Branding Belonging in the Night:

Youth Perception and Inclusion in Dutch Nightlife

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Abstract

This thesis examines how branding in nightlife settings is interpreted and perceived by young people in the Netherlands. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 18–25 and guided by a theoretical framework combining branding theory, identity, spatial politics and audience reception, the study uses reflexive thematic analysis to examine how branding communicates inclusion, exclusion, and identity performance. The findings demonstrate that participants experience branding as an emotive and symbolic system, signifying where participants feel safe, included, or excluded. Participants actively interpret visual, spatial, and social signs, usually negotiating or resisting branding expectations. These interpretations are shaped by personal social identity, taste, and experience. Though some branding was experienced as enabling self-expression, others experienced it as constraining or exclusionary. This analysis illustrates that branding is not solely a marketing technique, but a symbolic infrastructure that co-produces social meaning in nightlife contexts. As a feature of nightlife branding, it both reflects and legitimises symbolic boundaries in terms of aesthetics, crowds, and spatial cues (for example, music genre, door policy, and dress codes). Participants assessed 'moral' and aesthetic choices based on the branding cues, articulating their preferences as well as critiques and moments of ambivalence. In this sense, the use of branding cues is closely tied to a deep sense of belonging and the ability to negotiate or perform identities in nightlife space. Approaching branding as part of a dynamic interpretive process engages the tension between inclusion and exclusion, even in a nightclub space branded as inclusive. It is important to note that many participants articulated how nightlife branding functioned as a way to express their creativity and/or a form of liberation, but carried with it implicit standards which correspond with marginalising or alienating some bodies or behaviours. The study importantly highlighted how participants did not take these branded cues passively, but rather engaged in sense-making processes that involved resisting, reinterpreting, and negotiating affection. This research contributes to nightlife studies and branding research by highlighting the active participation of the young audience in creating the meaning of branded spaces, and also providing thoughtful perspectives on broader implications of symbolic limits in urban youth leisure culture.
KEYWORDS: *branding, nightlife, youth, perception, inclusion.*

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1. Introduction

Contemporary nightlife has evolved from informal social gatherings to a highly planned cultural economy, shaped by branding strategies that target specific audiences (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367; Moore, 2016, p. 50). In Dutch cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht, nightlife venues have become "branded institutions" that use spatial, visual, and social cues to appeal to their "preferred social and ethnic make-up of the crowd" (Bruin, 2011, p. 174). From highly curated visual aesthetics to exclusionary door policies, nightlife branding is not only employed to promote events but to convey identity, belonging, and access (Koren, 2023, p. 48). In this research, nightlife is defined as "the consumption practices and social activities at night time (after 8 pm) … that take place in nightlife establishments, such as pubs, clubs" and bars (Brands et al., 2014, p. 96). These spaces serve multiple functions: they are sites of entertainment and escape, but also "spaces of performance," where young people experiment with identity and develop what Moore, drawing on Grazian, describes as a "nocturnal self" (Grazian, as cited in Moore, 2016, pp. 50-51). The signals conveyed by nightlife branding have a particularly strong impact on young people who are actively negotiating identity formation and social positioning (Sinclair, 2008, pp. 217-218).

1.1 Societal Relevance

Nightlife plays a significant role in young people's lives as it allows them to connect with others, express themselves emotionally, and explore their identities. As van Liempt et al. (2014) state, it is "a realm of play…a time of friendship, of love, of conversation" which supports youth well-being and social formation (van Liempt et al., 2014, p. 408). Yet, this space of personal exploration and social freedom co-exists in tension with its economic function. As the authors point out, there are "obvious links between night-life, profitability and inter-urban competitiveness" (van Liempt et al., 2014, p. 412), which raise important questions about who is granted access to these spaces and under what conditions.

Nightlife has substantial implications for young people's well-being. As Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz (2023) state, nightlife is "fundamental…for community-building, multicultural understanding and socio-emotional well-being at both individual and collective level" (Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, p. 95). The possibility of finding a space that truly feels inclusive, affirming,

and expressive of one's identity can make a significant contribution to a young person's social confidence, social well-being, and overall sense of belonging within a community. Contrarily, branded exclusion—whether it is through racialised door policies, visual aesthetics, or music curation—can produce perceptions of exclusion and cultural marginalisation (Hae, 2011, pp. 3449, 3454; de Bruin, 2011, p. 172).

In a time marked by ongoing public debates surrounding inclusivity, diversity, and cultural representation, particularly among young people, it is critical to evaluate how branding within nightlife facilitates or hinders this sense of belonging.

1.2 Academic Relevance

This research contributes to the growing field of Nightlife Studies, which examines the cultural and social dimensions of night-time leisure. As outlined by Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz, the field explores "how we dance, behave and relate to each other in nightlife environments according to social class, gender, sexual orientation, age and cultural and ethnic background" (Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, p. 94). These dynamics are heavily shaped by the practices used in the curation, promotion, and branding of nightlife venues (Koren, 2023, p. 43).

Although nightlife has been thoroughly examined, few scholars have addressed how young people interpret branding as a symbolic system that shapes their sense of belonging (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2012, p. 280; van Liempt et al., 2014, p. 414; van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1254). Brands et al. note the exclusionary tendencies within Dutch students' nightlife, but do not make branding focal as an interpretive tool (Brands et al., 2014, p. 96). While Livingstone urges research to consider how people interpret media according to their lived socioeconomic position, de Bruin advises that more focus be placed on how class and ethnic-based segmentation functions within nightlife branding (de Bruin, 2011, pp. 205-207; Livingstone, 2015, p. 442).

Ultimately, this study addresses a gap in research by integrating branding theory with nightlife studies and youth culture. Drawing on Arvidsson's (2006) research, which emphasises that brands serve as a form of "information capitalism," tthis thesis treats branding not only as a marketing tool but as a symbolic system through which social values are expressed and

experienced (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 9). This is linked with Crosby's emphasis on the importance of comprehending the audience's interactions with media, who explains "[u]nderstanding audience reception is integral to understanding how people find meaning in their encounters with media" (Crosby, 2022, p. 11). By applying both of these lenses to nightlife, it allows us to unpack the ways nightlife branding shapes symbolic boundaries and social cues.

1.3 Research Aim and Question

This study aims to explore the ways young people in the Netherlands perceive and experience branding within nightlife venues, primarily focusing on the affective and symbolic dimensions of inclusion, exclusion and identity. The key research question guiding this thesis is: How do young people in the Netherlands perceive and interpret branding in nightlife spaces?

This question is examined through three sub-questions:

1. How do young people perceive branding in terms of inclusion and exclusion within nightlife spaces?

2. How do young people interpret and respond to these branding signals in terms of their own identity?

3. How do young people's interpretations of branding influence their decisions to attend, avoid, or critique particular nightlife venues?

1.4 Theoretical Background

This research draws on three primary theoretical themes: branding, nightlife, and the intersection between the two through the lens of audience reception and identity.

1.4.1 Branding as Social Sorting and Experience

As previously stated, branding in this research is understood as both a symbolic and affective process. Drawing on Brakus et al.'s (2009) perspective of branding as a sensory experience and Arvidsson's (2006) notion of brands as "informational capitalism", this research

focuses on how branding communicates boundaries and identity in nightlife (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53; Arvidsson, 2006, p. 9). Thus, branding is not treated as a fixed meaning, but as a system interpreted by young people through their social and emotional positioning.

