

# Cannabis festivals and their attendees in four European cities with different national cannabis policies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to: describe and contextualize the aims and distinctive and common characteristics of cannabis festivals in countries with different cannabis policies; assess characteristics of participants; identify reasons to attend cannabis festivals; explore to which extent cannabis festivals contribute to the social and cultural acceptance of cannabis, as perceived by attendees.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The approach incorporates three methods of data collection in the research design; quantitative research among 1,355 participants, participant observation and interviews with the organizers.

**Findings** – Cannabis festivals in Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome and Athens have common features but also maintain and reproduce local, social and cultural characteristics. Cannabis festivals, as well as their attendees, represent heterogeneous categories. The style of the festival – music festival or march combined with music – affects the main reason for attendance by the participants. In cannabis festivals more similar to music festivals the majority of the respondents attended for entertainment while at the cannabis festivals in the form of a march combined with music the majority attended for protest. Furthermore, increasing age, residency and the high frequency of cannabis use are factors that led the participants to attend for protest.

**Originality/value** – The research on cannabis festivals is limited. This paper not only explores the aims of cannabis festivals in four capital cities of Europe and the characteristics of their attendees including motivations, but also offers interesting insights for understanding the ways in which political and social constructions like cannabis festivals shape attitudes, perception and behaviors around cannabis use.

**Keywords** Cannabis, Cannabis policy, Cannabis events, Cannabis festivals

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Cannabis festivals represent a category of special events in an era where cannabis legalization is gaining momentum. Particularly in Europe, cannabis festivals are organized in many countries by civic organizations who aim to intervene in the politics regarding cannabis legalization. The organizers aim to protest against the current drug laws and cannabis policies and at the same time to celebrate cannabis culture. In this paper, cannabis festivals and their participants are explored in four European capital cities: Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and Berlin (Germany), Rome (Italy) and Athens (Greece). The four European countries selected for this study represent maximum variation in national cannabis policy, on a continuum from relatively liberal to punitive, as well as geographical spread across Europe (North and South).

Cannabis festival is a term that is being used in a variety of contexts, ranging from political protests against cannabis prohibition to commercial fairs dominated by



entrepreneurs in the cannabis industry. Recently, cannabis-related commercial events tend to be named as “cannabis expositions.” In the current study, cannabis festivals are defined as “social gatherings organized by civic society movements, where people congregate to oppose cannabis prohibition and advocate cannabis law reform” (Skliamis and Korf, 2018).

Cannabis festivals can be understood as a representation of a wider social phenomenon. Festivals are among the fastest growing types of events in the world and are considered important cultural practices (Quinn, 2005; Rouba, 2012). Festivals range from small street fairs to extravagant events (Wynn and Yetis-Bayraktar, 2016) and affect societies in economic, political and socio-cultural ways (Arcodia and Whitford, 2007). Festivals can be considered a “link between culture and politics,” and they provide a vehicle through which people can advocate or contest certain notions of identity and ideology (Smith, 1995). On the other hand, festivals are being used as commodities by entertainment industries (Jeong and Santos, 2004), and are vulnerable to overcommercialization (Rogers and Anastasiadou, 2011). Variation in aims, characteristics and context may explain why festivals are often studied individually (Rouba, 2012).

Cannabis festivals in different countries share the aim of decriminalization or legalization and may have other common features. The objective of the current study was: to describe and contextualize the aims and distinctive and common characteristics of cannabis festivals in countries with different cannabis policies; assess characteristics of participants; identify reasons to attend cannabis festivals; explore the potential contribution of cannabis festivals to the social and cultural acceptance of cannabis, as perceived by attendees.

#### *Variation in cannabis policies and sentencing practices*

The countries selected for this study represent the maximum variation in national cannabis policy within Europe, on a continuum from relatively liberal to punitive, as well as being geographical spread across Europe (North and South). In terms of national cannabis policy, variation referred to: scheduling of cannabis; legal status of use and possession of cannabis; difference in sentencing practices.

The Netherlands has probably the most liberal cannabis policy at the consumer level in the EU. Cannabis is listed in Schedule II (soft drugs). Sentences for acts involving substances listed in Schedule I (hard drugs) of the Opium Act are more severe than for those listed in Schedule II. Although cannabis is officially an illicit drug, the Dutch retail cannabis market has uniquely been decriminalized under the policy of “toleration” via so-called coffeeshops where adults (18 years or older) can buy and smoke cannabis (Korf *et al.*, 2011; Wouters, 2013). On the other hand, cannabis supply to coffeeshops has not been decriminalized and every year thousands of cannabis growers are arrested (Korf, 2011). In Germany, cannabis was placed in Schedule I of the *Betäubungsmittelgesetz* (Narcotic Act) together with other “non-marketable narcotics” such as heroin for decades. However, cannabis was transferred to Schedule III (marketable narcotic drugs available on special prescription) and thereby placed in the same schedule as methadone, for example. In Italy, since 2014, law 79/2014 listed cannabis in Schedule II (less dangerous drugs). In Greece, on June 29, 2017 cannabis was transferred to Schedule II (drugs eligible for prescription). However, at the time of our research, cannabis was still in Schedule I (all narcotics not eligible for prescription) and will be discussed as such unless otherwise specified.

Cannabis consumption is not subject to penalties in the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, while Greek drug laws allows for incarceration. Possession of cannabis for personal use is subject to a range of sanctions in the national drug laws of EU countries with little consistency between countries in the limits they set (EMCDDA, 2017a). Although according to the national drug laws, possession of illicit drugs is an offense, possession of a defined small amount of cannabis for personal use (up to 5 grams in the Netherlands; 6 grams or more in Germany, e.g., 15 grams in the state of Berlin; 1.5 grams in Italy) is commonly not

prosecuted or is subject to administrative sanctions. Alternatively, the Greek drug law (4139/2013) does not make a distinction between possession and use, and possession of cannabis for personal use is considered an offense. Individuals found to be using or possessing small quantities of cannabis for personal use (quantity not defined by the law) could face a prison sentence of up to five months.

