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The green shift? Narratives of changing cannabis policies and identity-work among Norwegian adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a growing public debate concerning the political regulation of cannabis products, substantiated by a multitude of competing narratives about the effects of various policies. However, little is known about how these ongoing discussions influence the meaning-making of cannabis use within wider contemporary youth cultures. Based on interviews with 80 Norwegian adolescents aged 16–17 years, this study explores narratives of changing cannabis policies and the type of work that these stories do in adolescents' identity-work. The analysis illustrates that the participants relied on several narrative frameworks that were characteristic of the drug political discourse. Interlinked with two contrasting political identities – the progressive and the conservative – the adolescents presented stories of how various regulatory reforms would either increase or decrease levels of cannabis use, as well as discussions of relative drug harms, and how reforms would potentially lead to negative or positive health outcomes. As such, these political narratives not only informed the young people's understandings of cannabis use, but also helped to position them within their broader social, cultural, and political surroundings. The study demonstrates how adolescents make selective use of the drug-political narratives that circulate within contemporary society to negotiate issues of personal identity.

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Introduction

During the past decade, there has been a rapid development in cannabis policies worldwide, with an increasing number of jurisdictions moving towards new legislations, such as decriminalization or legalization of non-medical cannabis use (Csete et al., 2016; Hammond et al., 2020). However, the field of international drug policy is controversial, and there is currently little consensus about the impact of policy change on cannabis use, particularly among adolescents (Blevins et al., 2018; Kotlaja & Carson, 2019; Melchior et al., 2019). This lack of agreement leads to competing political narratives about the effects stemming from various policies, as they offer divergent claims, use different facts, seek different purposes, and deploy different symbolizations, through all of which ordinary citizens must navigate (Miller, 2020). Young people are therefore exposed to multiple, competing narratives about the consequences of various drug policy regimes, and they make decisions, conscious or otherwise, about which aspects of these narratives to appropriate and which to discard (Hammack, 2011).



Parallel to this development, adolescent cannabis use seems to be on the rise in Norway (Bakken, 2018, 2020; Bye & Bretteville-Jensen, 2020) and scholars suggest there is a shift in the cultural context of cannabis use – from being associated with underground subcultures (Sandberg, 2013),

cannabis is increasingly viewed as a mainstream drug (Duff et al., 2012; Hathaway et al., 2016; Seddon, 2020). The role of political narratives within the ongoing drug-policy debates is therefore important, as they contribute to shaping public perceptions about the consequences of various policy formulations (McLaughlin et al., 2019; Soriano et al., 2021), as well as the wider cultural and normative context in which cannabis use is understood (Duff et al., 2012).

In this paper, we explore narratives of changing cannabis policies among a large group of Norwegian adolescents, aged 16–17 years. The aim is to assess how different drug-political regimes are constructed narratively among them, and we do so by examining their various lines of arguments, what sources they rely on and ultimately the type of work that these stories do. As such, the study provides unique insights into the contemporary socio-political and cultural aspects of cannabis use, how such drug-political narratives are embedded in youth cultures and their increasingly global patterns of communication, and ultimately how young people engage with these political narratives to negotiate issues of personal identity.

The cultural complexity of adolescent cannabis use

For decades, the use of cannabis has been associated with revolt, opposition, and subcultures, and linked to a variety of

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social, cultural and symbolic meanings that exceed its immediate intoxicating effects (Becker, 1963; Johnson, 1973; Young, 1971). Sandberg (2013) demonstrate how cannabis use is rooted in a shared complex of rituals, stories and symbols that signal cultural difference from and opposition to mainstream society. This sociocultural context, in which the use of cannabis has been associated with specific musical preferences and subversive political attitudes, has also been applicable to young Norwegian cannabis users (Pedersen, 2009). Thus the potential attractions of cannabis use may lie beyond the drug itself, and can be rather found in its ability to form identities (Duff, 2003; Hammersley et al., 2001).