1.4.2 Nightlife and Identity Performance

Particularly for young people, nightlife is understood as a space of performance and identity experimentation. Making use of Moore's (2016) concept of "nocturnal selves" and Grazian's emphasis on performative nightlife rituals, this study treats nightlife as a stage where identity, taste and belonging are negotiated, rather than just a cultural space of leisure (Moore, 2016, p. 56; Grazian, 2008, pp. 8, 24). These observations also guide how the study interprets participants' remarks on freedom, discomfort, and self-expression in nightlife spaces.

1.4.3 Audience Reception and Meaning-Making

Rather than assuming that branding has fixed effects on audiences, this thesis approaches audiences as active interpreters (Walmsley, 2021, p. 308). By drawing on Livingstone's (2013, 2015) participation paradigm and audience reception theory, Walmsley's (2021) engagement paradigm and Crosby's (2022) model of Audience 2.0, this study seeks to understand how young people interpret branding through their lived experiences. These perspectives demonstrate how audience perceptions of branding in nightlife are not linear or passive, but rather are influenced by social identities, individual experiences, and the emotional atmosphere of the venues.

1.5 Methodological Positioning

This research adopts a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews to foreground participants' lived experiences and meaning-making associated with Dutch nightlife settings. This is a relevant research method when the aim is to understand participants' perspectives and interpretations, as supported by the study of Adeoye‑Olatunde and Olenik (2021) (Adeoye‑Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360). Interview participants were recruited through purposive sampling in order to ensure a diverse range of nightlife participants were gathered, across gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1361). Additionally, snowball sampling was to reach further relevant participants through the social

networks of those already recruited (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 2). All interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed using ATLAS.ti (Woods et al., 2016, p. 600). This approach is particularly appropriate to an audience reception study, in which meaning is understood to be influenced by identity, positionality, and interpretation.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The following section presents the theoretical framework, elaborating on branding, nightlife, identity, audience reception and their interaction. The third chapter outlines the research design employed in this thesis, including sampling, the operationalisation of the core theories, the interview process, ethical considerations and how the data is analysed. Chapter four contains the results of the research, which are organised thematically into the categories of: branding as cultural signalling, inclusion/exclusion, identity performance, aesthetic and moral judgements and resistance and sense-making. Finally, the fifth and final chapter concludes this research by summarising the key findings, reflecting on their implications and offering recommendations for future research within the field.

2. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework situates the present study within the interdisciplinary fields of media studies, cultural sociology, and urban geography, with attention to the intersection of branding, youth culture, identity, and the feeling of belonging in nightlife spaces. This provides the theoretical foundation to define and operationalise key concepts necessary for developing the interview guide, analysing the data and interpreting the ways that young adults articulate their views concerning branding practices in nightlife venues across Dutch cities. The framework is structured around three core themes: (1) branding, (2) nightlife and (3) audience reception and sense-making in branded nightlife spaces.

Although existing literature recognises branding as a cultural force in shaping urban leisure and consumer experience (e.g., Sinclair, 2008; Hollands & Chatterton, 2003), fewer studies theorise branding as a tool through which symbolic boundaries are enacted and access to nightlife is socially and spatially regulated. Therefore, by critically engaging with existing literature, the framework clarifies the theoretical lens through which the study explores the relationship between branding strategies and the social experiences of youth audiences.

Nightlife, once understood as an unorganised and spontaneous cultural sphere, is increasingly considered a highly constructed and commercialised sector within urban economies (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 361; Grazian, 2008, p. 51). In this shift, branding has moved beyond simple promotional activities to encompass the spatial, visual, and symbolic construction of nightlife venues as cultural products designed for specific social groups (Sinclair, 2008, p. 219). Although considerable empirical research has examined nightlife venues from the perspective of surveillance, security, or reurbanisation, relatively little attention has been paid to branding as a central influence on perceptions of inclusivity and exclusion (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2012, p. 280). Brands et al. (2014) identify social segmentation trends among Dutch students in nightlife contexts, but fail to fully theorise branding as an intermediary process on access and identity construction (Brands et al., 2014, p. 96). de Bruin (2011) suggests that greater attention should be given to how class and ethnic-based segmentation work within nightlife branding, whilst Livingstone (2015) calls for researchers to take account of how people decode media based on their lived social condition (de Bruin, 2011, pp. 205-207; Livingstone, 2015, p. 442). This research aims to address these gaps by exploring how young people in the Netherlands, from various ethnic backgrounds, engage with nightlife branding practices and how these practices form their perceptions of inclusion and exclusion, in relation to their lived experiences.

Simultaneously, this study draws on audience reception theory. Livingstone (2015) and Walmsley (2021) argue that audiences do not receive cultural messages passively; rather, they are actively involved as interpreters whose decoding mechanisms are influenced by the social context within which they exist (Livingstone, 2015, p. 441; Walmsley, 2021, p. 308). This study, therefore, highlights the relevance of branding as an object of analysis alongside subjective meaning-making practices employed by young people as they move through nightlife spaces.

Whilst the processes and theories explored here are not solely based in the context of Dutch cities, I will be implementing them within the Dutch setting. Comparative field studies illustrate that similar marketing tropes and exclusionary tendencies shape nightlife in various cities, including London, Paris, Berlin and New York (Grazian, 2008, p. 6; Picaud, 2019, p. 1; Talbot, 2007, p. 887). These studies reveal how nightlife venues often reproduce existing social inequalities through selective branding, aesthetic signalling and gatekeeping methods (Talbot, 2007, p. 890). In London, Talbot (2007) shows how regulatory discourses and aesthetic branding

work together to marginalise Afro-Caribbean spaces and favour establishments in conformity with white middle-class norms (Talbot, 2007, p. 889). In New York, Grazian (2008) shows how nightlife is curated through aesthetic and communicative cues to attract specific demographics and quietly exclude others (Grazian, 2008, p. 113). In his analysis, Picaud (2019) notes that most of Paris's nightlife spots are associated with urban renewal plans that inflate property prices and reshape the image of working-class areas; frequently situated in squatted or short-term rented factory spaces, the venues are absorbed into redevelopment plans that solidify both symbolic and economic divisions of the city (Picaud, 2019, p. 12). Additionally, the City of Berlin's branding exploits the music scene's "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995) to develop its image as an innovative city for start-up creators," even as these commercial developments put smaller, independent, community-run venues at risk (Thornton, 1995, as cited in Picaud, 2019, p. 3). These studies demonstrate that branding conveys symbolic and spatial boundaries—a concept central to this thesis's analytical approach to Dutch nightlife. Thus, while this thesis's empirical focus is on Dutch cities, its theoretical framing is attentive to the internationalised dynamics of nightlife economies and aims to contribute insights that might be relevant in broader discussions about urban youth cultures and symbolic access to public leisure spaces.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives constitute a conceptual framework that understands branding as symbolic infrastructure, nightlife as spatial and performative identity space, and young people as active interpreters of branding within nightlife spaces. These concepts are operationalised to address how branding practices influence experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging in the context of Dutch nightlife. In the following sections, this framework is developed into six fundamental conceptual domains divided across three pillars: branding, nightlife, and interpretation.

