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From subcultural to mainstream? The evolving meaning of cannabis use among youth in a restrictive policy context

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ABSTRACT

Background: Cannabis liberalization trends are challenging traditional cannabis markets, opinions, cultures, and ultimately, the paradigms for understanding these social phenomena. Up-to-date studies across various socio-cultural and policy settings of how young people perceive and give meaning to their cannabis use are thus highly relevant for novel prevention and harm reduction strategies.

Methods: Individual interviews with 28 students (13 girls, 15 boys, 16–19 years) from Norway who had used cannabis. Investigation was based on the sociological concept of *framing* and thematic analysis.

Results: Participants tended to emphasize social equivalence between cannabis users and nonusers, and of cannabis and alcohol use in social settings. However, unlike alcohol, cannabis was also framed as a means for providing sleep, or for relieving depressive moods and ADHD symptoms. These framings markedly diverge from the traditional understandings of youths' cannabis use in nonliberalized settings as either subcultural and opposition-oriented or recreational and normalized.

Conclusions: Our results indicate that even in a strict drug policy context like Norway, adolescent cannabis use is increasingly given meaning within a mainstream, rather than within a subcultural, frame. In addition, a medicinal discourse seems to be gaining foothold. Findings should be of relevance for various drug strategies aimed toward adolescents.

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Introduction

Cannabis remains the most commonly used illicit drug in Europe (EMCDDA, 2023b). The literature addressing its medical and social implications (Hadland et al., 2015; Macleod et al., 2004; Silins et al., 2014; Volkow et al., 2014) cannot be fully understood without consideration of the cultural and social meanings of cannabis (e.g. Søgaaard & Lerikkanen, 2021; Wanke et al., 2022). These issues are especially relevant given the recent reports of substantial shifts in the drug discourse among users (Wanke et al., 2022) and strong decriminalization and legalization efforts in some key jurisdictions such as Canada and several US states (Decorte et al., 2020; UNODC, 2022). Indeed, some argue that cannabis use has traversed the social distance from criminal and subcultural to normalized and mainstream in some contexts (e.g. Asbridge et al., 2016; Duff et al., 2012; Duff & Erickson, 2014; Järvinen & Demant, 2011; Williams et al., 2017).

While these liberalization trends are challenging traditional cannabis markets, opinions, cultures, and ultimately, the paradigms for understanding these social phenomena, the use of cannabis for recreational purposes remains illegal in most jurisdictions outside the American continents (Decorte et al., 2020; EMCDDA, 2023a). Indeed, not enough is known about

how young people from different socio-cultural and policy contexts perceive and give meaning to their cannabis use. These changing frames and youth's cannabis perceptions and practices warrant further research attention, especially given the social and health risks associated with early initiation of cannabis use (Hammond et al., 2020; National Academies of Sciences, 2017; WHO, 2016).

In many Western countries, including Norway, cannabis use has traditionally been linked to nonconformist groups (Reid, 2020), and to the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Berger et al., 2022; Sandberg, 2013), alternative and oppositional social and political orientations, and identity formation processes grounded upon values such as 'natural', 'organic' and 'authentic' (Sandberg, 2011, 2013). These cultural meanings attached to cannabis were shown to be important in younger adults' identity constructions, representing free thinking, independence, and openness to new ideas (Dahl & Heggen, 2014; Sandberg, 2011). Sandberg (2013) argued that there is a subculture surrounding cannabis use, consisting of repertoires of rituals, narratives, and discursive practices that users across countries and time-periods share and make use of in both their use and accounts of cannabis. A central argument in this theory is that cannabis use is

generally stigmatized by the mainstream society, and that users utilize specific discursive repertoires to manage the stigma (Sandberg, 2011).