However, the persistent high levels of adolescent cannabis use, combined with a series of cultural and structural transformations, have led to different explanatory models characterized by a move away from 'deviant' youth subcultures, to something that is now more common (Duff et al., 2012; Hathaway et al., 2016). Accordingly, the normalization thesis argues that drug use has become a normal part of leisure time and has moved from the 'margins' of youth subculture into the mainstream of youth lifestyles and identities (Parker et al., 1995, 1998, 2002). While the normalization thesis has been heavily debated (Pennay & Measham, 2016; Shiner, 2009; Wibberley & Price, 2000), the increasing levels of cannabis use and normative shifts among young Norwegians have however prompted a renewed national interest in this debate (Pedersen et al., 2019).

Accordingly, an increasing proportion of young people have experimented with the use of cannabis in Norway and, in the capital Oslo, the proportion who had used the drug increased by more than 50% in the period 2015–2018 (Bakken, 2018, 2020; Bye & Bretteville-Jensen, 2020). Although young Norwegian cannabis users are still characterized by more psychosocial risk factors than those who refrain from such use (Pedersen et al., 2019), young people's assessment of the relative harmful effects of alcohol and cannabis are changing, and an increasing number of young Norwegians now consider cannabis as a less dangerous drug than alcohol (Burdzovic Andreas & Bretteville-Jensen, 2017; Pedersen & Von Soest, 2015). Recent findings therefore suggest that cannabis use has become more widespread and normalized among adolescents in Norway (Heradstveit et al., 2021), and that there is sizeable support for cannabis legalization among young people (Andreas et al., 2021).

The recent drug-policy debates in Norway, in which the government proposed to de-criminalize the use and possession of drugs, have brought drug policy to the forefront of attention (HOD, 2021), and several leading national news commentators have denoted the current developments in cannabis policies as 'the green shift' (Dagbladet, 2017; NRK, 2019). This political backdrop, which has moved in an arguably less punitive direction (Skjaelaen, 2019), may also affect the various cultural discourses pertaining to adolescent cannabis use, in which different actors now struggle to hegemonize it as either medicine, a dangerous drug or a harmless recreational substance (Månsson & Ekendahl, 2013). For example, the Norwegian drug policy debate has been marked by the increasing importance of representatives of drug users' organizations in roles as 'lay experts' (Pedersen

et al., 2021). The climate for political debate has therefore changed in Norway, in which new voices have become important for expressing narratives of progressive policy alternatives (Larsson, 2021). In addition, the cultural contexts of youth cannabis use and the political narratives involved, extend national borders, as they are embedded in the mediated images and ideas circulating within the wider popular culture (Hathaway et al., 2016; Manning, 2014).

Because of this, the cultural understandings of adolescent cannabis use are increasingly diverse and complex, and they are subject to a range of different influences engendered by contemporary media productions, texts and images (Bilgrei et al., 2021). Current trends in young people's cannabis use and their views of drug policies are therefore not only influenced by local conditions – they are also drawn together by the global communication technologies on which young people spend more time, which may provide new cultural narratives about the use of cannabis. This development necessitates a discussion of the concept of political narratives and how it may affect young people's views and assessments of the current changes to cannabis policies that are taking place.

Political narratives and cannabis-policy

The political debates about cannabis decriminalization in Norway and other western countries (Csete et al., 2016; Hammond et al., 2020), have been accompanied with a renewed debate about the accompanying policy effects, substantiated by a myriad of divergent claims (Miller, 2020). These claims are constantly negotiated and deliberated by the various actors engaged in the policy-making enterprise, as well as the influence of public opinion and the media (Gstrein, 2018; Park & Holody, 2018). The discourse on cannabis policy, and especially the potential consequences of reform, is replete with claims based on different interpretations of the facts, different facts altogether, different concerns and different aspirations (Miller, 2020). These conflicting views are usually expressed in narrative form and used in the creation of persuasive stories within the policy process (Soriano et al., 2021; Stevens & Ritter, 2013).