2.1 Branding

Branding in this research extends beyond marketing and includes how venues construct identities through visual, spatial, and symbolic cues (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367). Within nightlife, it exists at the intersection of service design and cultural signalling, unlike product branding, which focuses on the fixed/tangible goods marketed - nightlife branding is more fluid and experience-driven (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98). As noted by Hollands and Chatterton (2003):

there has been a corresponding shift towards the branding of services and images, and not just products... particularly the case when we look more closely at the nightlife industry, where we see a move away from just selling a product (alcohol), to offering a range of services (food, music, sports on TV, email etc.) and lifestyles (atmosphere, experience, cultural capital) (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367).

This is a critical perspective for this research, seeing as it regards branding as more than visual marketing; it considers branding as a complex, multi-sensory, emotional interaction that constructs a sense of attention to perceived inclusion and exclusion.

This research explores branding through two interrelated dimensions. Initially, branding is conceptualised as a mechanism of social sorting that establishes symbolic boundaries and sends implicit messages regarding belonging within nightlife venues. Secondly, branding is understood as an affective and sensory experience, whereby spatial design, atmosphere, and aesthetic stimuli influence the emotional experience of young people with nightlife establishments.

2.1.1 Branding as Social Sorting

Social sorting in nightlife refers to the gatekeeping practices through which individuals are classified, judged, and either included or excluded from elite social spaces, concerning one another through perceived status signals (such as social connectivity, cultural capital, image, and race) (Rivera, 2010, pp. 237, 247, 248). This process serves a dual purpose: reproducing symbolic and material exclusivity in nightlife spaces and reinforcing broader social hierarchies.

Branding is one of the main ways in which this sorting occurs, and in this section, branding is considered not only as a form of marketing communication but also a symbolic infrastructure that helps create and legitimise social boundaries. As brands manufacture and curate emotional and cultural associations, they also conduct a social sorting function, which takes on significant importance concerning nightlife venues, where the criteria for entry, spatial aesthetic, soundscape, and visual cues are all designed to appeal to a target clientele.

Within the nightlife industry, this staging, which Pine and Gilmore refer to, includes anything which engages the senses, for example: velvet ropes by the entrance of a club, interior decor, lights, and specifically curated playlists - all of which operate as codes of cultural signalling (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98). In this research, cultural signalling is defined as the use of any spatial, aesthetic or symbolic cues within a branded environment which convey depictions of certain group identities, social values and expectations (Grazian, 2008, p. 5; Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367). Collectively, these signs create a perceived social standard which coincides with social sorting: participants will interpret the space and form a decision on whether they belong within the brand's aesthetic or not. This interpretive task is quintessential to branding's social sorting process, seeing as cultural signals (e.g., minimalism, exclusivity, or 'underground authenticity) are not ubiquitous but instead are differentially recognised based on an individual's cultural capital and background (Grazian, 2008, pp. 16, 46, 47). This means that an individual perceives a nightlife environment depending on two factors: the signals conveyed by the venue and the interpretive frameworks that each participant carries with them. This concept will guide my analysis of how branding strategies suggest social boundaries and compel feelings of inclusion and exclusion within nightlife spaces.

Originally, branding functioned as a commercial identifier, allowing manufacturers to differentiate their products through brand names and logos (Sinclair, 2008, p. 218). However, Arvidsson (2006) notes this function has developed; a brand now operates as more than just its name and logo, but a produced identity which "can be employed to produce a particular kind of ethical surplus: a form of subjectivity…a social relation…or a shared experience" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 94). Hence, it must also be situated as a cultural phenomenon which greatly influences the audience's interactions with urban leisure environments. Arvidsson (2006) further describes brands as "a paradigmatic embodiment of the logic of informational capitalism," which generates value through consumer engagement instead of material production (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 7). In nightlife, branding communicates who belongs and who gets invited and specifies which experiences are offered (Sinclair, 2008, p. 222). Therefore, branding cannot be perceived as a neutral agent but rather as a symbolic and spatial agent which directly constructs social boundaries. This research approaches branding as a cultural construct which mediates social relations and forms symbolic meanings within nightlife settings. This analytical perspective

enables a deeper understanding of how young people navigate, interpret, and assign meaning to these branded environments.

Nevertheless, branding in nightlife is not solely about attraction - it also functions as an exclusionary practice (Boogaarts, 2008, p. 1284; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 103). The spatial and aesthetic decisions surrounding branding communicate who belongs and who does not (van Liempt, 2025, p. 46). Branding practices contribute to "the gentrification of nightlife," as Hae (2011) documented in her research of New York City nightlife and the cultural shift of clubs from subcultural, racialised nightlife to branded experiences that are central to corporatised, homogenised spaces (Hae, 2011, p. 3449). More broadly, "the wilder part of nightlife, repackaged with a chic touch, was promoted as iconic," while the communities that maintained nightlife to begin with were discarded, such as "underground music/performance clubs," "Afro-Caribbean venues" and other sub-cultural nightlife scenes (Hae, 2011, pp. 3454, 3450, 3451).

Gentrification processes are also connected to Talbot's (2006) study of the governance of nightlife in the United Kingdom, where "new forms of social and cultural differentiation" separate considerably respectable evening settings from rowdy ones that frequently sanction racially marginalised establishments (Talbot, as cited in Hae, 2011, p. 3451). These branding practices implicitly have genuine repercussions, since they determine who is allowed to participate in urban nightlife and who is marginalised (de Bruin, 2011, p. 172).

Whilst the ways in which branding functions as a symbolic mechanism in social sorting have been outlined in this section, it is important to consider the affective and sensory dimensions related to branding. Not only does nightlife branding set boundaries, but it creates atmospheres, evokes emotional attachments and forms how young people interpret, experience and engage with nightlife spaces. The following section explores branding as an experience, examining how sensory cues, aesthetics and interaction co-produce meaning and identity performance within nightlife settings.

2.1.2 Branding as an Experience

Brand experience is defined as "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli," such as "a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus et al., 2009,

p. 53). This concept is relevant for this study because it regards branding as more than visual marketing; it considers branding as a complex, multi-sensory, emotional interaction that constructs a sense of attention to perceived inclusion and exclusion. The power of brand experience to evoke emotive (excitement, recognition, comfort, and alienation) reactions—feelings that go beyond visual aesthetics—makes it especially significant in nightlife.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) note, "experiences are a distinct economic offering, as different from services as services are from goods," and must be intentionally designed to engage and provoke emotional responses from consumers over various timeframes (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 97). A nightlife venue, therefore, is not merely selling drinks or music; it stages a cultural experience that participants co-create through their presence, performance, and interpretation. This also places the consumer as not just a receiver of this branding, but an actor within the space, contributing to and shaping the brand as well. Drawing from their economic distinctions table, Pine and Gilmore argue that experiences are a separate economic offering from goods and services and require deliberate design in order for consumers to be engaged (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98). In the experience economy, it is crucial to engage customers on emotional, sensory and cognitive levels; "[t]he more senses an experience engages, the more effective and memorable it will be" (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 104).

Table 1

Economic Distinctions Between Commodities, Goods, Services, and Experiences

Economic Offering	Commodities	Goods	Services	Experiences
Economy	Agrarian	Industrial	Service	Experience
Economic Function	Extract	Make	Deliver	Stage
Nature of Offering	Fungible	Tangible	Intangible	Memorable

Key Attribute	Natural	Standardised	Customised	Personal
Method of Supply	Stored in bulk	Inventoried after production	Delivered on demand	Revealed over a duration
Seller	Trader	Manufacturer	Provider	Stager
Buyer	Market	User	Client	Guest
Factors of Demand	Characteristics	Features	Benefits	Sensations

Note. Adapted from Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(4), 97–105.