In contrast, reflecting upon growing trends of recreational drug use in Britain, others have argued that cannabis use among youth is no longer subcultural but rather mainstream (e.g. Measham et al., 1994; Parker et al., 1998, 2002). The normalization thesis includes five dimensions of normalization: access and availability; drug trying rates; usage rates; accommodating attitudes to 'sensible' recreational drug use; and wider cultural accommodation (Parker et al., 2002). Multiple international studies have addressed the normalization argument (e.g. Duff, 2003; Duff et al., 2012; Duff & Erickson, 2014; Hathaway et al., 2016; Järvinen & Demant, 2011; Sznitman, 2007) and debated whether cannabis use has moved from the margins to the center of youth culture (Pennay & Measham, 2016). A recent qualitative review argues that, even though cannabis use has become more 'commonplace' in American society, use is still stigmatized and that 'claims of normalization may be premature' (Reid, 2020, p. 2). Several authors have proposed a more nuanced view, arguing that there is evidence of both cannabis normalization and de-normalization in various contexts (e.g. Measham & Shiner, 2009; Reid, 2022; Williams, 2016), and that Shildrick's (2002) term 'differentiated normalization' may be a more precise description (Hathaway et al., 2016; Mostaghim, 2019). For instance, some authors suggest that moderate recreational use is increasingly normalized among groups of youth and younger adults, while excessive and/or dependent use remains problematized (Duff et al., 2012; Duff & Erickson, 2014; Hathaway et al., 2011; Järvinen & Demant, 2011; Reid, 2020).

Currently, there are ongoing shifts in cannabis control policies. In some jurisdictions, such as several American states and in Canada, this process seems to be well under way as reflected in legalization of both medical and adult recreational cannabis use (UNODC, 2020). In contrast, European states appear to lag behind the North American continent when it comes to decriminalization and legalization (Decorte et al., 2020; EMCDDA, 2023a). Understanding how young people navigate their cannabis use and perceptions under these evolving frames warrants further attention. With an aim to improve our understanding of the social meaning of cannabis use in youth culture today, we interviewed Norwegian high school students who reported having used cannabis to investigate how they frame their cannabis use. Specifically, we primarily wanted to know whether, and if so how, these adolescent users frame their cannabis involvement as a sub-cultural or normalized activity.

Adolescent cannabis use in the Norwegian drug policy context

International and national developments in drug policy and related debates inform adolescents' understanding and decision-making regarding cannabis use (Hammond et al., 2020). The overarching goal of the current Norwegian drug policy is to restrict the consumption of alcohol and prevent

the use of illegal substances by limiting the access to and demand for psychoactive substances. While alcohol-related policies are predicated upon banning of all alcohol advertisements and imposition of high taxes, age limits, and restrictions on sales- and serving hours for alcohol, the policies addressing (currently) illegal substances are predicated upon prohibition and criminalization of the manufacturing, sales, trafficking, possession, and consumption of cannabis and other drugs (Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2012, 2023). Within this frame, alcohol prevention measures targeting adolescents primarily aim to delay the age of first drink and reduce the frequency and quantity of alcohol consumption. For cannabis and other illegal drugs, the goal of preventive measures remains abstinence and reduction in drug-related harms (Ministry of health and care services, 2023).

The drug policy in Norway has been described as strict (Moeller, 2019), and even as 'one of the hawks in the drug policy field' (Larsson, 2021, p. 112). Skretting (2013, in Larsson 2021:114) characterized Norway's drug policy as 'schizophrenic', with elements of a strong belief in punishment as well as in rehabilitation and health care of the users. Sanctioning is seen as necessary to deter new users, while individuals with dependency are seen to need help instead of punishment. Since the turn of the century, the health focus has become increasingly central (Larsson, 2021), as has the use of alternative sanctions for young drug offenders (Sandøy, 2020).

A recent drug policy reform initiative was summarized in the Official Norwegian Report (2019) *Drug reform - from punishment to help*, underscoring the health-oriented approach, and proposing a model for decriminalization of all currently illegal drugs, including cannabis. The reform proposal did not receive sufficient support by the Norwegian Parliament (in March 2021), but the accompanying debate generated changes in law enforcement practices. For instance, the Attorney General instructed the police not to stop, search, or arrest individuals suspected of possessing illegal drugs for personal use only (with the limit for cannabis set to 15 grams). Still, the use and possession of illegal drugs remain criminal offences, and the debate remains concerning the state's views of and responses to (illegal) drug use in general, and recreational and non-dependent drug use in particular.

