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Marijuana Tourism in Denver

The real, but non-touristic deal!

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Abstract

Destinations can best be described as ‘composite products’ and may therefore undergo fundamental changes when new tourism actors enter the stage. The legalisation of marijuana has led to such changes as new, marijuana-related actors have entered the stage in Denver, Colorado. Focusing on the most prominent of these actors (dispensaries selling marijuana and marijuana-related products) this article discusses how out-of-state visitors enact and interact with these dispensaries. A central finding is that visitors, who expect visits to cannabis stores to be exotic, extra-ordinary and exhilarating, struggle to make sense of marijuana dispensaries as a legal and rather mundane retail experience. Hereby the paper points to the wider issue of tourism as reflexive performances set in a context that is far less exotic and touristic than visitors expect it to be.

Keywords

Cannabis tourism; marijuana tourism; retail experience; materiality

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Paget et al. (2010: 831) argue that tourism is “a hybrid collective in perpetual movement”. This collective can be conceptualised as a network that includes human actors, non-human actors and interactions between different actors. Human actors are both tourists and those who provide touristic services and products whereas non-human actors are, for example, objects (e.g. buildings, restaurants, stores and tangible products), informational materials (e.g. brochures, web sites and newspapers) and technologies. Paget et al. (2010) further point to interactions as that which connects human and non-human actors, hereby forming tourism. As a result, when new actors enter the stage, tourism may take on new forms. New actors could be new types of tourists, entrepreneurial business start-ups or innovative tourism activities that introduce new non-human actors (such as new products, services, hotels, attractions,

infrastructures, websites or technologies etc.). In most destinations it is not often that radically 'new' (human or non-human) actors enter the stage, but occasionally, radically new actors do enter the stage and sometimes, they fundamentally change a destination and what that destination 'is'. In some cases, such new actors become 'the' reason to visit a destination. Sometimes, these new actors do not interact much with existing tourism (e.g. when resorts that have weak ties to the rest of the destination are established). However, when new actors interact with existing tourism they become part of tourism as a hybrid collective and hereby form, or even transform, tourism at the destination.

A new tourism actor in Denver is cannabis that can be legally bought and consumed. Traditionally use, sale and possession of marijuana have been illegal (Marijuana Resource Center, 2015). However, in recent years states have passed various laws making USA a mixture of states with jurisdictions with legalized cannabis, jurisdictions with medical and decriminalization laws, jurisdictions with decriminalized cannabis possession laws, jurisdictions with legal psychoactive medical cannabis, jurisdictions with legal non-psychoactive medical cannabis and jurisdictions maintaining cannabis prohibition (*ibid.*). In 2005, Denver passed a law allowing adults to possess up to one ounce of marijuana (Scott, 2010) and in 2012, Amendment 64, allowing possession, use, production, distribution, and personal cultivation of marijuana was passed in Colorado (U.S. Const., amend. LXIV). On New Year's Day 2014, Colorado retailers began selling recreational marijuana. Many new dispensaries (on forth referred to as cannabis stores) have been set up and at present, there are 384 cannabis stores in Colorado (*ibid.*). Apart from cannabis stores, legislation has also led to the emergence of new products and services such as tours to cannabis growth facilities, glass blowing tours, gourmet cannabis chocolate, vape pens, 'Puff, Pass & Paint' (<http://www.puffpassandprint.com>), cannabis growing schools (<http://thegrowschool.org>), cannabis spas (<http://denverweed.com/spa/>), cannabis cooking classes (<http://highcountrycannabistours.com>) and a cannabis social lounge (<http://www.club64colorado.com>). Although a wide variety of cannabis-related products and services exists, anecdotal evidence suggests that tourists mostly visit cannabis stores and it is suggested that up to 70% of customers in cannabis stores are from out of state (interviews with destination management organization staff). Cannabis stores are thus critical components of cannabis tourism in Denver as they qualify as the

place where visitors, first and foremost, interact with human and non-human cannabis agents.

Traditionally, cannabis tourism has been seen as a part of the wider drug-tourism phenomenon that centres around the usage of drugs “considered to be illegal or illegitimate in either the visited destination or the tourist’s country of origin” (Ureily & Belhassen, 2006:239). Research on drug tourism emphasizes relations between cannabis consumption and leisure activities such as clubbing, backpacking and/or ‘weed’ subcultures (Korf, 2002). However, legalisation of cannabis usage in the United States has been subject to dramatic changes and consequently, “consumption in tourism is driven and influenced by the normalization process of cannabis use in Western societies” (Belhassen, Santos & Uriely, 2007: 304). Due to the novelty of legal cannabis stores in Colorado, not much is known about how tourists interact with this new agent and therefore, it seems imperative to investigate how tourists ‘see’ and make sense of these stores.