The concept of political narratives relates to the role narratives play in shaping political attitudes, beliefs, identities, and behaviors, and emphasizes how stories contribute to political communication, cognitive processing of political stimuli, and the experiences of the political world (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Such narratives permeate the political discourse by projecting a desirable or undesirable future – they make a normative point and offer a moral conclusion (Polletta et al., 2011). This constructivist perspective thus places emphasis on the ways in which policy language constructs and represents policy problems, as they have implications for how we think about and justify policies (Lancaster & Ritter, 2014). Stories have an added political potency because they appeal to our emotions, elicit sympathy and mobilize action (Loseke, 2007, 2018), and highlight the dynamics by which newly legitimated stories produce new modes of action and new terrains of contention (Polletta, 2009).

For young people, the issue of political narratives is especially important, as the process of exploring identities occurs primarily in adolescence (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). According to McAdams (2011), identities are formed by drawing on prevailing cultural norms, images, and themes embedded in social life. Such stories therefore provide information, but more significantly, they offer resources for people to construct their own stories and establish social boundaries (Frank, 2010). Importantly, during this life phase, both the audience and sources for such narratives shift from parents to the wider social arena in which adolescents participate (McLean, 2005). In this context, the socially circulating stories about cannabis policies may constitute an illustrative example of the relationships between narratives, identities, culture, and politics – as they can be used to form stories of the self, and contribute to make sense of our biographical particulars (Loseke, 2018).

With this backdrop, the aim in this study is to identify and explore narratives of changing cannabis policies as expressed by a large group of young Norwegians, both with and without experience of cannabis use. In doing so, we focus on their various lines of arguments, what sources they rely on and ultimately the type of work that these stories do. The study thereby helps expand upon and provide new understandings of how cannabis policy narratives circulate among young people, how they are retold and reformulated within local contexts, and how adolescents engage with these political narratives to negotiate issues of personal identity.

Methods

The study draws on data from qualitative interviews with 80 Norwegian adolescents aged 16–17 years. Approximately half of the sample were boys and the interviews were conducted as part of the large longitudinal multi-method youth study, MyLife (for more information about the MyLife-study, see Brunborg et al., 2019). Participants were recruited from six different urban and rural schools in Norway in 2015, when they were aged 12–13 years, and have since been interviewed in four waves. For the current study, we rely on data elicited from the fourth wave of interviews, conducted in 2019, when the participants attended their first year of high school. During this wave, the students were increasingly developing their identities in line with new influences and social environments, and 20 of them recounted own experiences of cannabis use.

The individual interviews were conducted by the authors and took place at the school premises, nearby cafes, or libraries, after personal appointments had been made with the participants. We followed a pre-defined guide that focused on various aspects of their adolescent lives, including socialization with peers, school, parental relations, leisure activities, social media use, and views and experiences with alcohol, tobacco, and other illicit drugs. In addition, all adolescents were asked to reflect on possible positive and/or negative consequences of cannabis policy reform, and their views on current and possible future legislation. Although we followed a pre-defined guide, the interviews were adapted to each of

the adolescents, in line with our overall explorative and reflexive approach towards the question under study.

The interviews commonly lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. We used digital audio recorders and the interviews were later transcribed and imported into the qualitative research software, HyperResearch. In addition, we wrote field notes after each interview that helped provide context, such as individual characteristics and appearance of the interviewees. The transcripts were thematically coded, reflecting the initial interview guide, as well as several sub-codes related to the adolescents' stories. We made several passes over the coded material to ensure sound interpretation of the data. For this specific article, we made especial use of codes related to cannabis, such as 'own experience with cannabis,' 'cannabis policy,' and 'risk perceptions.' When analyzing the data, we found that the adolescents relied on distinct political narratives, and we first identified and grouped the various cannabis-policy narratives that occurred in the interviews. In the further analysis, we examined the similarities and differences within these stories and found that they were based on overlapping themes, although they had different conclusions. As such, the binary representations of cannabis policies allowed for greater sensitivity towards the circulation of such political narratives among the adolescents. We emphasized their narrative evaluations and how they used these political plots to locate themselves within the broader socio-political culture.

