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## RESEARCH NOTE

### IS CANNABIS TOURISM DEVIANT? A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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With the growth of cannabis tourism, destinations such as the Netherlands have begun to offer cannabis-related products and services to visitors, including tourists from countries where all drugs are strictly prohibited. Yet limited research has sought to understand cannabis-oriented tourists' efforts to neutralize deviant connotations, namely by justifying or rationalizing misbehavior, when deciding to participate in cannabis tourism. This research note proposes a framework of deviant consumption behavior (DCB) constructed of geographic shifting, self-identity shifting, and moral identity shifting from the perspective of cannabis-oriented tourists to delineate tourists' decision-making process around engaging in deviant behaviors. The proposed framework suggests that previously developed DCB frameworks in the marketing and consumer behavior literature should be adapted for use in outbound tourism research. This research note also highlights areas for debate and investigation regarding cannabis tourists' deviant behavior. Future research directions are provided based on the proposed framework as it applies to deviant tourism research.

**Key words: Deviant consumption; Neutralization; Deviance externalization;  
Cannabis tourism; Amsterdam; Chinese tourists**

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#### Introduction

This research note reports on cannabis tourism in destinations where cannabis and relevant products are permitted to be consumed for recreational purposes. Specifically, this work examines the perspective of cannabis-oriented tourists from countries

where drugs are legally prohibited. Cannabis tourism is not a new phenomenon, as it has been explored from numerous social and psychological perspectives. Cannabis-related consumption has often been acknowledged as the “dark side” of consumption; deviant consumer behavior has attracted increasing interest among marketing scholars in

recent years (e.g., Daunt & Harris, 2011; Yi & Gong, 2008). As illustrated in Figure 1, this article draws from an ongoing project regarding popular cannabis tourism destinations and raises issues to be considered in this emerging form of tourism. This article primarily aims to enhance understanding of the mechanisms behind cannabis-oriented tourists' efforts to neutralize deviant connotations and justify or rationalize misbehavior through their decision-making process around cannabis tourism participation. The contributions of this research note are believed to lay a solid theoretical foundation for future empirical investigations.

Cannabis tourism is an area of growing interest among tourism scholars. Studies have explored recreational marijuana management in Colorado (Keul & Eisenhauer, 2019; Taylor, 2016), definitions of marijuana tourism (Taylor, 2018), cannabis tourism motivations (Wen, Meng, Ying, Qi, & Lockyer, 2018), and cannabis tourist segmentation (Wen, Meng, Ying, & Belhassen, 2019) among other topics. Given the nature of cannabis consumption in many contemporary societies, tourists' involvement in cannabis tourism has been recognized as deviant (Belhassen, Santos, & Uriely, 2007) if such behavior is either illegal or socially unacceptable in tourists' home countries (e.g., cannabis-oriented tourists from China). Deviant consumer behaviors (DCBs) refer to behaviors that are against the law, regulations, or organizational policy or that violate

accepted norms of conduct (Fullerton & Punj, 1993). Becker (1963) argued that deviance is socially constructed by moral entrepreneurs (i.e., states, firms, or individuals) who "work to persuade society that it should enforce rules, and by social interactions that construct deviant identities by defining them as such through moral labelling" (Garcia-Bardidia, Nau, & Remy, 2011, p. 1791). Although DCBs are regarded as norm violations in the eyes of external markets or organizations, such behaviors are neither irrational nor illogical from consumers' perspectives (Daunt & Harris, 2011). In the current research note, deviant behavior (e.g., cannabis consumption) is illegal and violates accepted norms of conduct in tourists' home environment (e.g., China) but is accepted in overseas tourist destinations. For example, cannabis consumption is considered a cause of numerous social and health problems in China but is perceived quite differently in some Western cultures (e.g., Amsterdam and Colorado), where recreational use of cannabis is considered beneficial for spiritual healing and relaxation (Wen et al., 2018).