In comparison with most European countries, levels of underage cannabis use remain relatively low in Norway (ESPAD, 2020). While an average of 16% of 15- to 16-year-old students participating in the European School Survey on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) reported having used cannabis at least once, only 9% of the participants from Norway reported lifetime use (ESPAD, 2020). Still, after a decade of steady trends, there are signs that increasing numbers of young people are trying cannabis (Bye & Bretteville-Jensen, 2020; Heradstveit et al., 2021; Sandøy, 2021). Time trend analyses of national survey data of students in secondary and upper secondary schools (13-19-year-olds), show increased proportions of past year cannabis use in the 2010-2019 period. The increase was more pronounced for boys (from 6,9% to 9,5%) than for girls (from 4,2% to 5,5%) (Heradstveit et al., 2021). The highest proportion of past year use was for students in the last year of secondary school (18-19-year-olds),

with almost twice as many boys compared to girls reporting past year use (boys: 25,5%; girls: 13,6%). The authors suggest that normalization of cannabis use is part of the explanation for their results, and that this process is particularly evident in Eastern Norway (the capital region), in the largest municipalities, and in urban areas (Heradstveit et al., 2021).

Adolescents' perceptions of risk associated with cannabis use have been decreasing in the same period. Post 2007-cohorts of Norwegian 15-16-year-olds are less likely to perceive cannabis use as harmful – including trying it a few times, using it occasionally, and using it regularly (Burdzovic Andreas, 2019). Qualitative studies also suggest that Norwegian adolescents' perceptions of cannabis use are undergoing changes. Bilgrei et al. (2022) find that adolescents' narratives related to cannabis policy now reflect increasingly liberal public discourse about cannabis use, and that recreational use is becoming more normalized with increasing age among adolescents (Bilgrei et al., 2021). Interestingly, these cannabis trends are opposite to the time trends for under-age drinking. Researchers are currently asking whether we are witnessing a de-normalization process of alcohol use (Caluzzi et al., 2022). And while the Norwegian youth drinking is characterized by somewhat excessive consumption primarily on weekends (Burdzovic Andreas, 2019; Enstad et al., 2017), an increasing proportion do however perceive alcohol use as risky (Burdzovic Andreas, 2019; Raitasalo et al., 2021)). Together with the declining alcohol consumption levels (Rossow et al., 2022), these observations may indicate substantial ongoing changes in local cannabis- and alcohol-related norms and perceptions among youth.

In the following we investigate how young cannabis users in Norway *frame* their cannabis use in relation to social acceptability and cultural accommodation (Parker et al., 2002). According to Goffman (1974), events or situations depend on framing to make sense to social actors. Frames are culturally determined definitions of reality that individuals use to understand and respond to events. We use this theoretical structure to explore how adolescent cannabis users talk about their cannabis use and discuss how cannabis use is positioned among youth in Norway. In this respect, subculture and normalization are seen as broad frames for interpreting and giving meaning to cannabis use.

Material and methods

The analyses in this article are based on data from CANN2021: a mixed-methods study aiming to explore the construct of cannabis as experienced and understood by adolescents in Norway. The study provides a national-level investigation of youth and cannabis use. E-questionnaires were administered during Spring 2021 to a nationally representative sample of 3 490 high school students, while qualitative follow-up interviews were conducted during Spring-Autumn 2021 with a selected subsample.

The data material for the present article consists of 28 qualitative interviews. The interviewees were recruited amongst those who in the survey answered that they had tried cannabis at least once, and who consented to be

contacted again to be invited to participate in qualitative interviews. As part of this consent, students provided their contact info, including their phone number and/or e-mail address. As the first step in the recruitment, study participants meeting the above criteria were sent an SMS message containing a brief overview of the CANN2021 qualitative arm and seeking permission to contact them for possible participation. Approximately one third responded affirmatively to the SMS and were invited to participate in individual interviews.

The qualitative sample was selected to be diverse in terms of gender and age (i.e., 13 girls and 15 boys between the ages of 16-19 years) and geography (i.e., living in both urban and rural areas in the South-Eastern, Mid-Western, and Northern regions of Norway). Overall, both the qualitative sub-sample and the quantitative sample was in line with the general population of 17-19 years old adolescents in Norway in terms of key demographics - even though obtaining representativeness was not the strict goal of the qualitative study arm. However, the qualitative sample appears to have somewhat lower (46% vs. 49%), while the quantitative sample appears to have somewhat higher (51% vs. 49%) proportion of girls than the corresponding general population.