Latour (1993) argues that non-human actors empower human actors and enable their agency. In a tourism context, Franklin (2003) contends that tourism objects can have a ‘life of their own’ as well as unpredictable impacts. Accordingly, legal cannabis might both enable agency and have unpredictable effects and the purpose of this article is to discuss the materiality (or more correctly, materialities) of cannabis tourism in Denver as part of hybrid tourism collectives. *Buying* and *consuming* cannabis, when on holiday, are two different things and in this article, we focus on buying cannabis, hereby emphasizing cannabis as a material object on display and for sale in legal cannabis stores. As a consequence, we do not discuss the more private experiences tourists have when they eat/digest/inhale/vaporize cannabis.

Apart from the theoretical lenses introduced above, theorizations of marijuana tourism in general (e.g. Denning, 2014; Belhassen et al., 2007) and in a Dutch context in particular (e.g. Monshouwer, Van Laar & Vollebergh, 2011; MacCoun, 2011) constitute the theoretical framework for this paper. However, marijuana tourism has often been associated with individuals and small groups on the ‘fringes of society’ (e.g. Rojek, 1999; Belhassen et. al., 2007; Scheyvens, 2002; Westerhausen, 2007), hereby neglecting the effects legislation has on normalization and habitualization of cannabis

purchases for tourists. Therefore, this article adds to the existing body of knowledge on cannabis by emphasizing cannabis in a *legal* and *touristic* context.

Methodology

Rooted in a social-constructivist ontological position, the study focuses on how tourists construct reality (or more correctly realities) and make sense of marijuana stores through interactions with both human and non-human actors. Research was conducted during one of the authors' eight months stay in Denver and the research design covers methods such as desk research on the history of cannabis consumption and tourism, participation in two conferences in Colorado focusing on the process of legislation, visits to marijuana growth facilities, observations conducted at cannabis stores, questionnaires distributed through the stores, participation in a marijuana tour, informal conversations with employees and destination managers, netnography and interviews with visitors. Even though data was collected for a period of five months, the results qualify as no more than a 'snapshot' of how visitors viewed cannabis tourism in Denver (Flick, 2004) at this period of time.

Desk research covers both academic literature and non-academic sources such as newspaper coverage, blogs, online and print magazines, promotional literature, marijuana organizations' websites, marijuana forums, online reviews, documentaries etc. Early on during the research process, a rather exploratory questionnaire was distributed through 10 cannabis stores, resulting in 183 questionnaires being returned (14 of which only partially completed). Identifying, visiting and sometimes actively asking questions in various cannabis forums and online review sites, approximately 1,000 online posts and comments were harvested and of these, 177 posts were subjected to qualitative content analysis. The reduction from 1,000 to 177 posts was done because authors of the reviews needed to be identifiable as out-of-state visitors, posts should be no more than 8 months old and posts should address experiences with cannabis stores in the Denver area. Interviewees were contacted at cannabis stores and this, unfortunately, only led to eight in-depth interviews being conducted. Finally, observations were conducted during a cannabis tour as well as at ten cannabis stores where managers consented to this and observations included photos, field-notes and informal conversations, during which the researcher acted as 'observer as participant' (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005).

All data was content analysed hermeneutically, leading to identification and saturation of more and more detailed sub-themes and categories through a process of constant comparison. This process was repeated until no further, relevant sub-themes or categories emerged (Belhassen et al., 2007). Consequently, the findings presented in the following section are condensed from data derived from all the sources of evidence employed during our fieldwork. In the subsequent section, when exemplifying themes by means of data, we predominantly use data from the netnography. This does not mean that the themes originate from only this source of evidence. It simply reflects the fact that the netnographical data are more eloquent than data obtained through e.g. open-ended questionnaires, informal conversations or the interviews.