As previously noted, these elicited emotions are not just a pure reflection of the nightlife branding, but rather, they are co-constructed through social interaction and personal positioning. Livingstone (2013) explains that audiences are active participants within media, contending that "participation is never a wholly individual act, and it always advances certain interests," which supports the claim that nightlife audiences interpret and interact with the space in accordance to their personal positioning (Livingstone, 2013, p. 24).

This research aims to explore the sensory details—such as music, lighting, visual aesthetics—that are most influential for respondents in creating nightlife experiences. These results place branding not only as a fixed communication of meaning, but rather as a fluid context for individual interpretation, where audiences decode brand messages through the lens of their own social location and experiential past. This is consistent with the audience reception theory principles discussed in Section 2.3.1.

In addition to the attendees of nightlife events, there are other characters which influence a branded space's atmosphere. Grazian (2008) explains that:

In the context of urban nightlife, such supporting characters often (but not always) operate as a set of shills, or accomplices, who assist the aforementioned lead performers in generating a credible aura of enveloping enthusiasm for patrons to consume. Sometimes these confederates participate by engaging in the most subtle of perfor-mances-a quick smile from a quiet hat-check girl, a slap on the back by a boisterous bouncer, a moment of lip-synching by a bus-boy collecting empty beer bottles. Just as overexcited shills add to the "atmosphere of synthetic excitement" during the climaxes of sidewalk shell games and other hustles, nightclub and restaurant managers encourage support personnel to help artificially heighten the overall mood experienced by their patrons (Grazian, 2008, p. 16).

In this sense, brand experience becomes a way for nightlife businesses to extend their brand identity with a felt, memorable experience and not be solely reliant on their marketing.

Similarly, Sinclair contends that "[b]randing is an economic and cultural process," in this case in leisure settings, which "involve the expressive and emotional attachment of consumers" (Sinclair, 2008, p. 217). Both authors argue that branding is rooted in its ability to evoke emotional and affective engagement rather than its manufacturing of marketable goods. Furthermore, he notes that branding could serve to form "expressive and emotional attachment" between brands and consumers (Sinclair, 2008, p. 217). In the context of nightlife, these expressive and emotional attachments tend to be socially charged and assist in constructing nocturnal identities: a nightlife venue's brand assists "emerging adults" construct who they are for the night - a phenomenon which Grazian (2008) refers to as a "nocturnal self" (Grazian, 2008, pp. 8, 24). The appeal of certain nightlife venues is precisely this promise of letting customers feel like someone else, even just for a night (Moore, 2016, p. 51).

In sum, brand experience is a key theoretical concept within this research that looks at how people perceive nightlife branding outside of visual and auditory cues. It draws attention to how important social interaction, symbolic staging and sensory design are in creating emotionally charged environments. This method allows me to examine how nightlife brands are enacted through carefully crafted environments and participant responses, as opposed to viewing branding as a static picture or message. Understanding how youth describe their experiences in

exciting, comforting, or alienating nightlife spaces and how these experiences influence how they navigate urban leisure spaces in general will be important. These emotive and symbolic dynamics of branding become more meaningful when placed inside the distinctive cultural and spatial context of nightlife, which is the subject of the following section.

2.2 Nightlife

Nightlife holds great importance in the social, cultural and economic aspects of modern society (George & Fonceca, 2024, p. 157; Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, p. 94). After the stresses and routines of everyday life, nightlife offers many young people a crucial outlet for socialisation, emotional release, and symbolic affirmation. In addition to nightlife being a social and economic force, it is also a culturally loaded space which elicits symbolic meanings. Moore (2016) highlights that "nightlife is the space where people can safely step aside from their daytime personalities to fully experiment and play with their nocturnal selves" (Moore, 2016, p. 56). Nightlife settings make these alternate performances of identity possible; nightlife venues therefore produce cultural and emotional landscapes which differ from the landscapes of day-to-day life.

Nightlife is important not only for youth culture, but it is also an integral component of larger urban systems and economic infrastructure (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 366). Beyond being a space for socialising and leisure, nightlife further contributes to commercialisation, urban renewal and social regulation (van Liempt et al., 2014, p. 409; Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, p. 96). In urban studies and cultural sociology, nightlife illustrates how people connect with the changing plans of modern cities and has thus become a subject of interest to academics (van Liempt et al., 2014, p. 407; Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, p. 95). Therefore, nightlife can be considered beyond being a leisure setting for youth culture to a foundation which both produces and negotiates urban meaning (Liu et al., 2023, p. 2).

According to Hollands and Chatteron (2003), "the 'new' entertainment and nightlife economies is that they have become highly branded and theme-centric," highlighting a shift away from local subcultures of nightlife (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367). Their text is used in this research to highlight how nightlife contributes to the branding of cities, rendering it a focus of policy attention and city growth. Nightlife has become a strategic economic asset for

many cities, in regard to its contribution to tourism. As Hae (2011) explains, "[t]he governing of nightlife in this way, however, has ironically been coupled with persistent governmental campaigns to use nightlife in tourism marketing campaign" (Hae, 2011, p. 3452). For the US and Europe, "entertainment is one of the hottest sectors in real estate circles" and greatly contributes to the creation of many jobs, such as bouncers, bartenders, event promoters, etc (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 363).

This section has emphasised the wider cultural and scholarly significance of examining nightlife as a socially produced and contested place. The following sections will focus more intently on how identity creation and spatial politics play a role in nightlife spaces. Nightlife serves as a site for intentional leisure, meaning negotiation, and urban experience; it also serves as a prism through which we can look at questions of culture, space and belonging in the modern world.

2.2.1 Identity Formation Through Nightlife

Nightlife is more than a source of leisure; it is a space where identity, belonging, and cultural expression are performed whilst satisfying needs of belonging and continuity of identity (Brands et al., 2014, p. 97). Moore builds on Grazian's idea, viewing nightlife as "spaces of performance" where individuals can "experiment with identity" and create a "nocturnal self" (Grazian, as cited in Moore, 2016, p. 51). Grazian (2008) emphasises that attendants of nightlife spaces "engage in sporting rituals that…include the art of imposture through fashion, grooming, and style, and the performance of social status through effective techniques of role performance and theatricality" (Grazian, 2008, p. 94).

For the purpose of this study, identity formation is defined as the continuous process through which individuals comprehend, negotiate and express themselves in relation to their social environment and those surrounding it (Glavev, 2023, pp. 42, 67). This is not a fixed process, but rather shaped by various social and symbolic acts, as well as distinct spatial settings (Glavev, 2023, p. 68). Nightlife is an especially relevant site for youth identity formation because they "present youth with opportunities to experiment with various styles of public behavior and strategies of impression management" (Grazian, 2008, p. 23). Nighttime settings facilitate a space for symbolic detachment from daily routine, allowing individuals to engage in social experimentation with fewer constraints than in other spaces. As argued by Nofre and

Garcia-Ruiz (2023), "transforming nocturnal public spaces into arenas for more meaningful experiences…should encourage a greater sense of identity and community through enhancing cultural and social life in the public space at evening and night hours" (Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, p. 100). Similarly, Liu et al. (2023) consider that:

> As a carrier of everyday nightlife, urban nightlife districts thus undergo a transformation into cultural sites. The evolution of the urban nightlife landscape inherently mirrors the indigenous culture and, to some degree, the sentiments of its patrons, thereby accent-uating the vitality of a city (Liu et al., 2023, p. 02).