All interviews took place between May and October 2021. Due to the Covid19-pandemic restrictions, interviews were conducted via video link (Teams). The first author conducted 15 of the interviews, and two research assistants did nine and four interviews respectively. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 36 and 80 minutes. The interviews focused on participants' personal experiences with cannabis and related perceptions, understandings, and attitudes.

The study was evaluated and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Norwegian Institute of Public Health. All participants received written and verbal instruction, and they provided their verbal informed consent prior to the interview. The participants were reimbursed for their time with a gift card in the value of 300 NOK (approximately 30 EURO). All interviews were manually audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To secure participants' anonymity in publications, we use pseudonyms and refrain from revealing potentially identifying information.

We used MAXQDA (a processing program for qualitative data) in the analytic process to extract the essence of the interviews, reduce the volume of the material, and facilitate generating of ideas grounded in details in the empirical data (Tjora, 2019). The first step of the analysis involved a close reading and inductive coding of the transcripts to get to know the material in detail and identify significant statements. Next, we performed a thematic analysis, where we worked through the codes to identify themes and understandings emerging as important within and across the interviews. In this process, we constantly shifted between the code reports and the full transcripts to ensure that the social context of the utterances was considered.

For the present article we specially made use of codes concerning use settings, comparisons between cannabis and

Table 1. Cannabis use experiences and anticipated future use, n=28 interviewees.

Cannabis use experiences	Number of times used in the past, n (%)		
	1-3 times	4-10 times	More than 10 times
	11 (39%)	5 (18%)	12 (43%)
Anticipated future use			
<i>Will not use again</i>	8	1	0
<i>Ambivalent</i>	3	3	2
<i>Will continue using</i>	0	1	10

alcohol, and future use of cannabis as anticipated by these young users.

Description of the interview participants

The interviewees' experience with cannabis varied considerably – from the two who *believed* they had taken cannabis once (through e-cigarettes and cannabis-infused drinks), to those who had used cannabis frequently for years. Of the 28 participants, eleven had used one to three times (Marius, Aurelia, Hallvor, Trine, Sarah, Tone, Peter, Synne, Elijah, Samuel, Sunniva), five had used four to ten times (Janet, Trygve, Daniel, Ea, Gabriel), and 12 had used more than ten times (Mina, Lisa, Thea, Johannes, Vincent, Abel, Joel, Leon, Ines, Sofia, Oscar, Bastian). Amongst those who had used more than ten times, some had had periods with weekly and/or daily use.

The participants also differed in how they imagined their future cannabis use would be. Nine were certain they would never use again (Janet, Aurelia, Hallvor, Trine, Sarah, Synne, Elijah, Samuel, Sunniva), and eleven imagined they would continue to use in approximately the same manner and frequency as they did at the time of the interview (Mina, Lisa, Thea, Johan, Daniel, Vincent, Abel, Joel, Leon, Ines, Oscar). A third group of eight participants expressed more ambivalence or uncertainty of how they would relate to cannabis in the future (Marius, Tone, Peter, Trygve, Ea, Bastian, Sofia, Gabriel). (See Table 1).

Results: Framing cannabis use

The main impression from our analysis is that the young Norwegian users from our sample understand cannabis use as an integral part of mainstream youth culture. When exploring how the interviewees described cannabis use, we identified three main themes: *Framing cannabis and alcohol as 'the same'*, *Framing cannabis experimentation as normative youth behavior*, and *Framing cannabis as medicine*.

Framing cannabis and alcohol as 'the same'

A common feature across our interviews were descriptions of cannabis use as 'normal', 'common', 'normalized', and 'not seen as a big deal'. In the accounts of cannabis as 'normal', using cannabis was often compared to using alcohol and described as 'the same' or 'a bit like alcohol'. For instance, Lisa (used >10 times) stated that *'I kinda feel people don't look at it as more*

uncommon, maybe, than drinking alcohol.' Others said that *'It's kind of a bit like alcohol – it's only for getting in a good mood and getting that social boost and having much more fun together'* (Leon, used >10 times) and that cannabis was *'a bit like alcohol at parties; it's something you do to enjoy yourself'* (Oscar, used >10 times).