It is important to note that variations exist in consumers' perceptions of ethicality (Neale & Fullerton, 2010) and wrongness (Wilkes, 1978). Consumers often adopt neutralization techniques to justify or rationalize their misbehavior (Sykes & Matza, 1957) as they seek to internalize morality shaped by laws or organizational policies (Cooter,

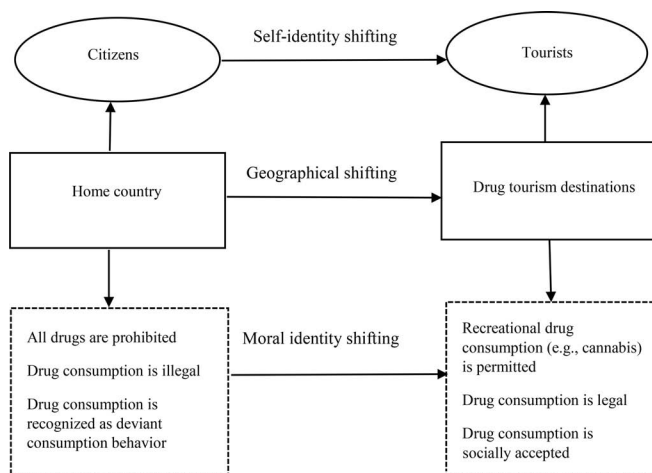


Figure 1. Proposed deviant consumption behavior (DCB) theoretical framework.

2000) and resolve the conflict between engaging in DCBs for personal benefit and maintaining their self-concept (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). As long as these behaviors fall within consumers' deviance threshold (Dootson, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2016; Festinger, 1957; Mazar et al., 2008), they are considered acceptable.

Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory of neutralization techniques provides a useful framework for understanding consumers' psychological tactics that enable them to perpetrate deviant behavior while remaining committed to socially espoused norms and values (Piquero, Tibbetts, & Blankenship, 2005). To expand on Sykes and Matza's (1957) five initial techniques (i.e., denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties), subsequent investigations have proposed additional psychological tactics adopted by consumers to neutralize and justify misbehavior. Examples include defense of necessity (Minor & William, 1981), claims of entitlement (McGregor, 2008), normal practice (Coleman, 1994), claims of relative acceptability (Henry & Eaton, 1989), and justification by comparison (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003). These tactics constitute a theoretical foundation for investigating tourists' neutralization around consuming cannabis in overseas destinations despite cannabis-related consumption being deemed deviant in their home countries.

In the marketing literature, many DCB and neutralization studies have focused on how consumers internalize values, beliefs, and norms imposed by society and other external actors while engaging in deviance neutralization. This phenomenon inspires the question of whether internalization is the only approach by which consumers can neutralize socially deviant behavior. In other words, might consumers discontinue deviant behavior when they find that the associated risks are beyond their deviance threshold? We argue that—as the values, beliefs, and morality of what constitutes an objective classification of behavioral wrongness are socially constructed—a shift in the social atmosphere where DCBs occur may offer an alternative and outside means of deviance neutralization. Tourism provides a suitable context for such empirical exploration. As shown in Figure 1, this study proposes a theoretical framework indicating

that tourism facilitates consumers' neutralization of deviant behaviors—namely recreational cannabis use—through three mechanisms: neutralization through geographic shifting, identity shifting, and moral shifting.

### Geographic Shifting

Tourism is usually conceptualized as a legitimate departure from everyday behavioral constraints (Goffman, 1963, 1967; Shields, 1992). Regulations, laws, and sociocultural norms around deviant tourism activities such as recreational drug consumption vary across destinations. Geographic shifting may provide tourists an opportunity to neutralize deviant behaviors between their home countries and overseas destinations. When cannabis-oriented tourists consume recreational cannabis away from home, such geographic shifting enables travelers to engage in activities that are prohibited in their home countries (e.g., China) but tolerated under specific regulations in certain overseas destinations (e.g., Amsterdam, the Netherlands). Amsterdam has long been known for its accessibility to commercial cannabis and sex, making it one of the world's most prominent cannabis tourism destinations (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001). According to BBC News (2012), the development of cannabis tourism in this city led to Amsterdam receiving approximately 1.5 million tourists looking to consume cannabis each year, including travelers from China where drugs are largely demonized. For these tourists, neutralization of deviant behaviors like cannabis use may be associated with a high level of risk beyond their deviance threshold. Despite China's long history with drugs and related consumption, strict laws state that citizens found taking drugs can be detained for up to 15 days and sent to rehabilitation centers. The general public has been implored to avoid all types of drugs. Tourism may therefore provide an alternative means by which consumers can neutralize deviant behavior. Without geographic shifting, consumers' neutralization of such behavior may not be possible. Compared with Sykes and Matza's (1957) identified neutralization techniques, tourists' geographic shifting is likely another form of denial of responsibility, such that tourists can interpret their responsibilities and behavioral standards differently under a