Finally, regarding cannabis supply, a recent study reported strong variation in sentencing practices across EU countries. According to a survey of national experts (EMCDDA, 2017b), the expected median sentences for the supply of cannabis resin varied within the EU from 0 to 10 years for 1 kg, and from 0 to 12 years for 10 kg. Expected median sentences are lowest in the Netherlands and highest in Greece, while Germany takes an intermediate position. Meanwhile, in Italy expected sentences are higher than in Germany but lower than in Greece.

In the next sections, we first give an overview of the qualitative and quantitative methods applied in the present study. Subsequently, from participant observation and interviews with the local organizers, we describe the four cannabis festivals, followed by the results from the survey.

## Methods

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used. To capture the distinctive and common characteristics of the four cannabis festivals, semi-structured in-depth interviews with the organizers were conducted. Interviews were guided by a set of questions aimed at understanding the philosophy, aims, policies and practices of the festivals and also capturing the distinctive characteristics. The local organizers were contacted in the weeks before the festivals for a preliminary contact in order to collect more information about the festival, and to arrange an interview after the festival. This interview was conducted about one or two weeks after the festival, collecting more details about the background, aim, organizational structure, characteristics of the festival and their evaluation on the festival. One of the interviews was held at the organization's office (Cannabis Liberation Day) and the others via Skype. Interviews lasted between one and three hours. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

At all the festivals, the first author performed participant observations from start to finish; in Amsterdam together with four field assistants (each one in different location of the festival, collectively covering the whole festival); in Berlin with one field assistant (from start to finish); in Athens with one field assistant (from start to finish in both days) and in Rome also with one field assistant (from start to finish). Observations were loosely structured around the following pre-defined themes: characteristics of the festival site; general atmosphere; police presence; and participants' demographic profile (age, gender and ethnicity), behavior and substance use. On the day after the festival, the observations were entered into the computer, and in subsequent days observations were completed with additional input from the field assistants and photos acquired at the festival or that could be found online.

A survey was also conducted among a convenience sample of participants at these four festivals, using a one-page custom-designed questionnaire. To approximate representativeness, with a small interview team (the same that performed the qualitative observations), taking into account gender and age distribution as much as possible, respondents were approached at various areas of the festivals (i.e. music stage, food area, market area, park and sound-systems area). The purpose of the survey was explained, the respondents' anonymity was ensured, and they verbally consented to participation. The questionnaires were in Dutch and English in Amsterdam, in German and English in Berlin, in Italian and English in Rome and in Greek and English in Athens. The questionnaire contains five items about demographic characteristics (gender, age, place of

birth and residence), three items about cannabis use, one question concerning reasons for attending the festival (protest/activism, entertainment/leisure, to meet people/socialize; to use cannabis; curiosity; and other/do not know/do not want to say), and last but not least two questions about social and cultural acceptance (Do you think that this cannabis festival affects the cultural and social acceptance of cannabis?; Would you let your colleagues/fellow students know that you attended the festival?).

Completing the questionnaire took 2–3 min. All data were processed with SPSS 24.0. Continuous variables were analyzed using ANOVA, and categorical and nominal variables were analyzed with  $\chi^2$  tests. Daily cannabis use was defined as “ $\geq 20$  days” in the past month. Non-daily cannabis use includes “not last month” and “never a user.” The variable “residency” was created by combining age, country of birth, age at arrival in the country of study (the Netherlands or Germany), and place of residence, leading to the formation of four categories: locals: persons born or living  $\geq 5$  years in the respective country (the Netherlands/Germany/Italy/Greece) and a resident of the respective city (Amsterdam/Berlin/Rome/Athens); non-locals: persons born or living  $\geq 5$  years in the respective country and resident of this country but not of the respective city; expats: persons not born or not living in the respective country for  $< 5$  years[1]; tourists: persons not born nor living in the respective country. A significance level of 0.05 was used for all the analyses and only significant results have been reported.

## Results

### *Four European cannabis festivals*

Cannabis festivals organized in Europe often take place in May, as part of the Global Marijuana March (GMM), an annual event held at different locations across the world that may include marches, meetings, rallies, festivals and educational outreach. The festivals in this study took place during weekends in Summer 2016 (Cannabis Bevrijdingsdag in Amsterdam; Hanfparade in Berlin) and May 2017 (Million Marijuana March in Rome; Athens Cannabis Protestival in Athens). All of these festivals participate in the worldwide GMM celebrations and demonstrations, and had similarities in aim, basic characteristics and organizational structure. According to local organizers, the festivals have an activist identity, aim to end cannabis prohibition, support cannabis policy reform and simultaneously celebrate cannabis culture. Furthermore, the local organizers believe that these festivals strive to participate in the political process and try to influence public opinion in favor of cannabis legalization.

### *General characteristics*

All four festivals took place in the open air and neither one had an entrance fee nor an age limit. The number of attendants was estimated from 5,000 in Amsterdam to a maximum of 15,000 in Rome (Table I).