Thea (used >10 times) explained that cannabis use at parties was 'quite common', and that using cannabis and alcohol was *'regarded at the same level. No one judges you if you do it, or if you don't, really'*. Drinking alcohol was the central activity at parties, but occasionally 'one of the guys' brought cannabis in addition:

It's almost always like that – not every time we go out, but perhaps one in five times we go out with different people, someone has [a joint]. And one of the guys says: 'I'm going outside to smoke', and we're just like 'Oh my gosh, he's going outside to smoke! Let's join him!' (.) Many wants to join – most often boys (.) But others don't want to. And it's not like it's frowned upon – it's just 'all right, okay'. Because then people think: 'Well, then there's more for me!' So, it's not a problem if you don't want to. (Thea, used >10 times)

Thea stressed the normalcy of smoking cannabis at the parties she went to – with boys providing the drug and taking the initiative to initiate use, and girls sometimes joining in. As noted in the quote above, she also rejects the idea that young people may experience social pressure to use cannabis, by underlining that it was 'not a problem if you don't want to'. By highlighting her peers' indifference to whether others use or not, using cannabis in party settings is framed as a mainstream activity. The phrase 'oh my gosh' signals that cannabis is still perceived as somewhat exciting and not as common as alcohol – at least for the girls in this group of friends – but it is none the less placed within the frames for socially accepted, mainstream partying in this age group.

Even though many participants argued that cannabis use was common and acceptable in a similar manner as alcohol at parties or party-like settings, some also elaborated on differences in the two intoxicants' effects – and how this made them suitable for use in different kinds of settings. The participants who were more experienced with using cannabis tended to explain that they seldomly used cannabis at parties. They preferred using cannabis in more private settings with a few close friends, or alone.

Everybody who doesn't use it at parties, use it in the same manner as we do. Because, at parties you... just want to be a bit wild, and alcohol gives you more energy. Whilst otherwise, people want to chill, watch series, have the stupid conversations that last ten years – about nothing in particular – just have a nice time together, a bit more personal. (...) Cannabis you tend to use with your closest friends. (Oscar, used >10 times)

In these descriptions, cannabis was given meaning as something that created intimacy within small groups of friends and as a means for relaxation. These descriptions occurred considerably more frequently in the interviews with

boys than with girls, and with participants who had more experience with cannabis use. Some of the more experienced participants even looked down upon ‘the less informed’ who used cannabis at parties:

Joel: Those who are more experienced mostly use cannabis just to relax and have a bit of fun with the guys. But those who are less informed believe it's some kind of a party drug. (.) It's kind of embarrassing to watch, as people tend to add a bit to what they're really sensing. And it's rather obvious when they mention something that is totally unrealistic to experience from cannabis. (.) Those who are not as interested in [cannabis]; they just hear about it at a party and reckon ‘yes, getting high is good at parties.’ (Joel, used >10 times)

Joel draws a symbolic boundary between the less informed and less devoted experimental users on the one hand, and the more well-informed and experienced cannabis users on the other. He places himself within the more mature and knowledgeable group, who uses cannabis in what he sees as more appropriate settings – more relaxed, intimate, and private. Joel's account echoes discourse and rituals coined as subcultural by Sandberg (2011). We do however not interpret these accounts as defensive responses to stigma. Rather, we find that the central understanding constitutive of this framing, is that attitudes to cannabis are accommodating – also amongst those who primarily use alcohol.

Even though some interviewees pointed out differences in effects and appropriate settings for cannabis and alcohol use, the overall tendency in our youth sample was to apply the culturally dominant script for alcohol use in their age group to give meaning and legitimacy to their cannabis use. Thus, using cannabis in social settings was framed as ‘normal’ and part of mainstream youth culture. The ‘mainstreaming’ is further established by emphasizing that cannabis can be used in the presence of, and is generally tolerated by, nonusing peers.

Cannabis experimentation as normative youth behavior

Some of the more cannabis-experienced participants claimed that using cannabis was not only accepted in similar ways as using alcohol, but even expected. According to Ines and Joel, experimenting with cannabis had become the norm in their peer group:

Ines: I kind of feel that it's... that it's more awkward not having tried it than having tried it. At least at my school and where I live, I feel many give a strange look at those who haven't tried (cannabis), because so many have tried it.