We obtained written, informed consent from the adolescents and the study received approval by the Norwegian Data Inspectorate (reference no.: 15/01495) after ethical evaluation by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (reference no.: 2016/137).

Results

The analysis illustrates how the adolescents relied on conflicting narratives of cannabis policy reform, both in support and opposition to 'the green shift.' These opinions were expressed through two main themes: The first involved stories of how policy reforms would either increase or decrease levels of cannabis use. The second was concerned with discussions of relative drug-related harms, and how reforms would potentially lead to negative or positive health outcomes. These representations reflected the current cannabis-political discourse, however, the adolescents also made selective use of these political narratives to negotiate issues of personal identity. Thus, we argue that the narratives not only informed the adolescents' understandings of cannabis use, but also were 'doing work' to help position them within their social, cultural, and political surroundings. The way adolescents make use of these competing narratives aligns with what we understand as two contrasting political identities – the progressive and the traditional.

Changing levels of cannabis use

The adolescents' reactions to questions about cannabis policy were usually stories that concerned changing levels of

cannabis use. This topic was not surprising, as it usually forms the focal point for most debates on cannabis policy. It was therefore a narrative framework readily available to the adolescents and they relied on stories that stressed the potential for increased cannabis use resulting from drug policies. However, these political narratives covered both sides of the political spectrum and they were substantiated by different claims.

Vanessa, a top student at her urban school, was one of the adolescents who relied on narratives of cannabis reform. During the interview, she did not recount any experience of the use of cannabis, or any other drugs. Rather, she was pre-occupied with sports and schoolwork, and aspired a position at an environmental program at an elite university. Vanessa occurred future oriented and talked about future goals, such as backpacking and experiencing the world. She had no interest in attending parties, unlike many of her peers. However, when asked about cannabis policies, she replied that she had: 'heard about places where it's allowed, and it actually declined [cannabis use], because it's not cool to do things that are legal.' Vanessa's story thereby aligned with a progressive policy argument, in which she portrayed criminalization as a driver for increased cannabis use and suggested that a different political regime would tend to reduce levels of use. This progressive position aligned with her broader self-presentation as future oriented, and with her 'green' and aspirational identity project.

Located in a rural part of Norway, Gina, also an aspiring 'top girl' (Vaadal & Ravn, 2021), distinguished herself from the local peers, referring derogatory to her former, less ambitious friends as 'stupid.' In contrast to them, Gina was eager to move to the city and study law. She expressed: 'If cannabis had been legal, I don't think people would see it as cool anymore, you know. It wouldn't be as bad-ass.' Gina's story thus followed the same progressive line of reasoning as Vanessa, in which the popularity of cannabis use was explained by its illicit nature, contributing to a distinct symbolic appeal. Gina's progressive stand can also be seen as a sort of boundary-work, in which she positioned herself in contrast to the local and traditional culture. The derogative description of her former peers also illustrates the emotional involvement in her identity-project, in which narratives that opposed cannabis reform was illustrative for the rural culture she wanted to distance herself from.

Cecilie, an upper middle-class girl from a larger city, expressed a similar political narrative:

If cannabis were legal, there would be less people using, because the fact that it's illegal, makes it more attractive. And it's not like people are dying from smoking weed. So, it wouldn't be the worst thing to legalize, but there should be an age limit, I don't want thirteen- or fourteen-year-olds to go around smoking.

Although Cecilie's narrative followed a similar plot as Gina and Vanessa, her story was subtly entangled with a different identity-project. Unlike them, Cecilie was part of a social milieu in which cannabis use was relatively widespread and accepted. The political narrative she presented was therefore embedded within an urban and progressive youth culture, in which positive views on drug-policy reform was part of the

continuum. She also hinted towards an exaggerated focus on cannabis harms, by stating that people were not 'dying from smoking weed.' This was despite her own propensity to use cannabis, which she described as having no desire for, but she appeared confident with her desistance, hinting towards her social position as one of the 'popular' girls at school – she had good grades, a cool boyfriend, and appeared to be culturally 'in the know' (Thornton, 1995). Cecilie's cannabis political views was part of this cultural capital and helped contribute to her hip and progressive identity. By supporting political reform, she positioned herself as openminded and in tune with wider progressive youth norms.