Findings

The themes covered in this section take the reader through the experience out-of-state visitors have with and in the cannabis stores. The first theme covers what ‘goes on’ before the visit to the store, including tourists’ excitement, anticipation and curiosity. While some tourists pre-plan their visit to a cannabis store, others first become aware of the cannabis stores after they have arrived in Denver - but they all feel excited and curious (and often bring along others for support). The second theme relates to the first impression visitors get when they enter the stores and how the waiting room becomes a critical point of interaction as well as one that challenges the visitors’ pre-conceptions about the experiences they have ‘in store’. The third theme covers the actual service encounters in the store, including the surprise that it is ‘a real store’. In this section particularly the use of props (including menus) and the different performances, roles and scripts visitors become involved in are discussed. The last theme covers the visitors’ overall experience with the stores, and particularly some visitors’ disappointment, as well as their attempts to convert the visit to a more touristic experience - including looking for souvenirs, gazing at the store and taking photos.

Before the visit

Buying marijuana legally in Colorado is a source of bafflement and excitement for out-of-state visitors and several respondents opine that they are more prone to experiment with cannabis while they are on holiday in Denver than they are in other contexts. One visitor summarizes his thoughts on this issue as follows:

“First thing to do is to go to your trusty ol’ smartphone and download an app for finding weed (read that sentence again, then think back 10 years and realize that half the words in said sentence wouldn’t even make sense ... dear God, the future is bright). I chose Weedmaps [...]. It’s a great little app, and it does the job.” (netnography, entry 98)

This visitor points to marijuana use as being so ‘normalized’ that one can download a ‘weed finding app’. The normalization of buying cannabis in Denver is also apparent in the special ‘marijuana sections’ in local newspapers as well as on different websites, smart-phone applications and publications on the issue. All of these sources of information showcase marijuana consumption as an integral part of everyday life in Denver. As an example, during one of the authors’ stay in Denver throughout holiday celebrations (St Patrick’s Day Parade, Cinco de Mayo and Cannabis Cup) some people were smoking on the streets and strong marijuana scents were detected around the marijuana stores near crowded pedestrian areas. Furthermore, on several occasions, both customers and employees were observed entering the cannabis stores while still smoking their vaporizers (i.e. devices used to vaporize the active ingredients of marijuana).

Several researchers (e.g. Peretti-Watel & Lorente, 2004; Belhassen et al., 2007; Westerhausen, 2002; Uriely and Belhassen, 2006) argue that tourists may be interested in experimenting while on holiday. Our participants voice interest in experimenting with marijuana in Denver and some even point to it being a mistake, or even ‘stupid’ not to embrace the unique opportunity to legally buy marijuana when in Denver. One of the visitors wrote about this issue on social media as follows:

“I’ve been hearing a lot about this marijuana, this ‘grass’ that the kids are all talking about. Evidently, it is now legal for recreational purposes in Colorado. Coincidentally, I found myself in Colorado, and I thought it would be irresponsible of me to let such an investigative opportunity pass by.” (netnography, entry 157).

As this visitor argues, although he was ‘coincidentally’ in Colorado, *not* buying marijuana would be ‘irresponsible’. Although many visitors would not buy marijuana in

their home state, doing so in Denver is seen as something completely different. Furthermore, because legalization of cannabis in Denver is something that is rather 'new' for our research participants, they point to feeling "a buzz" and "bafflement" as well as interest in "finding out what it is all about". Uriely and Belhassen's (2006) argue that curiosity can be a powerful travel motivation. The conducted interviews, netnography and questionnaires indicate that *some* visitors see the opportunity to legally buy marijuana as a strong travel motivation, thus echoing Uriely and Belhassen's (2006) argument. Furthermore, Carr (2002) pointed to 'doing what we cannot do at home' as a strong travel motivation. A visitor from New York pointed to Colorado as being a "*must visit*" (netnography, entry 38) because of the opportunity to legally buy marijuana and another visitor pointed to his visit to Colorado being triggered by a "*New Year's resolution to buy cannabis legally in the US*" (netnography, entry 2). Furthermore, several visitors opine that the legality of marijuana stores in Denver made them feel very excited, and one visitor made the following comment online:

"In my excitement after making my first legal purchase ever I left the shop without my flower!" (netnography, entry 5).

This visitor moves on to describe how the bud-tender (i.e. staff selling marijuana) followed her out on the street to hand over the product she had bought, but forgotten, in the store. Consequently, excitement-seeking behavior as identified by Prebensen (2013) seems to characterize many out-of-state visitors' experiences. Furthermore, visitors point to it 'being a big deal' to be able to legally buy marijuana in USA and one visitor addresses this issue as follows:

"I'm an out of stater so it is the coolest thing to be able to walk into a store and finally be able to legally purchase cannabis" (netnography, 58).