Interviewer: So, it's almost flipped around?

Ines: I feel the roles have turned now; that it's stranger not to have tried [cannabis] than having done it. (Ines, used >10 times)

Interviewer: How is cannabis use looked upon in your local surroundings?

Joel: In my local surroundings; nothing special, really. It's just the typical youth behavior; you take it occasionally. (...) It's become

such a typical thing [to do] for youth, kind of. It seems a bit ‘wrong’ to be young and not try it once, at least. It's like never going to a party during your secondary schoolyears. It's just those kinds of things you'll experience at that age. (Joel, used >10 times)

Ines and Joel make use of a cultural script in which youth are supposed to be curious and oriented towards new experiences and experimentation with drugs. Their accounts likely reflect their history of regular use and membership in the peer groups where many used or had tried cannabis. However, other participants in very different contexts also made use of this script. Peter's (used 4-10 times) closest friends had never tried cannabis, and he himself came across as highly ambivalent about whether using cannabis was acceptable or not. He still referred to the same cultural script when he explained that cannabis ‘could be dangerous’, but that people wanted ‘to explore as much as possible when young’.

Several others of the less cannabis-experienced participants implicitly related to this script in their accounts of why they had tried cannabis and decided not to use again. For instance, Sarah had tried cannabis once, taking only a few hits from a joint that had been passed around in a small group of friends. Based on this one experience, she had concluded that cannabis did not work for her and that there was no point in pursuing further use. Aurelia told a similar story; she had taken a hit or two a couple of times and concluded that it did not work for her. Elijah was on the same note. Initially in the interview he said that he had tried cannabis two or three times, and that it was useless, as he did not notice any effect. Later, he modified his story and said that he had only inhaled one puff once, and that he once had sat in a ‘hotbox’ for a short time before he changed his mind and left. In the excerpt below, he explains what he expected from smoking cannabis and how he responded when asked to use again:

I expected to feel a bit drowsy and relaxed, but I didn't feel a thing! I found that quite annoying! Many have asked me to do it again, but I've just said no, because it didn't have any proper effect on me. (.) ‘I've tried it, and I didn't like it’, kind of. (Elijah, used 1-3 times)

A common feature in these three examples is that the experimenting was so modest that any intoxicating effect could hardly be expected. The impression from these students' accounts was that their experimenting with cannabis was related to the perceived cultural expectations in their peer group, but rather half-hearted for them personally. Accordingly, experimenting with cannabis is generally framed as normative youth behavior in our sample – both by participants who were experienced and eager cannabis users, and by participants who had hardly tried and were negative towards using again.

Framing cannabis as medicine

The third main theme in the interviews is the framing of cannabis use as positively related to health and well-being. For

instance, Vincent (used >10 times) framed cannabis as ‘the perfect sleeping medicine’ and described how he took ‘four or five puffs to get tired’ when he had to get up early the next morning. Sophia (used >10 times) explained that ‘[cannabis] helps a lot of people to sleep better. At least it did so for me – I slept a lot better’.

Several of the girls also framed cannabis as a remedy for relieving strenuous emotional or mental states. For instance, Janet (used 4–10 times) said that girls would typically use cannabis because they were struggling with their mental health and needed to ‘wind down’. She had felt depressed in her final year in lower secondary school, and she explained that her experimentation with cannabis was motivated by a wish to relieve these negative emotions. Similarly, Mina said that cannabis provided her with ‘a break’ in periods when she was feeling down:

If I had had a bad month, or a bad week where I really had felt down, I thought: ‘Okay, now I’m gonna take a break and buy a little [cannabis]. And when I’ve smoked what I bought, I’ll get a grip on myself and try to get on the right track again.’ It’s the way it is: Every time I smoke, I think: ‘After this, I’ll try to get a grip and do this and that and that.’ (Mina, used >10 times)

She used cannabis as a means of logging off, and as a means for ‘getting a grip’ on herself and getting on with everyday activities.