Narratives that covered the opposite side of the political spectrum highlighted similar effects, however, the plot focused on increasing levels of cannabis use as a result of reform. As Johanne argued, potential changes to cannabis policies would only lead to 'an increasing number of users' and she therefore suggested maintaining the current regulations. During the interview, Johanne described a close relationship with her family, and emphasized stability and belonging when speaking of future aspirations. She aimed for a stable job within the local healthcare institution and wanted to settle down close to her childhood home. As such, Johanne's identity-work was concerned with more conservative values, upholding the traditions within her local community, which was also reflected in her view on cannabis policy.

Similarly, Nina had recently moved from the suburbs to attend high school in a nearby city. She struggled to find her place in the new environment and told that she missed her safe surroundings and old friends. However, she was conscientious and wanted to succeed at school. She also described that her mum was: 'worried all the time and quite strict,' especially when it came to drugs. Nina did not want to oppose her parents and seemingly adopted their views on cannabis policies:

Many people say that cannabis should be legalized and stuff, referring to the US and whatnot (...) But it's dangerous. They shouldn't do anything with the laws. People would probably use it a lot more and more people would be exposed to it. So, I think that, for the generation to come, it would probably have made a difference. I grew up with it being very dangerous and sort of 'stay away.'

Nina focused on the potential negative consequences of policy-change and highlighted the harms from cannabis use. She also hinted at a change in the normative climate if it were to happen and argued for the importance of policies to communicate such risks. Nina thus adopted the political narratives she grew up with, in which cannabis was deemed as 'dangerous,' thus adding to her responsible and conscientious identity. Similarly, Egil argued that 'young people will think that it's not that dangerous and probably try it,' thereby repeating a political narrative focused on the alleged deterrent effect of drug policies.

Interestingly, narratives concerning the changing levels of cannabis use were prominent among adolescents who relied on stories from both sides of the political spectrum. The similarities and differences within these stories were based on overlapping themes, although they had different conclusions. The narratives used to support political change blamed

criminalization for increasing cannabis use, while the more conservative stories emphasized the alleged deterrent effect of penalization and argued that changes to policy would lead to increasing use. As such, these stories not only echoed the wider political discourse (Room et al., 2010; Tieberghien, 2014), but also reflected the adolescent's identity-work. Those in favor of drug-policy reform appeared more progressively oriented, emphasizing future ambitions, in which their drug political narratives were used to convey cultural and political capital, and to position themselves in line with contemporary youth culture. These stories were evident among those who lived in urban cities, where cannabis use was relatively widespread, but they were also used by those in rural areas to symbolize distance to prevailing norms within their local communities. This sort of boundary-work was an effective way of negotiating identities in contrast to established sociopolitical patterns. On the other hand, those who opposed new regulations appeared more traditionally oriented, geared towards local belonging, and maintaining 'things as they were.' The narratives of political reform were used to substantiate a more conservative identity, developed in interaction with their local communities, schools or parents, and was entangled in a sort of cultural resistance, symbolizing distance towards centralized political power.

Relative harms

Another main political narrative presented by the adolescents was related to the relative harmful effects from alcohol- and cannabis use. Within these stories, they compared harms from the two drugs, although they were attributed unequal weight. Those who relied on narratives of political reform usually upheld the negative consequences of alcohol use, while those who were critical relied on narratives that encompassed the positive effects of alcohol use and denoted the negative effects of cannabis use as more prominent.