While this visitor stresses how 'cool' it is to purchase marijuana legally, other visitors felt somewhat uncomfortable even though they knew that marijuana is legal in Colorado. In line with the arguments made by e.g. Rojek, (1999), Belhassen et. al. (2007), Scheyvens (2002) and Westerhausen (2002), our research shows that some of the visitors felt that purchasing cannabis is a 'somewhat deviant leisure activity', or, as one visitor noted:

“Here is something very interesting about legally buying pot in Denver; you see it’s totally illegal” (netnography, entry 98).

In the waiting room

Normalization (Belhassen et. al., 2007) and ‘habitualization’ (Berger & Luckman, 1966) of buying cannabis is reinforced by the design of cannabis stores and especially the ‘waiting room’. Many waiting areas (i.e. areas where people wait for their turn to enter the store after verification of their age and identification papers) convey images of ‘business as usual’. The waiting areas often contain both promotional literature and posters pointing to benefits of cannabis use, new marijuana products and upcoming marijuana-related events (figure 1 shows a typical waiting area).

Figure 1 can be found in the last part of the paper.

In order to respect the anonymity of visitors, we have not included pictures showing people and their doings while waiting. However, the following description of what goes on in the waiting room that was posted on social media nicely sums up the visitors’ impressions of these waiting rooms:

“When you look around the waiting room there’s lots of stuff to read, and lots of info on the walls to look at. You’ll be sitting with a mix of people from guys in suits to college girls to older couples to even some international customers.” (netnography, entry 128).

Apart from reading material and informational posters, some stores provide complimentary refreshments in the waiting area. Furthermore, these areas allow for dialogues and informal conversations between customers while they wait, but as in a doctor’s waiting room, during our observations, customers rarely socialized with other customers. They did, however, interact intensively with their friends and fellow travellers. The majority of visitors picked up at least one brochure or magazine to read or skim. However, if one had not known what kind of a waiting room one was in and had one not taken a closer look at the posters and literature, the waiting room could have been any ordinary waiting room. Furthermore, the visitors’ behavior was very

similar to what can be observed in e.g. a doctor's waiting room, thus pointing to the design of these waiting rooms strongly supporting normalization and habitualization of waiting. Jurowsky (2009) argues that as more people accept something as part of everyday life, it becomes integrated into social life. The observations point to waiting in cannabis stores' waiting rooms resembling the social life that takes place in all other waiting areas, thus reinforcing both normalization and habitualization of waiting time in this specific context.

In the store

Many visitors expected the experience of buying marijuana in Denver to be an extraordinary ordeal and not at all similar to buying more 'normal' goods and products. As a result, many visitors were 'taken' by the fact that marijuana stores do not differ more from other service-scapes or stores that sell more 'normal' everyday goods, or, as one visitor wrote:

“Maybe it's because I'm from outta town but i was amazed at the recreational marijuana buying experience. This is a real business with real employees but their specialty is cannabis” (netnography, entry 19).

As this visitor argues, he was 'amazed' that the store was a 'real' business with 'real' employees, thus pointing to him having expected something very different. Visitors generally seem to expect experiences in the stores that matched their ideas of an 'illegal' activity as also suggested by Rojek (1999), Belhassen et. al. (2007), Scheyvens (2002) and Westerhausen (2002). However, the stores did not match these expectations and visitors, somewhat ironically, were surprised by the legality and normativity of legal cannabis stores.

Several cannabis stores in the Denver metro area use modern technology such as interactive LED displays, I-pads or tablet computers for both showcasing products and handling orders. As an example, figure 2 shows a changing LED display at one of the stores that, in addition to product descriptions, also showcases special promotions, prices and 'fun facts' about cannabis.

Figure 2 is to be found in the last section of the paper.

On social media, one of the visitors labelled cannabis stores using modern technology “*the Apple store of weed*” (netnography, entry 49), hereby pointing to the similarities between these stores and well-known high-tech stores. Furthermore, the observations identified a widespread use of ‘menus’ in cannabis stores. Many stores present the list of marijuana products and edibles as a ‘menu’ and if a menu was not presented, customers often asked ‘to see the menu’ (figure 3 shows an example of such a menu).

Figure 3 is to be found in the last section of the paper.

