thai's Government Policy: Freedom under Boundaries." *Journal of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing* 6(2):2191-2208.
- Keul, Adam and Brian Eisenhauer. 2019. "Making the High Country: Cannabis Tourism in Colorado USA." *Annals of Leisure Research* 22(2):140-160.
- Korf, Dirk J. 2019. "Dutch Coffee Shops and Trends in Cannabis Use." *Addictive Behaviors* 27(60):851-866.
- Lofland, Lyn H. 1973. *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Lofland, Lyn H. 1998. *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*. Berlin: Aldine de Gruyter.
- London, Bruce. 1977. "Is the Primacy City Parasitic? The Regional Implications of National Decision Making in Thailand." *Journal of Developing Areas* 12(1):49-68.
- Mascha, Edward J. and Thomas R. Vetter. 2018. "Significance, Errors, Power, and Sample Size: The Blocking and Tackling of Statistics." *Anesthesia & Analgesia* 126(2):691-698.
- Matsushita, Yuki. 2020. "What Will Be the Impact of Legalizing Medical Cannabis on Economic Effects in Japan? Analysis of Case Study in Germany and USA, Canada, Thailand." Ph.D. dissertation, Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
- Meeprom, Supawat et al. 2023. "Cannabis-Infused Food: Uncovering Effective Conditions for Achieving Well-Being Perception and Choice Behavior among Young Adult Consumers." *Food Quality and Preference* 109:1-12.
- Melbin, Murray. 1978. "Night as Frontier." *American Sociological Review* 43(1):3-22.
- Min, Ang Hwee. 2022. "Legalisation of Cannabis in Thailand Will Present More Challenges, with Many People Travelling to and from Singapore." *Channel News Asia*, September 01. Retrieved September 12, 2022 (<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/thailand-travel-weed-legal-cannabis-cnb-singapore-shan-mugam-2915951>).

Müller, Thaddeus. 2024. "Doing/Undoing Stigma: The Moral Enterprise of Territorial Stigma." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 53(2):212-247.

Oldenburg, Ray. 1999. *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. El Segundo, CA: Marlowe & Company.

Olszewski, Peter. 2022. "Thai Medical Cannabis Advocate Retires in Cambodia." *Khmer Times*, June 09. Retrieved July 18, 2022 (<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501090781/thai-medical-cannabis-advocate-retires-in-cambodia/>).

Phucharoen, Chayanon et al. 2023. "Green Rush in Phuket: Big-Data Evidence of Cannabis Commercialization in a Tourism-Centric Area." *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* 40(6):532-550.

Robertson, Roland. 1992. "Globality and Modernity." *Theory, Culture & Society* 9(2):153-161.

Robertson, Roland. 1995. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." Pp. 25-44 in *Global Modernities*, edited by

M. Featherstone, S. Lash, and Roland Robertson. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Strangio, Sebastian. 2022. "Thai Drug Legalization Advocates Fight Growing Marijuana Backlash." *The Diplomat*, November 24. Retrieved January 28, 2023 (<https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/thai-drug-legalization-advocates-fight-growing-marijuana-backlash/>).

Stuart, Aydan and Austin Bush. 2024. "Cannabis is Legal in Thailand, but It's Complicated: What Travelers Need to Know." *Lonely Planet*, April 24. Retrieved March 23, 2025 (<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/news/thailand-cannabis-guide>).

Terdudomtham, Thamavit. 2023. "Marijuana Policy in Thailand and the Argument for Decriminalization." *Rangsit Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4(2):9-14.

Wisz, Mary et al. 2008. "Effects of Sample Size on the Performance of Species." *Diversity and Distributions* 14(5):763-773.

Citation

Fong, Jack. 2025. "The Sociality and Liminality of Bangkok's Cannabis Cafés." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 21(3):6-28. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.21.3.01>