Lisa primarily used cannabis to ease her ADHD symptoms and to improve sleep. She said that cannabis calmed her down and ‘turned [her] head off’ in a manner that prescribed medicine could not. When asked whether she used to take her prescribed medicine every day, and whether she would combine it with cannabis, she said:

Lisa: I usually don’t take it [the prescribed medicine] during week-ends. And I’ve never noticed anything negative from taking them together, really. And I usually take the ADHD-medicine in the morning, while I usually smoke [cannabis] in the evening. Often right before going to sleep and such. (Lisa, used >10 times)

Lisa expected to continue using cannabis for the same purposes in the future, and she described that her non-using friends accepted her health-related motives for use, even if they were reluctant towards recreational use of cannabis and other illegal drugs. This acceptance of a more ‘medicinal’ use of cannabis was echoed in Samuel’s (used 1–3 times) statement that he would ‘understand it, emotionally’ if someone of his own age used cannabis ‘because they were stressed out or were feeling very bad’. To him, this was more legitimate than using cannabis ‘to have a laugh’ at a party.

In these stories, cannabis is framed as having specific and positive medicinal functions, such as providing sleep aid and relieving strenuous mental states. Such narratives differ from those described in the two previous themes. They also substantively differ from the descriptions of cannabis use as normalized among youth, as such health-based narratives reflect individual use for medicinal purposes, rather than use for leisure and socializing with friends. The extent to which this framing is used in our young participants’ stories of their own cannabis use seems novel for the Norwegian context.

Discussion

Our analysis suggests that there is an ongoing re-framing of cannabis use in contemporary youth culture in Norway. Only a decade ago, adult users in Norway were heavily drawing on alternative and oppositional values in their accounts of cannabis use (Sandberg, 2011, 2013). Today, young high school students in our material underscored how cannabis use takes place within the mainstream youth culture and resembles normative use of alcohol. Rather than expressions of subcultural identities and openness to alternative ideas (Dahl, 2015; Dahl & Heggen, 2014; Sandberg, 2013), cannabis use in our sample of adolescent users was primarily framed as part of mainstream identities and youth culture built upon normative developmental transitions, or as a health-related choice.

Comparisons between cannabis and alcohol were frequent in our interviews, with a focus on the similarities and interchangeability of the two substances. This particular use of alcohol-centered narratives markedly diverge from Sandberg’s (2011) earlier findings where subcultural discourse was the most frequently used one in his interviews with adult cannabis users. Even though we see some traces of the subcultural discursive repertoire – which centers on the positive difference of both cannabis users and cannabis – the adolescents in our study tended to emphasize equivalence between cannabis users and non-users, and of cannabis and alcohol use. This manner of comparing the heavily regulated but legal alcohol with the still illegal cannabis resembles what is described as normalization discourse (Sandberg, 2011). However, while Sandberg (2011) argued a decade ago that both normalization-, subcultural-, and neutralization discourse should be interpreted as responses to stigmatization, our interpretation is that our young participants experienced accommodating attitudes (Parker et al., 2002) towards cannabis use in their peer groups and that its subcultural appeal linked to opposition and alternative values was less important.

One possible explanation for this difference is that our participants were younger and had more limited cannabis experience, while the participants in Sandberg’s and Dahl’s studies already made cannabis use a more central part of their identities following comprehensive experiences over longer time periods (Dahl, 2015; Sandberg, 2011, 2013). However, our findings may also indicate that the social meanings of cannabis use in Norway have in fact been evolving over the last decade, and that using cannabis no longer symbolizes alternative and subcultural orientations to the same extent as before. It is possible that the North American liberalization trends and accompanying cannabis debates are affecting youth even in socio-cultural settings characterized by restrictive drug policy and limited cultural history of recreational use. This interpretation is supported by Bilgri et al. (2022) finding that Norwegian adolescents’ narratives related to cannabis policy reflect an increasingly liberal public discourse concerning cannabis use (e.g. American Addiction Centres, 2023; NOU 2019: 26, 2019; The Marijuana Policy Project (MPP), 2023).

Our participants’ claim that cannabis and alcohol were increasingly seen as ‘at the same level’ may indicate that the two intoxicants are symbolically moving closer to each other

and that adolescent users employ their cultural knowledge of alcohol to give meaning to their cannabis use. The framing of cannabis as something young people are expected to try—like initiating alcohol use in the context of social gatherings and parties—as part of the normative transition to adulthood points in the same direction. It is worth noting, however, that although many describe cannabis *experimentation* as normative behavior, *regular use*, or adult use, for that matter, may still be viewed as deviant. This could be one explanation as to why about one third of the sample (9 students) stated they would never use cannabis again.