A menu is an object strongly associated with restaurants and other places consumers are highly experienced with. When getting a menu, visitors ‘know’ and can base their behavior on the scripts, interactions and practices that are triggered by menus in restaurants, bars etc. In the cannabis stores, the menu helps visitors choose between different marijuana products and helps them deal with how to buy cannabis products by drawing on well-known scripts and practices from restaurant settings. As such, although legally buying marijuana is still a relatively new phenomena in Denver, marijuana stores use physical designs (e.g. waiting rooms) as well as a series of ‘props’ (posters, literature, menus, LED displays etc.) to ‘normalize’ and ‘habitualize’ the buying situation. This, however, leads to visitors being surprised by the normativity of an experience that differs significantly from the expectations they had before entering the store. As an example, one visitor described his feelings when entering a marijuana store as follows:

“...Now, if you have ever visited a state where recreational marijuana is legal and had the chance to visit a dispensary then you know about that weird feeling you get when you go in. That feeling that what you’re doing is somehow “wrong”. On that Friday morning, my first stop was the [name removed] dispensary. ... I pulled open the door and I can’t lie; I was flushed with ... anxiety? Yeah, I’ll call it that. I was almost looking over my shoulder until I

realized; It is completely legal to buy marijuana here. ... Again, while taking out my ID I'm racked with guilt, "this is wrong!!!" I say to myself in my sarcastic internal monolog". (netnography, entry 158)

This visitor points to feeling guilt, showing how norms that guide him at home influence him even though he is away from his home state. Furthermore, another visitor explains her feeling of awkwardness as follows:

"The consumers were men and women in their twenties and thirties, dressed casually, talking and buying like it was de rigueur. By contrast, I am a teetotaler and felt awkward as I walked behind the six or so patrons and checked out the joint, pun intended. My husband and cousin came along to bolster my confidence. We left before we could talk with anyone." (netnography, entry 175).

Awkwardness, as described by this visitor, was also seen very often during the observations. Although the observations do not allow us to differentiate between locals and out of state visitors, the behavior of some customers (such as acting as first time visitors unfamiliar with scripts, physical design of the stores etc. or directly pointing to their being 'visitors' when interacting with staff) strongly indicates at least an over-representation of out of state visitors amongst visitors exhibiting awkwardness. As an example of behavior implying awkwardness, some visitors would enter the store, their body language clearly indicating that they felt uncomfortable and they would very often leave the store quickly if staff did not approach them and strike up a conversation. However, some visitors shared their experience of 'overcoming' anxieties online or as one visitor phrased this:

"As a person coming from out of state I was kind of nervous coming to a dispensary, not knowing what I was going to encounter. But once I walked in there the knowledge that the employees had was amazing, making it comfortable for me to stay there AMAZED at what I was seeing. This place is awesome from the time you step in to the time you leave!" (netnography, entry 119).

Not all stories posted by out of state visitors are as positive as the one above and several first time visitors pointed to their need for special instructions from the bud-

tenders, who unfortunately rarely distinguished between locals (or other more experienced marijuana customers) and visitors with little or no experience with the buying of cannabis in legalized stores. During our observations, when directly asked to, staff often explained the rules and regulations regarding marijuana use to out of state visitors, but unless visitors specifically asked about actual use or effects of a specific cannabis product, they were often not given that sort of information. This could indicate that marijuana use in Colorado has already become so normalized that bud-tenders forget that although purchasing cannabis might be as normal for experienced customers as buying groceries or take-away, this is an extra-ordinary experience for first time visitors. In many situations it even seemed that the bud-tenders transformed something that is a truly extra-ordinary experience for novice customers to an ordinary and potentially disappointing ordeal by treating marijuana consumption as something so 'normal' that it needed no further clarification.

Particularly the survey suggests that only a minority of visitors travelled to Denver 'only' to buy and consume cannabis. Instead, the reasons for going were skiing, visiting friends or simply sightseeing. Some visitors did not even know that it is legal to buy marijuana before they arrived in Denver. Nonetheless, when they found out, the majority of these visitors visited a marijuana store and particularly so if they had already used cannabis back home or during other trips. For example, one experienced cannabis consumer wrote the following:

"I'm in Colorado for Family Thanksgiving. I'm so happy there are recreational use laws here - Staff was fast, efficient, and quite helpful to an obvious newbie who was quite literally a kid in a candy store and distracted by all the choices."
(netnography, entry 8)

This visitor was in Denver because of a family holiday, but he moves on to describe his 'happiness' and how buying marijuana legally made him feel like 'a kid in a candy store'. In accounts such as the one above, for out of state visitors, buying cannabis in Denver very often ends up being a memorable peak experience even when it was not planned in advance.