These findings show that nightlife is an integral component of the stage and not only a supporting factor for youth identity. Circling back to Moore's (2016) concept of "nocturnal selves," and this separation between a daytime and nighttime identity allows for a symbolic transformation; this may occur by means of clothing, music, ways of dancing and overall behaviour in these nighttime settings (Moore, 2016, p. 51). Whilst these individually crafted identities may be temporary or exaggerated, they are still socially meaningful and may subtly influence participants' daytime identity. These symbolic markers of identity (i.e. clothes, music preference and behaviour) act as cultural cues which help youth both express themselves and locate their sense of belonging in relation to others. As claimed by Grazian, such rituals "illuminate how young people experience urban nightlife as a rite of passage" (Grazian, 2008, p. 95). Thus, participating in nightlife is not just about consumption or recreating - it is a social act where individuals come to perceive themselves as part of a collective bigger than themselves. This perspective is central in my research, as it highlights the role of nightlife as an active cultural setting for identity formation, rather than just a backdrop for cultural expression.

It is also crucial to outline that these acts do not often occur in isolation, but are usually shaped by different social dynamics, such as peer validation, gender norms and cultural capital (George & Fonceca, 2024, pp. 157-158). In the Dutch context, Brands et al. (2014) observed that "[t]he most important factors," in deciding which nightlife venue to attend, "were 'friends are/go here' (40%)," (Brands et al., 2014, p. 100). This aligns well with Jensen's (2006) take on subcultural capital as both socially recognised and negotiated within peer groups; it is "gendered and gender specific, at the same time as it is classed and class specific, racialized and

ethnicized," (Jensen, 2006, p. 272). Within nightlife, in order to successfully take on a nocturnal identity, participants must demonstrate fluency in certain dress codes, be aware of how to behave in certain venues and get along with their perceived accommodating crowds.

This section guided the analysis of how individuals create and perform identities in accordance with peer group dynamics, branding, and the environments in which they exist. In addition to how young people interpret and incorporate the symbolic meanings in their surroundings, this study examined the ways branded nightlife settings both enabled and constrained identity performance. Identity was treated as something continually created and represented through interaction, performance, space, and context rather than as something that people possess. The following sections will examine how gatekeeping and spatial practices affect the conditions under which identities can be performed, as I am curious about how these dynamics develop. Not all identities are equally readable, and not all identities are equally validated when it comes to performance.

2.2.2 Spatial Politics and Gatekeeping

Spatial politics corresponds to how access, mobility, and authenticity are managed in urban spaces (van Liempt et al., 2014, p. 409). This is drawn from van Liempt et al. (2014) as well as from her theories with van Aalst (2015), who explore how these dynamics unfold in nightlife environments. This concept investigates not only who frequents the location, but also how admission is granted and what criteria specific individuals can be granted or rejected at the entrance (van Liempt et al., 2014, p. 412). In the context of nightlife, spatial politics become evident at the threshold - the door. Nightlife establishments enforce exclusion through their decor, cost, and, most explicitly, the discretion of door staff (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252). Spatial politics are conveyed and enforced through regulations, spatial signals, individual evaluations, and embodied actions.

Branding indicates who the venue is for, explicitly through promotional materials and implicitly through the aesthetics of the space, the entrance price, and the door policy, which in the Dutch context often articulate social sorting (de Bruin, 2011, pp. 29–30). Through this manner, branding assists in signalling the target demographic (or alleged 'right crowd') for the event, but it is through spatial politics - such as the door staff, decor and cost - which truly

enforce these signals. As demonstrated by van Liempt et al. (2015), "[s]everal studies have suggested that bouncers sometimes deny entry to, or discriminate against, ethnic-minority youth," which reveals that branding in nightlife is shaped by more than just aesthetic or economic factors, but also racialised through exclusionary means (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252). They contend that "[a]gainst this background, there is a growing concern that urban public spaces are becoming more exclusionary and hence less 'public' as private policing in entertainment spaces increases" (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252). These behaviours highlight the spatialised nature of nightlife gatekeeping: exclusion occurs at the door both physically and interpersonally, in addition to through interaction or spatial design. Ergo, bouncers are not just security personnel, but cultural mediators who aid in personifying a venue's brand.

Søgaard (2014) refers to this phenomenon whereby bouncers use "techniques of neutralization" to justify exclusionary choices by using nebulous justifications (Søgaard, 2014, p. 41). He goes on to explain "how bouncers seek to avoid allega-tions of discrimination by engaging in a performative de-visibilization of ethnicity in the enforcement of door policies" (Søgaard, 2014, p. 41). This raises importance of paying attention to how discretion functions as a tool of selective exclusion in nightlife settings. Bouncers frequently state that someone does not fit into the venue due to their attitude, demeanour, or vibe; however, these arguments are ambiguous and may conceal deeper judgements based on factors such as ethnicity, class, or physical appearance (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252). This results in what Søgaard classifies as "colorblind door policies," in which social boundaries are reinforced by exclusion despite formal inclusion rules being neutral (Søgaard, 2014, p. 43).

Concerning door staff and club promoters, spatial politics of nightlife are also shaped by symbolic curation. When examining New York City nightlife, Rivera (2010) adds a crucial dimension to this conversation by showing how door staff represent the nightclub's brand to make sure that patrons influence the image that the venue is trying to project (Rivera, 2010, p. 238). In her research, Mike, "a doorman who also served as the club's head promoter," who had great influence over who was allowed or denied entry stated that the club's strategy was purposely to "promote to more people than [they] have the capacity to fit" in order to make sure "[they] can select...and get the best people inside,"" (Rivera, 2010, p. 237). This reveals that

exclusivity is planned, and not incidental, as entry to a nightlife venue becomes a process of aesthetic and demographic refinement.

These practices are not exclusive to the United States - similar dynamics are also evident in the Netherlands. Brands et al. (2014) outline that student nightlife can be exclusionary, as "facilities and events specifically dedicated to students...is strongly dominated by youth (Bromley, Tallon, & Thomas, 2003; Roberts & Turner, 2005) and that non-whites, the lower social classes and to some extent women are excluded in multiple ways," (Bromley, Tallon & Thomas 2003; Robert & Turner, 2005, as cited in Brands et al., 2014, p. 96). This is indicative of nightlife districts' larger tendency to perpetuate social inequalities in the disguise of safety, exclusivity, or taste. This demonstrates how the aesthetics of exclusivity frequently perpetuate social hierarchies in the name of taste, safety, or brand consistency.

Nightlife districts in urban areas, particularly those projected as cosmopolitan or elite, act as gentrified spaces marked by a belongingness of whiteness and capital (Søgaard, 2014, p. 41). Liu et al. explain that "the geographical location plays a pivotal role in shaping the urban nightlife landscape" (Liu et al., 2023, p. 04). Nightlife districts which are closer to central businesses benefit from "location advantage," whilst those in more residential areas "have a diminished lower location advantage" (Liu et al., 2023, p. 07). Venues in more 'elite' spaces like the business central areas will attract a higher-class demographic of people than those in residential areas, signifying the role of geographical location in how branding in nightlife is enforced. Ergo, the branded space becomes a venue of stratification rather than being neutral. As explained by de Bruin (2011), "a specific door policy in place, the producers of nightlife control the ethnic, social and cultural make-up of their consumers," further supporting the point that the makeup of the crowd is often curated through gatekeeping rituals (de Bruin, 2011, p. 47).