Anett was a representative of those who supported changes in cannabis policy. During the interview, she described herself as an outsider and one who did not fit in with the conformist lifestyle that characterized 'the other square students [at her school].' She wore a large hoody and deliberately refrained from using makeup, which substantiated her oppositional and rebellious attitude. Anett was also one of the adolescents who had experimented with the use of cannabis. When asked about her experiences with the drug, she eagerly replied:

It makes me feel warm inside. Everything is a lot more fun and I get a laugh out of anything. That's why I really can't understand that it's illegal. Alcohol should be illegal instead, it's a lot more dangerous. Nobody has ever died from smoking weed, that's scientifically proven. But there's a lot of people dying from alcohol use. I really wish that the politicians could see the same thing. Weed is just natural. It's a plant, you know, from Mother Nature. That's not the case with alcohol, it's poison that kills your braincells. It makes you do stupid stuff, but I promise, if you smoke weed, all you want to do is eat chips and listen to music.

Anett clearly had strong opinions about cannabis policy and, unsolicited, she presented a political narrative that advocated regulatory changes. At the same time, her story also

revealed several distinct narratives about cannabis use. First, the effect of the drug was presented as harmless, causing her to feel warm and giggly. Second, cannabis was framed as green, organic, and stemming from Mother Nature. Finally, alcohol was presented as the binary opposite – it was poisonous and made people do harmful things. As such, her story leaned on several drug-political narratives and they were also entangled with subtle references to that of cannabis culture (Sandberg, 2013). Anett thereby positioned herself in contrast to her 'square' peers – she avoided their 'dangerous' drinking practices, but rather relied on 'scientifically proven' narratives that framed cannabis use as less harmful. This narrative boundary-work helped position her identity in opposition to the traditional and conservative values she saw as illustrative of her hometown.

Similarly, Rasmus had quite extensive experiences with the use of cannabis. During the interview, he carefully explained how he prepared hash-brownies for his friends and described the sensations as 'a good feeling in the legs, almost as if they're gone.' Similar to Anett, he had strong opinions about cannabis policy and told that he would 'probably vote for those who want to legalize.' Rasmus explained:

I understand that people are worried about weed because it can be dangerous. It can be mixed with everything, you know. But if it had been legal, we would have coffee shops where they sold cannabis – like the proper stuff. And there would have been proper information. The scary thing now is that you don't know the THC levels or whether it's mixed with this or that. If it had been legalized, it would have been a lot safer.

In the above quote, Rasmus blamed criminalization for the harms caused by cannabis use. According to him, a regulated market would provide increased control and more information to users. The story he presented was progressive, while also entangled in the cannabis culture, arguing that cannabis use had 'positive effects.' On the other hand, he described his peers' drinking practices as 'silly,' thereby positioning himself as culturally different and in opposition to traditional youth norms.

Gaute, an upper-middle class and straight A-student, relied on similar narratives in support of cannabis decriminalization. However, his identity-project differed drastically from Anett and Rasmus'. In contrast to their references to cannabis culture, Gaute's political sources seemed to be more informed by progressive branches within the political spectrum. He presented himself as an active athlete, with high ambitions, and refrained from drinking alcohol and smoking cannabis. Still, when asked about his thoughts on the harms from various drugs, he replied that: 'alcohol is the most dangerous, and I think weed is the least.' Gaute elaborated further:

I think it's silly that sugar and alcohol is legal. Weed is not as dangerous as alcohol, so if we were to start regulating anything, it should be alcohol. Just look at the effects, if you smoke weed, you'll just get calm, but if you drink alcohol, you'll get aggressive and start breaking stuff, vandalize things and beat people up. To me, weed is clearly a better alternative.

Stressing the relative harms, Gaute presented vivid narratives to convey his position: cannabis made people calm, while alcohol caused aggression and violence. The story he presented was, however, without any first-hand experience of

the use of cannabis and he said that he had ‘read articles from abroad, watched the news and seen stuff on social media’ that claimed that cannabis was ‘not that dangerous.’ From these sources of information, Gaute adopted a narrative repertoire that added to his enlightened and health-oriented identity. Within the elite-school he attended, such cannabis-political views clearly had cultural value.