The non-touristic experience

Bellhassen et al. (2007) suggest that tourists, who experiment with marijuana are often motivated by a quest for authenticity. And yet none of our respondents voiced any interest in visiting places where cannabis is farmed, produced or harvested. Hammersley, Jenkins & Reid (2001) argue that traveling to a cannabis-oriented destination is a way to establish ‘belonging’ to a cannabis-related culture by e.g. participating in cannabis-related tours and events. However, very few respondents had participated in such tours or events and even those who had, showed little interest in finding out how cannabis is grown or produced. Furthermore, the interviewees contacted during a cannabis tour said that they took the tour because the tour ‘was offered at the store’ and they ‘just happened to have a couple of hours to spare’. They described the tour with adjectives such as “*nice*” and “*interesting*”, but nonetheless argued that if the opportunity to take the tour had not ‘come up’ they would not have sought it out themselves. Additionally, the majority of respondents in the survey had not participated in any other marijuana-related activities than visiting cannabis stores and the netnography suggests that the ‘top marijuana attractions’ in the Denver area are the cannabis stores. Despite the fact that visitors predominantly visited cannabis stores and did not exhibit much interest in other cannabis-related activities, many visitors felt that the ‘authentic’ Denver marijuana experience was a disappointment as they had expected something ‘more exciting’ and less mundane. For example, one visitor wrote:

“I had kind of expected to find that, following the legalization of marijuana in Colorado, Boulder's head shop business would merge with the newly created legal pot business, to create a sort of Super Head Shop — where one could purchase both Grateful Dead teddy bear T-shirts and the substances necessary to make those shirts seem cool. I was wrong.

Other than a handful of smoking devices, the [specific store] did not carry any random pot culture accoutrements. No, not even souvenir post cards. (Which, seriously.) Instead, when my associates and I walked in the door, we found a lobby not unlike the one at my dentist's office — leather couches, soothing green-painted walls, a long reception desk. It was almost distressingly boring...” (netnography, entry 171).

This visitor hoped that marijuana stores would sell products that would enable him to express his belonging to a cannabis culture (as also suggested by Hammersley et

al., 2001). However, his excitement faded when he discovered that the marijuana store did not carry any of those products and, instead, this experience became ‘almost distressingly boring’. Even though visitors are aware of the social acceptance and legality of marijuana in Denver, many still associate it with more deviant activities and do not expect to have what they coin an ‘average retail experience’ or as one visitor wrote:

“... Walking through the door, an overwhelming aroma of marijuana and candy greeted me. This was not your behind-the-dumpster drug deal, and the bud-tenders, who were helpful and polite, were far from your average dealers. What started as a “Wow, this is real!” moment transformed into the average retail experience...” (netnography, entry 159).

Apart from being disappointed by the experience turning into an ‘average retail experience’, visitors were also disappointed by the lack of souvenirs in the stores. Many visitors were very interested in buying souvenirs that could ‘validate’ their experiences and their visits to a marijuana store. Few stores sell the kind of souvenirs that visitors would like to buy and the observations suggested that only a few stores offered a very limited selection of clothing and accessories. Figure 4 and 5 show two pictures of a typical souvenir section in a marijuana store.

Figures 4 and 5 can be found in the last section of the paper.

Morgan and Pritchard (2005:29) point to tourists reflexively using souvenirs as “touchstones of memory”, that enable them to (re)create experiences and make them self-aware of their roles as tourists. In this way, souvenirs become objects that mediate experiences in time and space and represent the material cultures of tourism. Souvenirs are mythological, but also very material objects (Gibson, 2014) that visitors use in order to tell the stories of ‘where they’ve been’ and ‘what they’ve done’. When comparing what the cannabis stores offer (or do not offer) in terms of memorabilia and souvenirs to the touristic experiences that would satisfy more novice visitors, the following observation points to some of the fundamental issues:

A woman in her 50ties entered the store with a younger (30ties) female friend. They did not seem particularly interested in purchasing anything. However, when approaching the shelf with books about cannabis, the following dialogue took place:

Older lady: [after browsing through several cannabis books and finding a cookbook] Hey, look at that. This one is a cookbook! [Her friend laughs] This would make a great birthday present for my sister. It's coming up soon and I have no clue what to get her. And look, it even shows you how to grow this stuff [cannabis].