Considering the size of the cities and the public transportation system, all four festival locations were easily accessible. Even though the festivals in Amsterdam and Athens took place out of the inner city, access was easy by tram or metro, respectively, and a parking area was provided. Cannabis Bevrijdingsdag in Amsterdam was organized in Flevopark, one of the biggest green areas in Amsterdam, located next to a lively multi-ethnic neighborhood a few kilometers from the inner city. The festival began at 2.00 p.m. and ended at 10.00 p.m. The Athens Cannabis Protestival was a two-day festival from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. each day, located at the Army Park (also known as Goudi Park) a few kilometers from the city center. Both festivals were licensed by the city administration as cultural events, with a music stage, bands and DJs. The local organizer in Athens explained that the choice for a music festival was embedded in what he called “cultural activism”: “we use culture, in this case music, in order to promote our political and social messages to

	Amsterdam	Berlin	Rome	Athens
<i>General characteristics</i>				
Name	Cannabis Bevrijdingsdag (Cannabis Liberation Day)	Hanfparade (Hemp Parade)	Million Marijuana March – Antimonopolismo Cannabinico	Athens Cannabis Protestival
Organized since	2009	1997	2000	2004
Date of festival in study	June 12, 2016	August 13, 2016	May 27, 2017	May 5-6, 2017
Duration (hours)	8	9	9	10 hours each day
Population estimated by organizers/observers	5,000/5,000	12,500/10,000	15,000/10,000	14,000/12,000 (both days)
Licensed as type of festival	Cultural event Music festival	Political event Rally with music	Political event Rally with music	Cultural event Music festival
<i>Organizational characteristics</i>				
Volunteers	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Sponsors	Yes	Yes	Yes (only one)	Yes
Commercial market	Yes	No	No	Yes
Food market	Yes	No	No	Yes
Promotion stands	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Info stands	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
House rules	Yes	No	No	No
Speakers/speeches	Yes	Yes	No	No
Educational workshops/seminars	Yes	No	No	Yes
Movies/documentaries	Yes	No	No	No
Social media	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fence	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Use and sale of alcohol/drugs</i>				
Sale of alcohol/cannabis	No	No	Both	Alcohol
Use of cannabis	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate
Use of alcohol	Low	High	Low	Moderate
Use of other drugs	No	No	No	Yes
Cannabis + Alcohol	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Extra Observations</i>				
Anti-social behavior	No	No	No	No
Environmental issues	No	No	Yes (litter)	Yes (litter)
Multicultural- multiethnicity groups	Yes	No	No	No
Sustainability profile	No	No	No	No
Families	Yes	No	No	No
Flags	No	Yes	No	No
Banners	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

**Table I.**  
Characteristics of  
four outdoor  
cannabis festivals

bigger audiences.” Like with other music festivals, the license in Amsterdam and Athens required the presence of a First Aid kiosk.

The latter was not the case in Berlin and in Rome, where the cannabis festivals were accorded as political events. They both started as a rally with music trucks from squares located next to the central train stations. The Hanfparade rally in Berlin started at 1.00 p.m. at Washington Plaza, continued through the main avenues of the city and finished at Alexanderplatz, the biggest central square in the city at 4.30 p.m., where the festival continued until 10.00 p.m. The Million Marijuana March in Rome had a similar structure. Participants initially gathered at Piazza della Repubblica at 13.00 p.m. and from there started a rally following central avenues of Rome which ended at Piazza san Giovanni. There, the music trucks created a festival atmosphere, and people stayed until 22.00 p.m.

Regarding the demographic profile of attendants, some striking differences between the festivals were seen. While in Berlin, Rome and Athens the vast majority identified as white, participants in Amsterdam represented a more multi-ethnic group. Also, many adolescents were observed at the festivals in Berlin and Rome, but not in Amsterdam and Athens.

### *Symbolism*

The organizers of these festivals chose specific places to organize these festivals and all locations had a symbolic meaning. The places where festivals take place often have a symbolism and they are used because of that (Mueller and Schade, 2012). A place can be considered as “symbolic” whenever it means something to a group of individuals, in such a way that it contributes to giving an identity to the group (Monnet, 2011). In terms of the post-industrial city, festivals enhance the sense of place and trends toward a gradual re-appropriation of public space by citizens (Chatzinakos, 2015). All festivals seem to involve and engender some form of social concentration and connectivity (Lee *et al.*, 2012). For the choice of a rallying or dispersion point, or for pausing along the itinerary of a demonstration, organizers of political demonstrations opposing the established power often make use of symbolic places (Monnet, 2011).

Concerning the symbolism (or symbolic characteristics) included in these festivals, many differences were also observed and derived from the interviews with the organizers. Even if in Amsterdam there was not a symbolic meaning of the place, symbolic locations were integral to the other three festivals. In Berlin, the rally did a politically symbolic 20 min stop at the Ministry of Health at 3 p.m., declaring the support of the organization on legalization of medical cannabis, which was one of the main aims. Also, Alexanderplatz is strongly symbolic for the city of Berlin. In Rome, the gathering places and the route was purposefully chosen, including symbolic places for big demonstrations. The organizer of the Million Marijuana March in Rome stated that “anyone who wants to make a big event or a big demonstration uses this square. It’s like a symbol if you want to do an event in Rome.” In Athens, according to the local organizer, “this location had a symbolic meaning because it is located next to the Ministry of Justice which is responsible for the National Drug Policies.” Furthermore, permission was obtained by the Ministry of Defense as well as that the “Army Park” officially belongs to that Ministry. The permission worked as an unofficial statement that the Greek Government would not create obstacles for the organization of such a festival.

### *Organizational characteristics*

Concerning their economic sufficiency and autonomy, all four cannabis festivals in our study mainly depended on sponsorship and revenue from rent in the market area. None of the festivals collected revenue from entrance fees. As the festival in Rome did not have a market area, revenues were limited. The cannabis festivals in Amsterdam, Berlin and Rome were based on volunteerism, while in Athens only a few core members of the organization worked voluntarily, while all others were paid.