However, not all narratives presented by the adolescents followed the path towards a less punitive cannabis policy. Several were also highly skeptical about change and relied on narratives that stressed the harms stemming from cannabis use. These stories were usually presented by adolescents that favored the use of alcohol and who grew up in milieus where cannabis was distant, in which they reproduced local stories of ‘what people from here do’ (Ravn, 2021). This was evident in the interview with Lea. For her, alcohol involved something positive and argued that she had: ‘never experienced anything bad with alcohol, it’s just fun.’ However, when asked about potential changes to cannabis policies, she replied:

I don’t think that’s a good thing. I think it’s absolutely unnecessary. Maybe you can say the same thing about alcohol, I don’t know. But at least I feel that, with alcohol, most people use it just to enjoy themselves, while with cannabis, that’s something you actually get addicted to.

Lea argued that the addictive potential of alcohol and cannabis use differed, and the latter was presented as more prominent. While she acknowledged the negative risks of alcohol use to some extent, her political narrative still maintained the positive effects involved in drinking and argued that the consequences of cannabis use were more severe. This story can also be seen as an important part of Lea’s identity-work, in which she retold local stories of belonging, where cannabis had no presence. The narrative highlighted the accepted norms of alcohol use within her wider sociocultural environment, as well as its positive role within her social life.

Within these narratives, the addictive potential and accompanying health risks involved in cannabis use served as an important plot and helped sustain cultural boundaries that encompassed more accepted and established alcohol practices. Brita drew such a boundary towards the use of illicit drugs and described those using cannabis as ‘people with problems.’ Within this narrative, she emphasized the health risks involved:

I’ve also seen videos that say alcohol is more dangerous than weed, but I’m not really persuaded. In my head, it’s like: ‘no, drugs are deadly’ (...) So, there’s a reason why it’s illegal and I don’t think that should be changed. It can lead to long-term health consequences and brain damage and things like that.

Brita was clearly informed about the different narratives concerning cannabis policies and referred to social media content that claimed that alcohol was more harmful than cannabis. However, she was not convinced, and retained a narrative that upheld the negative consequences of cannabis use. The conflicting messages she encountered provided, however, an illustrative example of the various political

narratives that circulated among the adolescents. Torleif expressed similarly:

It’s just something negative really. I’ve seen a lot of things, for example that cannabis has been legalized some places, and I’m thinking: what will happen to them after they’ve been exposed to cannabis? They want more. They get addicted and it just leads to a worse life.

Torleif’s story was embedded with his negative views on cannabis use. According to him, it was more commonly used by youth who lived ‘in apartments with lower standards of living.’ Such housing conditions could cause ‘people to get depressed, and more easily resort to drugs.’ For his own part, Torleif lived in a house on the countryside and dreamed of becoming a doctor. The reformist views on cannabis policy did not fit with his identity-project, and he rather relied on political narratives that stressed the addictive and harmful potential of cannabis use.

The adolescent’s discussions of relative drug harms illustrate the contested narrative landscape of cannabis policies. Within this steady flow of information, there was competition for political dominance (Miller, 2020), through which actors proffered the likely consequences of future policies (McLaughlin et al., 2019). For the young people, these competing policy implications made it seemingly necessary to simplify and rely on the emotional carriage involved. This implied assessing its normative implications and how it matched their overall stories of themselves. The narratives of relative drug harms were employed to illustrate subcultural authenticity among adolescents who were affiliated with the cannabis culture. Within these stories, alcohol was presented as harmful, while the positive properties of cannabis use were highlighted. Importantly, similar stories were presented by youth who positioned themselves as politically progressive and were part of milieus where such views had cultural value. On the other hand, those who opposed reform, relied on narratives that upheld the positive aspects of alcohol use and denoted cannabis as dangerous and addictive. These stories were used to display more conservative values, embedded in local traditions where cannabis had little or no cultural value.