destination's rules and regulations. This geographic shift offers an acceptable excuse (Minor & William, 1981) for tourists to normalize deviant behavior. Different from previously identified neutralization techniques mainly used to explain deviant behaviors in light of responsibility avoidance or guilt, geographic shifting through tourism seems to promote deviant behavior by affording tourists an external environment conducive to neutralization of deviant behaviors. Future research could investigate the impact of geographic shifting on consumers' participation in deviant behaviors and the neutralization dynamic.

### Identity Shifting

In terms of overseas tourism, geographical shifting may also facilitate tourists' social identity shift to lead their neutralization of deviant behaviors. Drawing from social identity theory, a person's social identity refers to his or her self-categorization or classification with a social group, which then forms a set of standards to guide behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individuals' social identities are heavily influenced by the social environment in which they live; with life experience and increased awareness of different social categories, individuals' social identities are subject to change (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reiher, & Wetherell, 1987). Following this theory, tourism research found when people travel to a tourism destination where social norms are different from their home countries, a shift in social identity may occur (Bond & Falk, 2013). For example, tourists perceive leisure travel as a "license for thrill" (Wickens, 1997, p. 151) and believe that as tourists, they are allowed—or even encouraged—to pursue risky activities that may be deemed socially deviant at home, such as cannabis tourism. As such, through tourism, a consumer's social identity may shift from a "citizen" at home to a "tourist" at a travel destination, thereby developing differential tolerance to deviant behaviors (Belhassen et al., 2007). Use of an identity shift as a potential neutralization technique may be similar to a previously identified technique: claim of entitlement (McGregor, 2008), through which consumers believe they have a right to engage in deviant behaviors due to having a superior or unique identity. Future research could

explore the potential effect of identity shifting on neutralization.

### Moral Identity Shifting

Tourists' deviant behaviors are highly influenced by their moral identity, referring to "the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity" (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 212). The development of moral identity is similar to social identification, which is heavily influenced by one's external environment and social norms. Most accounts of moral identity frame the concept as remaining relatively stable across situations, akin to a personality trait, even though moral identity develops over time (Blasi, 2004; Colby & Damon, 1992; Moshman, 2005). However, recent social cognitive approaches have suggested that although the importance of morality to a person's identity may be rather stable, one's sense of moral identity may be constructed "moment to moment" (Monin & Jordan, 2009) and more or less activated in particular situations (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Stets & Carter, 2006). In terms of cannabis tourism, tourists' moral identity shifting may result in geographical shifting and identity shifting. Among cannabis-oriented tourists, before leading to moral action, a moral judgment can pass through a judgment of responsibility such that an action is seen as moral and as something for which the individual is responsible (Bandura, 2014). Criteria for such judgments often stem from individual differences in the extent to which being moral is central or essential to one's sense of self—that is, one's moral identity. When a person's identity is centered on morality, the desire to live in a manner consistent with one's sense of self can serve as a key moral motivation. Because tourists can experience recreational cannabis in overseas destinations free from illegal constraints, identity shifting could result in a moral identity shift to be liberated from moral condemnation based on engagement in certain deviant activities. As a result, tourists' moral identity shifting may harken back to Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques, including denial of the victim, normal practice, and claims of relative acceptability. Therefore, future research could further identify the role of moral identity shifting in tourists' neutralization of deviant consumption.