The level of commercialization varied across the festivals (Table I). In Amsterdam, the presence of several Dutch companies related to cannabis cultivation, sponsors and a market area with 53 stands promoting or selling cannabis paraphernalia (electronic devices in particular), cannabis seeds, books, clothes and 17 kiosks in the food and drinks area, gave the cannabis festival a more commercial character. According to the local organizer in Amsterdam “the festival tried to combine a modern way of activism, which is not opposed to commercialization, and a healthy economic sustainable organization based on volunteers.” Because, the Hanfparade in Berlin was identified as a political event, selling products or services was not allowed. However, there was a market area (20 kiosks)

where advertising and promotion were allowed, including some big cannabis industry companies (similar to Amsterdam). Nonetheless, the Hanfparade had fewer commercial features than we observed in Amsterdam. In Berlin, there are other events – such as the Cannabis Business Conference and Cannabis Expo (Mary Jane Berlin) – that have an exclusive commercial character. As was stated by the local organizer “the Hanfparade is a grass-root political movement where there is no place for business. The combination of a grass-root activist movement with business in terms of commercialization could create confusion and extensive complaints from both the participants and the volunteers.” In Rome, where the festival was licensed as a political rally similar to political marches, the festival was not allowed to have a food area, a market area or promotion stands. In Athens, there were 3 music stages, 10 promotion stands and 40 kiosks at the market and food area, which gave a kind of commercial character, similar to many other music festivals. The local organizer stated: “We kept the number of the kiosks limited to 40. We didn’t want more as it would give the festival a very commercial character and this is not the aim of the festival.”

#### *Political characteristics*

A striking difference in the nature of the festivals was found in both the interviews and the observations regarding the different levels of politicization. Here, we define politicization as the act of giving a political tone or character to the cannabis festivals. In Berlin, several left-wing and liberal political parties (representing a coalition of political parties in Berlin that had agreed to strive for partial decriminalization of cannabis) participated in the Hanfparade. In Amsterdam, only the very small “Piratenpartij” officially took part in the festival. However, representatives from other political parties participated in panel discussions, and one of the keynote speakers at Cannabis Bevrijdingsdag was Dries van Agt (Christian Democrats), who was Minister of Justice when cannabis was decriminalized in 1976, and Prime Minister from 1977 to 1982. In Athens and in Rome, no political parties participated in the festivals. Furthermore, in Amsterdam, next to the music stage, there was a big screen where messages and mottos supporting legalization were displayed. Also similar messages could be seen on printed posters around the festival. In Athens, similar messages on banners made by the organizers could be seen around the festival. However, in Athens no speeches or panels took place and the focus was on the music. In Rome, the festival particularly aimed to participate in the recent debate that took place in the Italian Parliament in Summer 2016 about regulating production of cannabis, including cultivation by individuals or by Social Cannabis Clubs under a state monopoly. For that reason the official name for this year was “Million Marijuana March – Antimonopolismo Cannabinico.”

In Rome, even if the particular aim had political characteristics, and even if the rally was held as a political march and the permission was as such, no banners or messages relating to legalization or with that specific request were present. Furthermore, no such speeches took place. It is worth noting that the only festival where the participants carried handmade banners and flags supporting the cannabis legalization was in Berlin. Furthermore, hundreds of flags were shared by the sponsors, while the organization of Hanfparade also had official banners supporting legalization. Furthermore, the Hanfparade was considered a political rally and the organizers had obtained permission by the Municipality. On the music stage, many speeches took place regarding cannabis legalization. As we can see through the observation, even if the events in Berlin and Rome were licensed and officially labeled as political events, they had striking differences at the level of politicization. In the same vein, despite the fact that the events in Amsterdam and Athens were in the form of a music festival, the level of politicization was much higher in Amsterdam.

### *Cannabis culture*

The broad open use of cannabis in these festivals in combination with the similarities in music, the festival atmosphere and the participants' behavior constitute basic feature of what we call "cannabis culture." The common symbolic characteristic of these festivals was the "celebration of cannabis culture." Cannabis culture refers to a social context of associated social behaviors and beliefs that mainly depends upon cannabis consumption and the support of the idea of legalization. From the beginning of the rise of cannabis culture in the 1960s until today, cannabis has evolved its own language, etiquette, art, literature and music (Brownlee, 2002). All of these cultural aspects that cannabis encompasses gradually formed what is known today as "cannabis culture" and includes specific beliefs, symbols and music styles, i.e., reggae, dub and hip hop. Even if there are global differences in the perception and also in the items of "cannabis culture" – differences in terminology (i.e. spliffs and joints), in use (use of paper filter known as a crutch, or rolling tip; use of cannabis with tobacco or not; use of paraphernalia as vaporizers or bongs), in ethics (pass the joint after a certain amount of puffs, etc.) – music styles related to cannabis are globally and commonly recognized and they constitute a symbolic characteristic of "cannabis culture."

### *Use and sale of cannabis and alcohol*

Regarding the use of cannabis and alcohol, considerable differences between the festivals were observed (Table I). In Amsterdam, the sale of alcohol was not allowed, and alcohol use during the festival (mainly beer) was the exception rather than the rule. On the other hand, cannabis use was more common. As we observed, people used cannabis either in joints or pipes, while sponsors offered free use from vaporizers. In Berlin, selling alcohol at the festival was also not allowed, but alcohol use (mainly beer) combined with cannabis use (mainly in joints) was very frequently observed, not only at Washington Plaza and Alexanderplatz, but also during the rally. In Rome, the music trucks were allowed to sell beer. However, beer consumption was limited. On the other hand, cannabis use was widespread, from the very beginning to the closure of the festival. The continuous presence of dozens of street dealers selling cannabis might have made this easier. In Athens, alcohol sale was allowed at the festival and there were two bars. The use of cannabis was extensive and many attendants combined drinking beer with smoking cannabis (joints). Use of illicit drugs other than cannabis was only observed around one of the three music stages (i.e. the Dance Stage) at the festival in Athens.