Discussion

This paper illustrates the socially circulating narratives of changing cannabis policies among a large group of Norwegian adolescents. Based on in-depth interviews with 80 young Norwegians, aged 16-17 years, the analysis demonstrates how stories of various cannabis policies were articulated through available political narratives that projected the consequences of various policy regimes, both positive and negative. These included stories of how policy reforms would either increase or decrease levels of cannabis use, as well as discussions of relative drug harms, and how reforms would potentially lead to negative or positive health outcomes. As such, the adolescents relied on the narrative frameworks that were already available to them, and the study shows how these stories were repeated, modified, challenged, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences.

Although fragmented, the stories of cannabis policies helped convey political plots that matched the adolescents' sense of identity and contributed to their presentation of self. Narratives of changing cannabis policies therefore exist through widely available means of communication; however, they offer divergent claims, use different facts, seek different purposes, and deploy different symbolizations (Miller, 2020). Young people therefore orient themselves in the endless flow of available information, and they do so by borrowing more or less fragmented narratives that fit with their overall stories about themselves, their experiences and aspirations.

The study of young people's policy narratives further highlights how the public discourse about cannabis use has shifted, due to current trends in the global news media, social media and advertising (Park & Holody, 2018). Parallel to the legislative developments, the cannabis-related information that flows throughout various media sources seems to shape public attitudes towards cannabis policy reform (Felson et al., 2019; Lewis & Sznitman, 2019). The political narratives that constitute the cannabis-policy discourse therefore help construct models of the political world, conveyed through the narrative form (Loseke, 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2019). However, political narratives rarely tell the entire story in full (Polletta, 2009). The various socially circulating stories about cannabis policies, both positive and negative, must therefore be viewed as social artefacts, with their production continually being influenced by the social circumstances in which they are created, modified and challenged (Loseke, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Accordingly, the young people in this study pieced together their own stories by rejecting some, and by modifying fragments from others (Loseke, 2018), resulting in political narratives that were based on, and mediated through, increasingly fragmented sources.

This was evident in the adolescents' use of the existing narrative frameworks that were available to them. While many had no clear opinion on issues of cannabis policy, they still relied on the narratives they encountered in social life to present moral evaluations and solutions (McAdams, 2011). According to Loseke (2018), the narrative form in such types of political communication is important, as it is a vehicle for meaning-making in public moral arguments. While the discourse of cannabis policies is replete with 'white noise' and divergent claims (Miller, 2020; Oldfield et al., 2021), it is accompanied by increasing belief in the importance of emotion (Loseke, 2018, p. 2). This highlights the value of political narratives in the experiences of the political world, because they make a normative point and they do so by integrating descriptions, explanations, and evaluations, that in turn offer a moral conclusion (Polletta et al., 2011). As such, narratives 'does not distinguish fact from value, objectivity from subjectivity, logic from emotion; narrative truth is that which reflects the world as cognitively, emotionally, and morally experienced' (Loseke, 2018, p. 2). The adolescents' illustrations and interpretations of the political world were therefore embedded in narratives that appealed to their morality and sense of identity, in which they relied on fragmented and disparate facts to construct lines of reasoning and to locate themselves within the broader socio-political culture (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). Put simply, they navigated the

stream of available political narratives and drew on those that they considered to be relevant.

The current study thus provides added insight into the role of political narratives, their contested circulation and how they are utilized among young people. This form of narrative transportation (McLaughlin & Velez, 2019), in which the adolescents relied on fragmented and preassembled narratives about cannabis policies, has particular importance for this age group, as the sources for such narratives usually shift to the wider social arena in which they participate (McLean, 2005). Accordingly, they were subject to an increasing amount of competing narratives (Hammack, 2011), and they drew on the many narratives they encountered to construct a sense of their own identity (McAdams, 2011). However, such stories of the self were constrained and constructed in concert with their wider cultural and societal identification (McLean, 2008), and they were evaluated by different means. The political narratives that the adolescents in this study relied on therefore illustrate the contested, fragmented, and varying stories of cannabis policy that circulate within contemporary society. These, however, only became meaningful to the extent that they evoked some larger narrative about the adolescents themselves.

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