The participants in our study describe cannabis use in party settings with many participants – also with peers who do not use cannabis themselves. This, in combination with the findings that cannabis is framed as ‘the same’ as alcohol and as something youth are expected to try, suggest that cannabis use in these settings is becoming more ‘mainstream’ in the sense that it is increasingly socially and culturally accommodated (see also Järvinen & Demant, 2011; Ladegaard, 2023; Parker et al., 2002). Ladegaard (2023) identifies a similar decoupling of cannabis use and counter-cultural ideas in a recent study of electronically published consumer reports of cannabis and psychedelics (Ladegaard, 2023). He notes that narratives associated with anti-capitalist sentiments, rebellion or a community for alternative, free-thinking individuals are absent in the reports. He concludes that the tone and content of the reports suggest that drug-taking is ‘best understood as recreational consumption, in line with research on drug normalization’.

Even though the framing of cannabis use as resembling normative alcohol use was the more common in our sample, there were also additional and different framings. Unlike alcohol, cannabis was also framed as a means for providing sleep, or for relieving depressive moods and ADHD-symptoms. While cannabis as a means of alleviating physical and/or psychological conditions and stress is not necessarily a new phenomenon for adolescents growing up in cultures with more pronounced cannabis use traditions (Bottorff et al., 2009), the emergence of these medical framings seem relatively recent for Norwegian youth. Medically motivated use has been noted, but only in older, experienced cannabis users who still embraced the rituals, argot, political opposition and “green” values of the traditional Norwegian cannabis culture (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013). Among our adolescent users, cannabis was framed as something that can be used in solitude and for medicinal purposes, thus diverging from both the socially oriented ‘sensible use’ (Parker et al., 2002) addressed in the normalization literature and opposition-oriented subcultural use more typical in Norway historically speaking.

We believe this novel framing of adolescents’ cannabis use should be understood in light of the growing global discourse concerning the potential health benefits of cannabis and the legalization of cannabis use for medical purposes in several key jurisdictions (Sznitman & Bretteville-Jensen, 2015; UNODC, 2020). Indeed, a set of recent studies noted that American young adults are lessening their cannabis use for celebratory purposes (Graupensperger et al., 2021) and that both American college and high school students commonly use cannabis as a

sleep aid (Drazdowski et al., 2021; Goodhines et al., 2022). Even in a strict drug policy context like Norway (Larsson, 2021; Moeller, 2019), with relatively low levels of cannabis use among adolescents compared to North American and European rates (ESPAD, 2020), adolescents partake in globalized discussions and discourses about cannabis use online. These discussions and discourses offer new frames for understanding, and we suggest that they may fuel a cultural change, where this self-administered medicinal use may be increasingly accommodated in youth culture. To what extent this novel framing is becoming normalized among Norwegian youth, and, if so, in what groups of youth, remains to be seen. For example, more girls than boys in our sample used the framing of cannabis as a remedy for relieving strenuous emotional or mental states. Whether gender sensitive prevention approaches may be needed remains to be addressed in further studies. Finally, future in-depth investigation of these emerging framings may also be warranted given the strong evidence that using cannabis to relieve stress (Glodosky & Cuttler, 2020) or to cope with psychiatric symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Schermitzler et al., 2023) may be particularly maladaptive and associated with adverse outcomes.

Conclusion

The participants tended to emphasize the social equivalence between cannabis users and non-users, and of using cannabis and alcohol in social settings. However, unlike alcohol, cannabis was also framed as a means for providing sleep, or for relieving depressive moods and ADHD-symptoms. This framing markedly diverges from the traditional understandings of youths’ cannabis use as either subcultural and opposition-oriented or recreational and normalized.

Our results indicate that even in a strict drug policy context like Norway, adolescent cannabis use is increasingly given meaning within a mainstream, rather than subcultural frame. In addition, there also seems to be an ongoing social and cultural accommodation of medicinal cannabis use, fueled by global discourse concerning the potential health benefits of cannabis and the legalization of cannabis use for medical purposes. A comprehensive and updated understanding of how young people perceive and give meaning to their cannabis use is central for designing and implementing relevant prevention strategies.

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