### Limitations and Exceptions to the DCB Framework

Although the DCB framework has been developed and applied widely in the marketing and consumer behavior literature (e.g., Sykes & Matza, 1957; Piquero et al., 2005), the current article argues that this framework must be adapted for tourism to better delineate deviant consumption behaviors in a tourism context. Drawing from social identity theory, especially for outbound tourism, geographic shifts result in self-identity shifts (i.e., from citizens to tourists) when tourists travel from their home countries to overseas destinations. Thus, the DCB frameworks developed for specific environments are not adaptable across geographic areas. Based on geographic and self-identity shifts, tourists' moral identity can also shift given their attitudes towards certain consumption behaviors considered deviant and illegal at home but socially accepted and legal overseas. As illustrated in Figure 1, this article proposes a theoretical framework composed of three shifts to adapt the DCB framework to a tourism perspective. Therefore, this research note presents a novel attempt to propose a framework to evaluate tourists' deviant consumption using the case of cannabis tourism in Amsterdam. As the proposed framework enables researchers to understand consumers' deviant behaviors in multiple environments, it is well suited to the multifaceted nature of outbound tourism.

### Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This article has introduced the concept of deviant consumption neutralization and raised a series of questions on the topic to provide a preliminary understanding of this phenomenon. As illustrated in Figure 1, a theoretical framework is proposed to indicate how geographic shifting, identity shifting, and moral identity shifting facilitate tourists' neutralization of deviant consumption using cannabis tourism as an example. Future research directions are also provided to better understand deviant consumer behavior in a tourism context.

The current market development in cannabis tourism calls for more research attention. With the growth of cannabis tourism, destinations such as the Netherlands, many of the US states, Canada,

Denmark, Spain, and Uruguay have started offering cannabis-related products and services to visitors (Webster, 2017). From the consumer's perspective, cannabis-oriented tourists are also internally motivated to participate in cannabis tourism for pursuing *spiritual and emotional healing*, *social prestige*, and *relaxation and escape*. Occasionally, consumers are simply interested in *cannabis experimentation* (Wen et al., 2018). Cannabis consumption has become one of primary tourism appeals, a trend that provides opportunities for insightful exploration of tourists' interpretations of deviant behavior in a tourism context.

Although the normalization of cannabis use in Western societies could diminish the uniqueness of traditional destinations such as Amsterdam, this normalization process could also increase the demand for destinations where cannabis-related services can be experienced freely. In light of normalized cannabis use in many countries coupled with increased competition in the related tourism market, a better understanding of this growing segment should prove valuable. From a tourist perspective, it remains unclear how the apparent shift in morality and labeling around cannabis consumption (i.e., illegal and criminalized at home but legal and acceptable abroad) affects tourists' deviance neutralization and their decisions to travel overseas to engage in a consumer activity considered deviant in their native social environment. Thus, research employing mixed methods (e.g., exploratory qualitative analysis and subsequent quantitative analysis using cross-sectional surveys) could better contextualize tourists' deviant behaviors in a tourism context. As shown in Figure 1, these shifts represent three drivers behind tourists' strategies to neutralize behavior. Other potentially important underlying factors could also be explored to extend the proposed model. Although this research note focuses on cannabis consumption, the proposed framework may apply to other illicit substances that are legal in certain regions. This model can thus be used to examine a range of drug consumption in destinations such as Jamaica (Gamradt, 1995) and Thailand (Westerhausen, 2002). Furthermore, while this research note considers cannabis-oriented tourists whose home countries have outlawed cannabis consumption, the proposed model can also be applied with tourists from areas where cannabis



consumption is socially acceptable to determine whether any of these shifts may influence cannabis-related consumption. Therefore, this article calls for further efforts to enrich understanding of DCBs and neutralization mechanisms by 1) exploring how consumers react to a consumption behavior subject to contrasting moral identity when the marketplace is separated from their original social environment, and 2) addressing a new externalizing approach to consumer deviance neutralization via moral identity and label shifting.

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