### *Police presence*

Despite differences in legal context and cannabis policy, and even though police were much more present at the cannabis festivals in Berlin and Rome than in Amsterdam and Athens, police generally tolerated the extensive use of cannabis by participants. In Amsterdam and Athens, police basically did not pay attention to cannabis use. At the festival in Amsterdam, police appeared only once for a parking issue. Similarly, in Athens police appeared for a sound-pollution issue and gave a friendly warning. Contrarily, in Berlin and Rome dozens of police officers accompanied the rallies – a common feature of political demonstrations or parades – and after the rallies, they remained at the festival areas (Alexanderplatz and Piazza di san Giovanni, respectively). In Berlin, on several occasions the police approached groups of adolescents and kindly but decisively asked them to put out the spliffs they were smoking. Overall, this took place in a friendly atmosphere. In Rome, the arrival of police at the starting point of the rally (Piazza della Repubblica) made participants first run away in panic, but returned once it was clear that police appeared on purpose in order to let the people know that they had to begin the rally and leave the square. Therefore, no intention to arrest cannabis users took place.

**Survey results**

The respondents ( $n = 1,355$ ) included 387 attendants from Cannabis Bevrijdingsdag in Amsterdam, 341 from Hanfparade in Berlin, 251 from Million Marijuana March in Rome and 376 from Athens Cannabis Protestival in Athens. Demographic characteristics are presented in Table II. In the total sample, close to two-thirds were male (62.8 percent), with more males in Berlin and Amsterdam, and less in Athens and Rome. Age ranged from 14 to

	Total ( $n = 1,355$ )	Amsterdam ( $n = 387$ )	Berlin ( $n = 341$ )	Rome ( $n = 251$ )	Athens ( $n = 376$ )	Test	$p$
<i>Gender</i>							
Male	62.8%	60.2%	58.4%	68.5%	65.7%	$\chi^2$ 8.863 (df3)	0.031
Female	37.2%	39.8%	41.6%	31.5%	34.3%		
<i>Age</i>							
Range	14–70	17–70	14–57	14–34	16–54	F(3, 1351) = 92.038	< 0.001
$M$ (SD)	24.9 (8.39)	29.2 (10.48)	22.8 (6.18)	19.6 (3.73)	26.1 (7.37)		
<i>Age categories</i>							
14–17	9.7%	0.5%	15.0%	29.1%	1.6%	$\chi^2$ 317.649 (df9)	< 0.001
18–24	50.1%	41.6%	53.7%	61.4%	48.1%		
25–34	29.2%	34.6%	26.1%	9.6%	39.6%		
35+	10.9%	23.3%	5.3%	0.0%	10.6%		
<i>Residency</i>							
Locals	54.4%	27.6%	57.2%	64.5%	85.6%	$\chi^2$ 374.023 (df9)	< 0.001
Non-locals	24.8%	33.3%	27.0%	33.5%	13.3%		
Expats	12.6%	21.3%	5.3%	0.8%	0.3%		
Tourists	8.2%	17.8%	10.5%	1.2%	0.8%		
<i>Cannabis use</i>							
Lifetime	97.0%	97.4%	97.4%	97.2%	96.3%	$\chi^2$ 1.104 (df3)	0.776
Last month	90.0%	88.4%	91.2%	96.4%	86.7%		
Days last month $M$ (SD)	17.6 (11.84)	19.7 (12.06)	17.2 (11.35)	18.3 (11.30)	15.5 (12.05)	F(3, 1351) = 8.346	< 0.001
Daily use	54.2%	62.8%	51.3%	55.0%	47.3%	$\chi^2$ 24.079 (df3)	< 0.001
Cannabis use at festival	84.9%	80.6%	82.4%	96.8%	80.6%		
<i>Main reason</i>							
Protest/activism	35.3%	19.4%	41.6%	45.0%	39.4%	$\chi^2$ 239.876 (df15)	< 0.001
Entertainment/leisure	35.4%	44.7%	30.8%	12.4%	45.5%		
To meet people/ socialize	8.1%	10.6%	8.5%	8.8%	4.8%		
To use cannabis	6.3%	3.6%	5.6%	19.9%	0.8%		
Curiosity	11.6%	18.3%	11.7%	11.2%	4.8%		
Other/do not know	3.2%	3.4%	1.8%	2.8%	4.8%		
<i>Acceptance of cannabis</i>							
Yes, in positive way	83.1%	89.7%	87.4%	72.5%	79.5%	$\chi^2$ 42.723 (df6)	< 0.001
Yes, in negative way	3.2%	1.3%	2.3%	6.8%	3.7%		
No	13.7%	9.0%	10.3%	20.7%	16.8%		
<i>Colleagues/fellow students</i>							
Sure	55.2%	61.0%	51.9%	54.6%	52.7%	$\chi^2$ 29.070 (f12)	0.004
Probably yes	29.4%	25.1%	27.9%	29.5%	35.4%		
I do not know	8.2%	7.8%	11.7%	6.8%	6.4%		
Probably not	4.3%	5.2%	4.4%	4.8%	2.9%		
Certainly not	2.9%	1.0%	4.1%	4.4%	2.7%		

**Table II.**  
Demographic and  
cannabis use  
characteristics, main  
reason for festival  
attendance, and  
acceptance of  
cannabis

70 years (mean age 24.9 years). On average, respondents in Amsterdam were the oldest (29.2 years). Respondents in Athens were 3 years younger than those in Amsterdam; respondents in Berlin were 3 years younger than those in Athens; and respondents in Rome were 3 years younger than those in Berlin and almost 10 years younger than those in Amsterdam. Overall, 18–24-year-old respondents constituted the largest age category, followed by 25–34-year-olds. However, in Rome the second largest age category were minors (< 18 years of age; 29.1 percent). While minors were rare in Amsterdam and Athens, they represented 15.0 percent of respondents in Berlin. Conversely, respondents aged 35 years and older were rare in Berlin and in Rome, but represented close to a quarter of respondents in Amsterdam and one in ten in Athens.