Together, these examples illustrate how spatial politics function through a combination of design, location, regulation and social interpretation. Spatial politics show how access to nightlife is controlled by space, not only by the identities of individuals but also by their appearance and surroundings. Nightlife venues shape who feels seen, welcome, and eligible to belong by enforcing social boundaries through design, door staff, and location, which makes inclusion selective and exclusion structured.

2.3 Audience Reception and Sense-Making in Branded Nightlife Spaces

Branding and nightlife are inextricably linked, with branding not only decorating the nightlife area but also actively shaping its social purpose and symbolic bounds. Consequently, these venues act as vessels for branding to come to life through performance and audience reception. This mutual shaping means that branding and nightlife are co-produced: branding scripts the atmosphere whilst nightlife provides the space for the performance to exist (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 375).

There is existing literature which recognises nightlife as an increasingly branded experience and that branding extends beyond marketing into emotional and symbolic landscapes, as previously mentioned in section 2.1.2 (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367; Sinclair, 2008, p. 219; Arvidsson, 2006, p. 94). This study, however, shifts its focus from corporate objectives to audience reception; it examines how young audiences interpret brands in relation to the nighttime space within which they are situated and how those interpretations change based on peer relationships, socio-economic position, and spatial cues. As such, nightlife branding is not a fixed process but rather an immersive and contentious one. The theoretical lens presented here is centred on the investigation of audience reception and sense-making, emphasising young people's interpretative efforts in contrast to venue owners' intentions.

2.3.1 Audience Reception

The study of how audiences interpret media information in light of their social environment, identities, and life experiences is known as audience reception theory. In contrast to previous theories that saw audiences as passive consumers, reception theory sees audiences as active meaning-makers. As Schrøder (2016) defines:

> Reception research is a form of audience research which explores the meanings and experiences people produce as a result of their contextualized encounters with media products, carried by a variety of analogue and digital technologies, and conceptualized as verbal and visual texts, or discourses. (Schrøder, 2016, as cited in Schrøder, 2018, p. 111)

Audiences are not just passive consumers, but "cultural producers of meaning" who engage with and respond to mediated environments in response to their own social positioning (Walmsley, 2021, p. 308). This underlines media as a two-way process, with both creators and audiences shaping the meaning of the experience. Crosby (2022) states that "understanding audience reception is integral to understanding how people find meaning in their encounters with media; a process that wrestles with concepts of identity and shifting alignments to social signifiers, such as age, class, race and gender" (Crosby, 2022, p. 11). This is especially applicable in emotionally charged environments such as nightlife venues, where the experience of branding is perceived through the lens of experiential identity (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367). This links well to a point addressed by Livingstone (2013) in section 2.1.2 regarding audience participation not being a "wholly individual act," but advancing "certain interests," implying that audience engagement is shaped by cultural capital and social conditions (Livingstone, 2013, p. 24). Furthermore, she connotes that "media influence is always "read" through the lens of audiences' lifeworld contexts," confirming the notion that audience reception is not detached from social conditions (Bird, 2003 as cited in Livingstone, 2015, p. 441).

Such dynamics become particularly visible within nightlife spaces. When young audiences enter branded locations, they bring their social identities with them and interpret safety, style, and accessibility cues differently. This interpretive diversity is a primary analytical emphasis in this study's exploration of branding perception. However, "this decoding is not universal across individuals" (Crosby, 2022, p. 64). For instance, queer, racialised, or otherwise marginalised youth may interpret exclusion or threat in the same messages that others read as neutral or as welcoming. For example, Ekenhorst and van Aalst (2019) document that, "while some people experience clubs and bars as safe and inclusive spaces in which they can freely express themselves, a significant number experience this space as pressuring and intimidating" (Ekenhorst & van Aalst, 2019, p. 203). In a similar manner, Boogaarts (2008) observes that "[m]any young Dutch-Turkish people complain of not feeling welcome anymore in mainstream nightlife. Some of them feel more comfortable and safe partying in their own Turkish clubbing scene" (Boogaarts, 2008, p. 1298). These different interpretations accentuate the way branding, atmosphere, and accessibility signs in nightlife are read through the lens of lived social identities.

These dynamics underline the fact that branding in nightlife is not a shared experience but one that is mediated and interpreted through the audience's social production. This highlights reception as a key analytic concept in understanding the processes of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. The next section considers how this interpretive process leads into embodied sense-making—how youth affectively and physically respond to branding in nightlife spaces.

2.3.2 Sense-making

Whilst audience reception addresses the ways branding is interpreted, sense-making outlines the more comprehensive process through which these perceptions are internalised, contested, and communicated—often through performative and embodied actions (Schrøder, 2018, p. 105). Nightlife branding is not only seen or heard; it is truly lived. This concept may mostly apply to marginalised communities (such as the queer community) for whom nightlife engagement is both affirming and contested (Glavev, 2023, p. 195). Such spaces are not just commercial - they are socio-political venues in which visibility can be both a commodity and a cultural strategy. As stated by a performer who was interviewed in a study on New York nightlife, "you can make money off of queerness now, and that is something that I don't think we ever thought would happen," which accentuates how commercialisation may distort the initial intents of queer cultural spaces (Glavev, 2023, p. 313). Branding is viewed as both facilitating and constraining in queer spaces, and this conflict between visibility and commercialisation lies at the heart of it. Attending queer nightlife events can allow for the temporary suspension of personal cultural or social limitations, allowing participants to feel "safe, sexualized, and messy" which is a rare opportunity of embodied liberation (Baer, 2021 as cited in Glavev, 2023, p. 194). Whilst that quote refers to members of the transgender community feeling safe and "having [their] beauty reflected to [them]", it is applicable to anyone who feels limited in self-expression in their daily life (Baer, 2021 as cited in Glavev, 2023, p. 194). Drawing on Baer (2021) and Glavev (2023), this study explores whether nightlife enables participants to enact expressive identities which may be constrained in routine life, thereby showcasing how branding mediates affective and symbolic dimensions of identity.

However, the complexity of sense-making is not restricted to marginalised groups. Gendered expectations, peer group validation, and class-coded aesthetics all influence how

branding is represented and negotiated (Jensen, 2006, p. 272). These interrelated factors influence the ways individuals recognise, reproduce, and resist symbolic signals of branding.

Continuing the discussion of this interpretive complexity extending beyond queer scenes, de Bruin (2011) highlights that "feelings of being unwelcome, or even being discriminated against, have an impact on the nightlife choices that many young people from ethnic minorities make" (de Bruin, 2011, p. 83). To one person, the same branding that communicates exclusivity or elegance may signify rejection and blandness to another, based on the person's social positioning (Crosby, 2022, p. 152).