Her friend [surprised]: Does she smoke?

Older lady: Oh no, but she loves to bake. That would be so funny, don't you think?

Her friend: It would definitely make a memorable present.

They both proceeded to look at several books and summoned a staff member to answer their questions. After looking more at two books, the lady decided to purchase the cookbook after all.

During the observational part of the study, we made many observations of visitors who did not purchase any cannabis products. Instead, they sometimes bought books on the history of cannabis, marijuana cookbooks or other marijuana-related literature. Other visitors looked at the literature on sale, browsed through the store, took photos of the cannabis plants and collected informational brochures, but left without buying anything. Furthermore, insofar more inexperienced visitors actually bought cannabis, they seemed to be more interested in edibles (e.g. chocolate bars or cookies with cannabis) than in products to smoke or vaporize. As a result, our study points to a fundamental difference between what out of state visitors are most interested in 'buying' (i.e. a touristic experience of visiting a legalized marijuana stores and validating this experience by means of souvenirs, marijuana-related products and photos) and what the stores are selling (i.e. marijuana in various forms).

Discussion and Conclusion

To sum up, the experience out-of-state visitors have in cannabis stores in Denver relate, on the one hand, to the pleasant surprise of the stores being ‘real and normal stores’. On the other hand, it also relates to disappointment triggered by the normativity of the stores as this normativity transforms what visitors thought would be a truly extraordinary experience to a somewhat mundane, banal and ordinary retail experience. But what does this tell us about tourism in Denver as ‘a hybrid collective in perpetual movement’ or as a network that includes both human and non-human actors and interactions between these actors? Destinations as material geographies are made - and made sense of – by tourists through actions and interactions with other actors. Adler (1989) pinpoints that touristic practices are framed and informed by discourses that provide practical orientations and specify which actions are appropriate in particular places and spaces. What is interesting about tourists’ experiences with cannabis stores in Denver is that tourists struggle to make sense of these stores as different, oftentimes conflicting, scenarios present themselves. Visitors come to these stores with their minds set on experiencing something exotic, extraordinary, exhilarating, thrilling and intoxicating. However, when they enter the stores, they are met by something far more mundane, banal, normal and everyday-like in the form of ‘sterile’ and ‘anonymous’ waiting rooms, waiting silently together with ‘regular’ (experienced) customers, restaurant-like menus, ordinary (or high-tech) retail experiences, a general lack of souvenirs and bud-tenders that make the retail experience as mundane as that of grocery shopping.

To the more inexperienced visitors, the cannabis stores become what Sibley (1988) coined ‘purified’ spaces strongly circumscribed and framed with expectations of customers conforming with certain rules, scripts, actions and performances. But many out-of-state visitors struggle to decode the rules, scripts and performances appropriate in the marijuana stores. This often makes them leave again without interacting with the central material object (the cannabis products) or with the staff. Neumann (1988:24) stated that “tourists are rarely left to draw their own conclusions about objects or places before them”. But when visiting cannabis stores in Denver, out of state visitors find themselves cast into the role of novice (and potentially naïve) customers, who are unable (or at least have major problems) ‘cracking the code’ of how to behave in these stores without staff offering them much guidance. Visitors unable to ‘crack the code’ seem to experience what Edensor (2000:334) calls ‘sensory and social overload’ and

reflexive performances are hindered by “the immanence of experience” and uselessness of well-known and well-rehearsed touristic scripts and roles.

And yet, when visitors enter the cannabis stores, they have succeeded in their quest for authenticity. They experience social reality or, in Goffman’s (1959) terms, they enter the ‘backstage’ (or at least authentic stage) of legalized cannabis consumption where locals buy cannabis in ways very similar to any other retail experience. Nevertheless, many visitors feel uncomfortable and often leave this authentic setting because it does not provide the clear meeting places between tourists and hosts that more traditional touristic front regions do.

The aim of this paper is not to put forward normative theory or claim what cannabis stores should do, sell or ‘be’. Instead, the purpose is to uncover how out-of-state visitors enact and interact with these stores. The key finding is that while the stores sell marijuana as a ‘normal’ physical object, many out-of-state visitors do not visit these stores to interact with this physical object (marijuana) as an object of consumption. Instead, they visit the stores to experience the world of legalized marijuana consumption – without necessarily taking bodily part in the actual consumption of marijuana. Furthermore, those visitors, who are interested in buying cannabis, often end up not doing so because they lack the competencies that regular customers have. The cannabis stores seem to define themselves as stores (i.e. places where cannabis is supplied and sold) and *not* as touristic experience-scapes. But by doing so, they invite tourists into a stage that is authentic, but *not* what visitors had hoped for. As a result, what the visitors experience in these stores is the real, but non-touristic ‘dealing’ of marijuana and marijuana-related products.