Significant differences in the attendants' residency were found between the festivals. In the total sample, over half of respondents were locals, but they constituted by far the largest group in Athens (more than eight of ten), and the smallest category in Amsterdam (less than three out of ten). In Amsterdam, close to four out of ten respondents were expats or tourists, followed by one out of seven respondents in Berlin. Expats and tourists were rare in Athens and Rome.

### *Cannabis use*

The vast majority of respondents had used cannabis at least once in their lifetime, and nine out of ten had used cannabis in the past month (Table II). On average, respondents had used cannabis on 17.6 days in the past month, 4 days more in Amsterdam than in Athens, with Berlin and Rome taking an intermediate position. Over half of respondents were daily cannabis users, but more often in Amsterdam than in the other cities, and least often in Athens. The analysis also reveals that in the total sample, eight out of ten respondents used cannabis at the festival (84.9 percent), but by far most often in Rome (96.8 percent).

### *Cultural and social acceptance of cannabis*

A large majority of respondents thought that the cannabis festival they attended positively affects the social and cultural acceptance of cannabis, most often in Amsterdam and Berlin (Table II). In each city, only a very small minority of the festival attendees thought that the cannabis festival affected acceptance in a negative way. Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents replied that they would not hide their attendance of the festival (Table II). The negative answers were slightly higher in Berlin and Rome, the cities with rallies and younger respondents.

### *Reasons for festival attendance*

The most prevalent reason for participating in cannabis festivals was “entertainment/leisure” or “protest/activism” (Table II). However, there were significant differences between the four cities, with “protest/activism” most often reported in Berlin (41.6 percent) and Rome (45.0 percent), and “entertainment/leisure” in Amsterdam (38.3 percent) and Athens (45.5 percent). “Curiosity” ranked third, although this was a more common response in Amsterdam than in the other cities, and least common in Athens. Other reasons – i.e., “to meet people/socialize” or “to use cannabis” – were less often reported. However, in Rome “to use cannabis” ranked as the second main reason (19.9 percent).

To further elaborate differences in reasons for attending cannabis festivals, demographic and cannabis use characteristics were assessed. As shown in Table III, respondents were more likely to choose “protest/activism” with increasing age, while the opposite was found for “to use cannabis.” That is, the younger respondents were more likely choose “to use cannabis” as the main reason. Furthermore, with decreasing age, respondents were more likely to choose “to use cannabis” as the main reason for attendance.

“Entertainment/leisure” as the main reason was more prevalent among young adults (age categories 18–24 and 25–34), than among minors and older respondents (35+ years). Regarding residency, locals and non-locals more often reported “protest/activism” than expats and tourists, and expats and tourists most often chose “entertainment.” Daily cannabis users were more likely to report “protest/activism” than non-daily users, while the latter were more likely to report “entertainment.”

**Discussion**

All of these festivals share common characteristics such as the activist identity, the common aim to support cannabis policy reform, and last but not least to celebrate cannabis culture. On the other hand they had distinct differences not only in organizational structure and the level of politicization and commercialization but also in the profile of the participants.

The difference in the political characteristics of the festivals can first be explained by differences in the official status accorded by the respective municipalities (i.e. “a political march” in Berlin and Rome not allowing for commercial activities or “a festival” like many others in Amsterdam and in Athens). However, the Million Marijuana March in Rome was officially “a political march” but did not appear to have or embed any political characteristics. Therefore, it can be argued that an official status does not automatically define the character of a festival. Second, the differences in character between the festivals can be explained by differences in current cannabis policies and laws. Dutch drug law and cannabis policy allowed for the presence of Dutch cannabis-related companies (e.g. coffeeshops, cannabis seeds and electronic devices for using cannabis). Although Dutch politicians plea for further steps away from criminalization, the political debate on cannabis policy reform appears less fundamental than in Germany. German cannabis policy is more restrictive. Therefore, it can be argued that, for cannabis reformers, there is much more to be gained in Germany than in the Netherlands. In the same vein, it would be expected that the festivals in Athens and Rome would be characterized by a higher level of politicization as the cannabis laws in these countries are much stricter than in Amsterdam and Berlin. Also, despite that the festival in Rome had the special name of “Antimopolismo Cannabinico” which is directly related with the recent political discussions in the country, the festival did not have any political atmosphere or any political characteristics. Furthermore, in Athens Cannabis Protestival, the level of politicization was low and the political characteristics were limited, even if the official name was “Protestival.”

Cannabis festivals can attract people for a variety of reasons. They may come to protest current cannabis policy, but they may also have other reasons. Reasons for attending cannabis festivals can be derived from reasons for attending festivals in general, where often mentioned reasons include “curiosity,” “escape from routine” or “entertainment” (Scott, 1996). Analysis of over two dozen empirical studies found similar as well as other

**Table III.**  
Main reasons for festival attendance, by gender, age, residency and daily cannabis use (%)

Main reason	Gender $\chi^2$ 1.909 (df5) $p = 0.862$		Age $\chi^2$ 69.469 (df15) $p \leq 0.001$				Residency $\chi^2$ 53.149 (df15) $p \leq 0.001$				Daily use $\chi^2$ 45.783 (df5) $p \leq 0.001$	
	M	F	≤17	18–24	25–34	35+	Locals	Non-locals	Expats	Tourists	Yes	No
Protest	35.4	35.1	32.1	32.3	35.0	52.7	38.0	36.1	24.3	23.4	42.4	26.9
Entertainment	34.9	36.3	29.0	38.7	36.3	23.6	35.4	31.3	49.5	36.0	30.0	41.9
Socialization	7.9	8.5	3.8	8.7	9.1	6.8	7.8	9.3	8.7	6.3	7.6	8.7
To use cannabis	6.7	5.8	16.8	7.1	3.5	1.4	6.9	6.8	1.0	6.3	7.5	5.0
Curiosity	11.5	11.7	16.8	10.2	11.8	12.8	8.1	14.6	15.5	22.5	9.8	13.7
Other/do not know	3.6	2.6	1.5	3.1	4.3	2.7	3.8	2.0	1.0	5.4	2.7	3.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

“motivators” but revealed socialization as the most common dimension in motivators for attending music festivals (Abreu-Novais and Arcodia, 2013). Given that music usually is an important element of cannabis festivals, socialization could similarly be a major reason for attendance. Research has also shown that the specific type or theme of a festival may alter the motivations of attendees (Yolal *et al.*, 2009), e.g., wine in the case of a wine festival (Yuan *et al.*, 2005) or food in a wine and food festival (Park *et al.*, 2008). In the same vein, one of the expected reasons for attending a cannabis festival would be to use cannabis.