Accordingly, nightlife must be considered as a cultural and spatial practice; as Yassai-Gonzalez (2023) observes, venues are:

> more than "neutral containers''(Green, 2018, p. 88), live music venues are host to a number of qualities which make them meaningful …[they] function as "gathering sites that assist in fostering a collective identity, and in which shared interests, concerns and goals are emphasized" (Green, 2018, as cited in Yassai-Gonzalez, 2023, p. 14).

In this way, nightlife is both performed and interpreted, especially for young people. Grazian (2008) writes that "[n]egotiating nightlife scenes drives young people to engage in sporting rituals…[that] include the art of imposture through fashion, grooming, and style" (Grazian, 2008, p. 94). Such rituals "illuminate how young people experience urban nightlife as a rite of passage" and are integral to the sense-making process, as participants negotiate meaning both through what they do but also through what they interpret.

In conclusion, sense-making is a complex, embodied process in which young people are involved with nightlife branding—not only interpreting the messages associated with a brand, but performing, resisting, and effectively changing the brand by expressing themselves socially and emotionally.

This theoretical framework provides a conceptual structure for analysing branding, nightlife, and identity through the lenses of access, meaning-making, and belonging. The framework reveals how branding is analysed, which is not only perceived and executed, but also

spatially arranged; this shows how young participants co-create nightlife culture rather than passive customers. Branding serves as a social filter, influencing how young people perceive their position in urban life in ways that are more than merely physical or economic. The methodological chapter that follows describes how these theoretical insights will guide the design and analysis of qualitative interviews, establishing the foundation for investigating how young people navigate and make sense of branded nightlife venues.

3. Research Design and Methods

To explore how branding shapes young people's perceptions of inclusion and exclusion in Dutch nightlife, a qualitative approach was necessary for capturing subjective, situated and affective experience, which distinguishes young people's interactions within nightlife. This was an appropriate research method for collecting participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes in nightlife social contexts. As Adeoye‑Olatunde and Olenik argue, "[s]emi-structured interviews are the pre-ferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is to better understand the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon," (Adeoye‑Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360). This interview format allowed for open-ended responses, whilst maintaining thematic consistency, which aligned with the research's theoretical framework.

The chosen research design reflects the goal of uncovering how young people decode branding and negotiate inclusion and exclusion across nightlife venues within the Dutch context. Thematic analysis was anticipated as the main analytical method, which would allow for the identification of trends in the way participants interpret branded environments. The interpretive paradigm of the research, which views meaning-making as influenced by context, affect, and social identity, was especially well-suited to this approach.

3.1 Sampling, Recruitment and Participant Overview

This research used purposive sampling - a strategy well suited for qualitative research as it allows for a selection of individuals "with the most knowledge of the subject matter and those who can provide different perspectives" (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1361). Participants were selected based on three primary criteria: (1) between the ages of 18-25, (2)

currently residing in the Netherlands and (3) recent (within the last year) experience visiting nightlife spaces in the Netherlands. The rationale for targeting this age group was that it pertains to a life stage in which nightlife participation is still particularly high. Existing research suggests that young adults, especially those between the ages of 18–25, engage or participate more in nightlife activities (such as clubbing, going to bars, and pre-drinking) than other age groups (Labhart et al., 2013, p. 288). The sample average age in Labhart et al. (2013)'s event-level research of nightlife behaviours among Swiss students was 23.1, and the statistical presentation of drinking and risk-taking on weekends showed patterns characteristic of this age group (Labhart et al., 2013, p. 286). This study provides context-specific insights into the behaviours of young people on nights out.

As a means to accurately reflect the spatial and cultural dimensions of Dutch nightlife, efforts were made to ensure recruited participants were familiar with urban nightlife environments in cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht, which are diverse in their venue branding and nightlife visibility (de Bruin, 2011, p. 174).

In order to achieve multicultural inclusivity, attempts were made to recruit participants from a variety of ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As reaching such a heterogeneous population directly (particularly in regards to informal, youth-oriented nightlife venues) can be challenging, snowball sampling was used, as it allows for the researcher to use the social networks of participants to enlist others with similar nightlife participation but varying social positions (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 2). Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) recommend that "researchers should also consider how recruitment might vary by participant type" and make adaptations accordingly (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1361). Such adaptations included using informal communication channels (such as WhatsApp for the initial recruiting instead of email) relevant to nightlife culture and offering flexible interview times which accommodate nightlife social routines (i.e. interviews did not take place during the early morning or the late evening). However, to maintain a level of professionalism, email was used to send participants their consent forms and participant information sheets (discussed further in section 3.4).

A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with participants whose nightlife experiences reflected the study's interest in meaning-making through experiential, social and

affective layers. These interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as "the stage at which the data collection and analysis have been exhaustively examined and comprehended, and no additional themes are emerging" (Naeem et al., 2024, p. 1).

3.2 Interview Design and Procedure

An interview guide was created from the study's theoretical framework, which is informed by concepts of audience reception theory, branding theory, and cultural signalling. The guide included open-ended questions aimed at exploring participants' thoughts regarding nightlife branding, inclusion or exclusion. The intersectionality of such thoughts with identity categories of ethnicity, gender, and class. According to the authors' guidance, the interview guide was not strictly adhered to, but rather used to "provide structure and focus to the natural flow of conversation for each unique interview" (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1362). Prompts were incorporated within the interviews to help participants elaborate on emotionally or socially complex topics, which were carefully designed to avoid leading language or suggestive framing that may bias responses. For example, if a participant stated they were uncomfortable at a venue, a follow-up prompt such as "could you specify on what you believe made you feel that way?" would be used to elaborate (without implying any specific expected answer). To offer safety and access to all participants, the interviews were completed in English on Microsoft Teams. Participants were also informed before the interviews (via consent forms) and at the start of them that they could withdraw from the research at any point, that they did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable as well as their other rights as participants. As noted by Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), video interviews allow for "non-verbal reactions," while overcoming any constraints that come with arranging in-person interviews (such as finding a location that is private and reachable by both the interviewer and interviewee) (Adeoye‑Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1363). The only possible challenge with video interviews was internet reliability; in-person meetings were a suggestion if that was a problem. Every interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the participants' consent. The transcripts were automatically generated using Microsoft Teams and corrected to ensure an accurate depiction of participant opinions, per Erasmus University guidelines and qualitative research standards.

3.3 Operationalisation of Concepts

In order to address the research question, interview questions were structured around the four key concepts drawn from the theoretical framework:

1. Branding as social sorting, which focuses on how branding elements convey symbolic boundaries and structure inclusion/exclusion in nightlife spaces (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 8; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98; Sinclair, 2008, p. 222).

2. Audience reception and identity interpretation, which looks at how participants interpret branding through their lived experiences, are shaped by social identity and cultural capital (Crosby, 2022, p. 29; Livingstone, 2013, p. 24; Walmsley, 2021, p. 308).

3. Spatial politics of inclusion and exclusion, referring to how branding is materialised through the spatial design of the venue, decor, door policies, and symbolic gatekeeping (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252; Rivera, 2010, p. 237; Søgaard, 2014, p. 41).

4. Youth identity formation in nightlife, focusing on how nightlife serves as a site for experimenting with self-expression, performance, and belonging and how it contributes to shaping personal identity (Glavev, 2023, p. 303; Grazian, 2008, p. 94; Moore, 2016, p. 51).