So what kind of new tourism actor ‘is’ legalized cannabis consumption as materialized in and by legal cannabis stores in Denver? Our fieldwork suggests that these stores might not be, and do not define themselves as, *tourism* actors per se. Although tourists enact these stores as a central element of Denver as a destination and interact with them by actually visiting and ‘being-in’ them, out-of-state visitors oftentimes end up not being able to relate much to these stores. The primary reason for this is that the stores do not enable touristic performances, nor meet visitors’ expectations. Instead, the stores ‘push’ the visitors towards taking on roles, using

scripts, engaging in performances and unfolding practices that relate to mundane shopping, doctor's appointments, institutionalized waiting and well-scripted restaurant visits. Ironically, the authentic visit to 'real' cannabis stores visitors are looking for often ends up being a disappointment. As legalized marijuana consumption is a rather new phenomenon in the Denver area, it is quite possible that the future will bring with it further differentiation and specialization of marijuana stores. Some stores might target those (experienced and/or local) customers that simply want to buy marijuana and wish for a rather mundane everyday-life retail experience. Other stores might target tourists, who are less interested in actually buying cannabis, but very interested in experiencing and gazing at legalised marijuana consumption. However, at present, the 'real, but non-touristic deal' that marijuana stores offer is rather far from what many visitors want to experience when they visit a cannabis store as part of their stay in Denver. What many visitors want is a visit that does not necessarily entail literally consuming marijuana. Instead they desire a visit that, first and foremost, gives them a chance to experience legalized marijuana consumption as a rather exotic new dimension of the materiality of tourism in Denver.

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Figure 1. Typical waiting area including promotional literature.



Figure 2. Picture series on a changing LED display

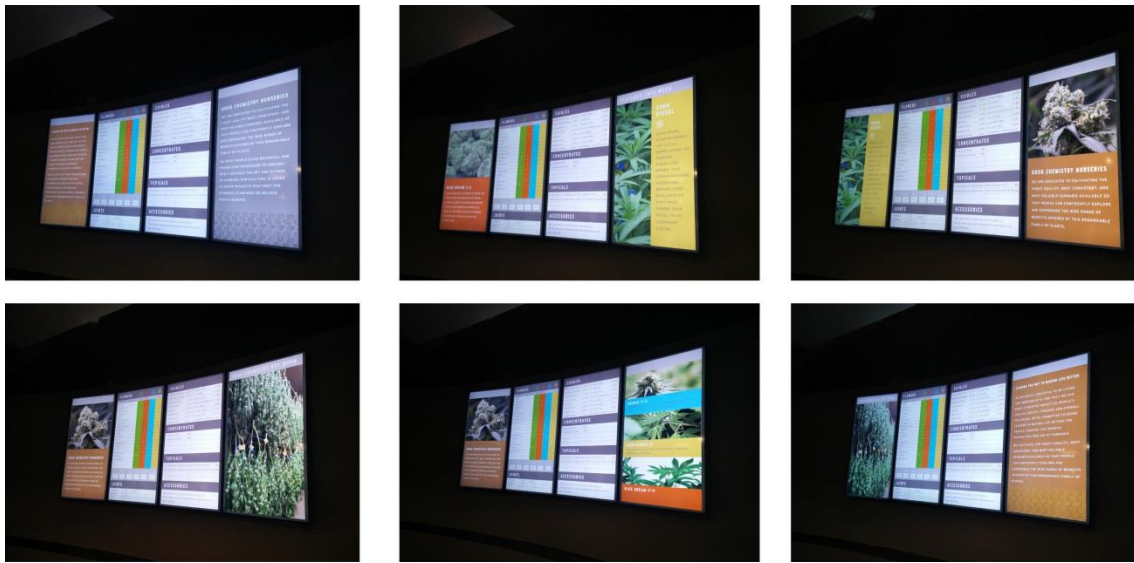


Figure 3. Marijuana menu



Figure 4. Selection of souvenirs I



Figure 5. Selection of souvenirs II