In our research, the most prevalent reasons for attendance were “protest/activism” and “entertainment/leisure,” but not in the same order in the four cities. Historically, festivals were produced for political purposes (Jarvis, 1994) and they have been used as a space for the public to express dissent to the established order (Abrahams, 1982; Waterman, 1998). Besides serving as a space for resistance, festivals have also been linked to more organized movements for social change (Sharpe, 2008). Therefore, in the context of the current study we could claim, in accordance with the opinions of the organizers, that the festivals create a space where people can gather in public and oppose current policies regarding cannabis. It could also be claimed that cannabis festivals provide a platform for those who oppose cannabis prohibition and seek an opportunity to publicly speak out on specific issues that concern them, opposing current drug laws in particular. People with common social demands gather to demand legal changes that require political and social changes. In this respect, cannabis festivals are operating as an instrument of social change.

In addition to social protest, one major reason that festivals historically used to take place is for celebration, specifically a celebration of a culture, i.e., cannabis culture in the current context. The most common and encompassing type of public community celebration remains the festival (Arcodia and Whitford, 2007). The key characteristic of a festival that distinguishes it from other events is that there is a clear community and celebratory focus to the occurrence (Arcodia and Robb, 2000). Therefore, cultural festivals emerged to be a common platform for individuals to come together and display a socio-cultural ethos (Rokam, 2005). Also, entertainment is considered as a main part of the celebration and it has become the core of festivalization in the cultural urban landscape (Doğan, 2011). Furthermore, cultural festivals ultimately promote the continuation of a culture (Lee *et al.*, 2012), where in the present case cannabis festivals not only aim to celebrate the cannabis culture, but also to contribute to its continuation.

In Berlin and in Rome respondents more often opted “for protest,” whereas in Amsterdam and Athens “for entertainment” was more common. Various aspects might explain a stronger preference for protest in Berlin and Rome. These two cannabis festivals in Berlin were framed as political events and they were officially labeled as such. This could also explain why the demand for the legalization of cannabis is expressed through a political march. In particular, several political parties were represented in Berlin. Furthermore, the Million Marijuana March in Rome had a specific demand directly related with political decisions concerning the regulation of cannabis cultivation for personal use.

The current investigation also suggests that younger festival participants are less interested in protest and political activism for cannabis reform. Across the four cities, older respondents (25+ years of age) were more likely to choose protest/activism as the main reason for attending the cannabis festival. One explanation could be that, in statistical terms, this age gradient suggests a “survival bias.” That is, the cannabis users who keep attending festivals are the ones that are more ideologically dedicated to cannabis. Another explanation could be that the older cannabis users, whether because of more social responsibilities (e.g. job and family) or based on personal experience, are more afraid of the negative consequences of repressive cannabis policies such as legal sanctions and stigma (Hathaway *et al.*, 2011) and are more inclined toward activism for legalization. Alternatively, it could be that today’s youth and young adults tend to worry less about cannabis legalization. They may believe that

cannabis is available anyway, whether in coffeeshops (Amsterdam) or from other sources (Berlin, Athens and Rome), so why not choose to attend a cannabis festival for entertainment rather than for activism?

Furthermore, frequent cannabis users were more likely to choose protest/activism as the main reason for attending the cannabis festival. It can be argued that, with more frequent use, cannabis users would benefit more from legalization. Assuming that cannabis is a more important aspect in the self-defined identity of daily users (Liebregts *et al.*, 2015), it may be that they are more inclined to consider cannabis use as an inalienable civil right – a right that calls for protest and activism.

At the cannabis festivals in Berlin and in Rome, which were framed as political events and they were officially labeled as such, respondents more often opted for protest in comparison with Amsterdam and Athens where participants mainly chose to attend for entertainment.

All festivals were less male-dominated than one would expect from the gender distribution in the user population. In Europe last year, male cannabis users outnumbered females by a factor of two (EMCDDA, 2016). In our survey, among festival attendees in these four cities, close to four out of ten respondents were female. The majority of respondents were youth and young adults (aged 18–34 years), the age group reported to have the highest rate of current cannabis use in the EU (EMCDDA, 2016). However, many more minors (< 18 years) were interviewed in Rome (29.1 percent) and in Berlin (15.0 percent) than in Amsterdam (0.5 percent) and in Athens (1.6 percent). One explanation could be that, in Dutch cannabis policy, a clear distinction is made between minors and adults. Since the mid-1990s, the minimum age to be allowed in a coffeeshop is 18, and this legal restriction is actively enforced (Wouters, 2013). Although this policy does not keep Dutch youth from using cannabis – lifetime prevalence among students aged 15–16 years was 22 percent, above the EU average of 16 percent (The ESPAD Group, 2016) – the minimum age policy for coffeeshops might discourage youth from attending a cannabis festival.

More than one out of five of the minors in Rome chose “to use cannabis” as the main reason for attendance. Furthermore, because of the extended illegal sale of cannabis, it could be argued that younger participants and specifically minors attended the festivals as an easy opportunity to find street dealers in order to buy and use cannabis at the festival. The majority of festival participants were current cannabis users, often daily users, and most respondents used cannabis at the festival. However, when asked for their main reason for attending the festival only a few reported “to use cannabis.” This indicates that, at least in cities like Amsterdam, Berlin and Athens, they do not need the public space of a festival in order to smoke a joint. However, in Rome, one out of five had attended in order “to use cannabis,” with the vast majority (96.8 percent) using cannabis at the festival compared with ~80 percent in the other festivals. Table III indicates that for the total sample, the younger respondents are more likely to opt for “to use cannabis” as an attendance reason.

Regarding the residency of the respondents more than four out of five in Athens were locals while more than three out of five were locals in Rome. In Berlin, more than half of the respondents were locals vs one in five in Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, one out of three respondents were expats and tourists vs nearly one out of six in Berlin, while expats and tourists were rare in Athens and Rome. One of the reasons to pay attention to the residency and the presence of tourism is because festivals are emerging worldwide as a growing and vibrant sector of the tourism industry (Arcodia and Whitford, 2007) and they play a major role in tourism industry development (Arcodia and Robb, 2000). The use of the term “festival tourism” is increasing among tourism researchers, the vast majority of whom conceive of the festival primarily in terms of its economic potential (Quinn, 2005). In addition, governments, cities and municipalities have also begun to look at these events as economic opportunities for tourism (Sharpe, 2008). However, this is not the case in our research. In establishing the connection between festivals and tourism for cannabis festival,

the organizers' aim is particularly relevant. In selecting artists, themes and direction the festival producers and directors can be seen as the "gate keepers" (Derrett, 2003) as they have absolute control of the marketing processes and festival strategy (Jepso *et al.*, 2008). Even if all of the cities are considered significant touristic destinations in Europe for different reasons, the organizers did not mainly target on attract tourists, and neither the government nor the municipalities promoted the festival locally or internationally. The organizers of Cannabis Bevrijdingsdag and Hanfparade tried to promote the festivals mainly in other provinces and also in other neighboring countries, such as Belgium and Austria, respectively. Furthermore, the fact that the websites were in both Dutch–English and German–English, respectively, could be considered a basic attempt to overcome the national borders. That did not happen in Athens Cannabis Protestival and Million Marijuana March where the promotion was limited at to national level.

### Conclusion

Cannabis festivals represent a category of special events in an era where cannabis legalization is gaining momentum. Particularly in Europe, cannabis festivals are organized in many countries by civic organizations who aim to intervene in the politics regarding cannabis legalization. The organizers aim to protest against current drug laws and cannabis policies and at the same time celebrate cannabis culture. Cannabis festivals in Amsterdam, Berlin, Athens and Rome have common features but also maintain and reproduce local, social and cultural characteristics. Cannabis festivals, as well as their visitors, represent heterogeneous categories. They can be understood as an expression of cultural politics, a celebration of cannabis culture or represent a protest movement.

In the total sample, age ranged from 14 to 70 years (mean age 24.9 years) and close to two-thirds were male. Overall, 18–24-year-old respondents constituted the largest age category. The vast majority of respondents had used cannabis at least once in their lifetime, and nine out of ten had used cannabis in the past month. Over half of respondents were daily cannabis users, but more often in Amsterdam than in the other cities, and least often in Athens. The analysis also reveals that in the total sample, eight out of ten respondents used cannabis at the festival. A large majority of respondents thought that the cannabis festival they attended positively affects the social and cultural acceptance of cannabis. Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents replied that they would not hide their attendance of the festival. The negative answers were slightly higher in Berlin and Rome, the cities with rallies and younger respondents.

The most prevalent reason for participating in cannabis festivals was "entertainment/leisure" or "protest/activism," but there were significant differences between the four cities, with "protest/activism" most often reported in Berlin (41.6 percent) and Rome (45.0 percent), and "entertainment/leisure" in Amsterdam (38.3 percent) and Athens (45.5 percent). The style of the festival – music festival or march combined with music – affects the main reason for attendance by the participants. In cannabis festivals more similar to music festivals, the majority of the respondents attended for entertainment while at the cannabis festivals in the form of a march combined with music the majority attended for protest. Furthermore, increasing age, residency and the high frequency of cannabis use are factors that led the participants to attend for protest.

This study has implications for research as well as policy making in various fields. Future studies may use this study and its results as a platform for guidance in further research. Cannabis festivals may serve as important research fields for getting in contact with large numbers of cannabis users. Future research on cannabis or cannabis users could be held at these festivals. Furthermore, this paper identifies motivations for attending cannabis festivals and could be added in the increasing literature of event studies concerning participant's motivations. Last but not least, city officials, policy makers,

festivals organizers and promoters could use such information to expand these events into new areas, i.e., tourism – in places that cannabis is legal, i.e., California, Colorado, etc. – in the same way that music festivals do. Cities that hold cannabis festivals could also conduct research in order to understand the potential benefits or the socioeconomic importance of holding such events; and to explore the potential impact of cannabis festivals on the national or regional drug policies.

The main limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Study limitations include restriction to only four capital cities from four European countries, respectively. Although our study in Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome and Athens guaranteed some variation in national drug policies, future research could include more variation. Another limitation refers to the survey among festival attendees. The festival participant samples were not normative, and we used a short questionnaire. However, given that festival attendees do not make up a well-defined population, the method we applied enabled surveying a large number of outdoor festival participants in a limited time. One more limitation to be mentioned is that participants in the survey could not be given private space to complete the questionnaires, and may therefore have been influenced by others in close proximity. Furthermore, qualitative interviews could deepen insight into attendees' motivations for participation in cannabis festivals, the role of age (or maturity) in this matter and also provide a further insight on the social and cultural acceptance of cannabis as it is perceived by the attendees.

#### Note

1. The “five years” criterion constitutes the Dutch national minimum to obtain a passport, as well as the German minimum for a permanent residence document.

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