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Demographic Data

Beyond the ethics checklist, additional measures ensured ethical standards. Participants received a participant information sheet detailing the objectives of the study, how the data will be handled, and their rights. Additionally, they were sent a consent form, signed before the interviews. As per the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Sociological Association (2017) and Israel and Hay (2006), participation was voluntary and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any point of the process (British Sociological Association, 2017, p. 08; Israel & Hay, 2006, p. 68). Participants had the option to decide if they wanted personal identifiers revealed during the study or if they preferred the use of pseudonyms instead. Audio files were securely stored and were accessible to only the researcher.

Additionally, transcripts were stored separately from consent forms to reduce the risk of re-identification, as per ethical research protocols (British Sociological Association, 2017, p. 06).

Semi-structured interviews were a helpful format so that the participants were in control of what they chose to disclose, and I reminded participants throughout that if a question felt uncomfortable, there was no obligation to answer or explain why. To mitigate discomfort or social pressure, demographic data were collected post-interview and kept limited to categories that were relevant to the scope of the study, unless participants already revealed it during the interview (such as their gender identification, sexual orientation and the city in which they reside). This establishes best practice for ethically, safely, and inclusively conducting research, particularly when involving marginalised people (Adeoye‑Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1362). Respect, transparency, and care were integrated as ethical standards across the duration of the research process, not only at the consent stage.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the data was conducted through an abductive approach, which integrated both deductive and inductive logics recursively across the research and analysis process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1364). Deductive codes, drawn from the theoretical framework, provided the initial structure that informed the early familiarisation process and construction of the interview guide. The second stage involved the application of inductive coding, in which transcript data were read line by line to detect unforeseen insights, affective reactions, and emerging patterns. The circular movement between theory-driven codes and emergent meanings enabled for the refinement and reorganisation of the codebook as themes emerged. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to work both inductively and deductively, adapt the analysis to different theoretical frameworks, and shift between outlining the data and analysing underlying patterns of meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). This makes it ideal for a study on lived experience, social identity, and meaning-making in nightlife spaces. Ultimately, the use of both deductive and inductive methods within this research led to findings that were both driven by theory and data.

A deductive codebook (see Table B1 in Appendix B for the complete codebook) was generated based on theoretical concepts, especially around branding as signalling, perceived

inclusivity, cultural fit, and emotional safety, prior to conducting the interviews. This was done as a way to help me structure the interview guide and the data accordingly, but was not used during my interviews, as no coding was conducted during the interviews themselves. This constructed code list was aligned with the research question and the sub-questions, as well as the theoretical components of the study.

An inductive technique was employed when going over the interview transcripts to find new themes and patterns that arose directly from the participants' lived experiences rather than being anticipated. The combination of inductive and deductive approaches aligns with what Vila-Henninger et al. (2022) describe as an "iterative process between theoretically surprising cases and tentative explanations," where researchers build grounded theories by moving back and forth between theory and data (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022, p. 974). This abductive method "combines features of both inductive and deductive inference," resists enforcing a distinction between inductive and deductive approaches, and allows the researcher to revise explanations while continuously engaging with empirical data and theoretical framing (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022, p. 974).

The coding process was completed using ATLAS.ti, a specific qualitative data analysis application which aids with the systematic management and analysis of large volumes of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts (Woods et al., 2016, p. 600). ATLAS.ti allows researchers to apply, extract, and visualise codes, whilst also revealing and enabling the recognition of patterns across transcripts.ATLAS.ti assisted in keeping the coding process organised through the use of tools such as codebooks, memos, and linked quotes. This made it easier to identify patterns among various participants while still taking into account their personal stories, different perspectives, and social backgrounds (Woods et al., 2016, p. 606).

As part of the analysis, a formal codebook was created that included all major and minor codes, with operational definitions and an example quote provided for each. Throughout the analysis, the codes continued to be modified and reorganised as patterns began to emerge or my original presumptions regarding the data came into question.

Once the complete set of data was coded, themes were constructed by considering the relationships between those codes and noticing patterns of a higher order (i.e. the broader

themes which emerge from grouping smaller, related codes). The themes were then defined and named based on the extent to which they captured a central phenomenon of participants' understandings and experiences of branding in nightlife. The final themes were compared against the a priori theoretical frame to see how the empirical data elaborated, underpinned, or complicated the existing theory (Woods et al., 2016, p. 599).

The principles of reflexive thematic analysis were followed in this analysis, which, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes are not simply discovered in the data, but are actively constructed by the researcher (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). This is a method particularly well-suited for research focused on meaning-making, as it "provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). These themes were inductively developed using ATLAS.ti. The initial themes were derived from the interview guide and emerging insights which occurred during the analysis. Later, codes were grouped into fitting categories based on my theoretical framework, such as audience reception, brand experience and identity formation. Once the complete codebook was done, the groups were reviewed and adjusted to be more cohesive.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, I paid careful attention to the interpretive role played in the construction of themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). As the researcher, my goal was not to find objective truths; rather, I wanted to present a well-founded, transparent, and theoretically informed interpretation of how young people make meaning of branding in nightlife spaces, specifically their experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and identity expression.

3.6 Multicultural and Reflexive Considerations

"Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome," (Berger, 2013, p. 220). In line with this, the positionalities of the participants were recognised as a part of the data rather than a variable to control for. Race, gender, class, and ethnicity are not viewed as neutral or background traits in qualitative research; rather, they are entwined with lived experience and the construction of meaning (Thompson et al., 2007, p. 511). Therefore, rather

than attempting to standardise or bracket out these differences, this study approached identity as a dynamic component of each participant's narrative, influencing both their experiences of nightlife and their interpretations of branding.

I maintained reflexivity by reflecting on my own thoughts, feelings and interpretations, particularly during the interviews and when analysing the various perspectives provided by the interviewees, to stay conscious of how my perspective may influence the results of the study. As argued by Milner (2007), researchers must acknowledge the ways that race, culture and identity shape the research process in order to achieve reflexivity; during the interview process and whilst interpreting the findings (Milner, 2007, p. 389). Using critical qualitative research methods, I encouraged dialogue that allowed participants to identify themselves and avoided making negative assumptions about their experiences, allowing participants to steer conversations toward what they found meaningful, and responding to cues about comfort, fatigue, or disengagement (Milner, 2007, p. 396).

I carefully reviewed the interview guide and coding scheme for neutrality and sensitivity by piloting the questions on myself and my roommate, revising the questions for clarity, tone and whether the wording of the questions is leading towards a specific experience, which were also reviewed by my supervisor (Adeoye‑Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1363). As a queer Greek woman who grew up in the Middle East with extensive experience of Dutch nightlife, I approached the research as both an insider, and an outsider, relying on my connections and assumptions about participant cultures and experiences based on my positionality to establish a rapport with the participants. I also acknowledge that my understandings are influenced by my own social location and cannot describe all the lived experiences of those with different identities and cultural positions.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, reliability and validity are not understood through statistical generalisability, but rather through the lens of trustworthiness. This study adopted a verification-based approach to reliability and validity, as outlined by Morse et al. (2002), who argue that rigour in qualitative research is not achieved post hoc, but must be embedded throughout the research process (Morse et al., 2002, p. 15). Their framework emphasises that

"research is only as good as the investigator," highlighting the importance of methodological coherence, responsiveness, and ongoing analytic reflection during the interview process (Morse et al., 2002, p. 17).

This research design ensured reliability by maintaining coherence between the research question, method, data collection and analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews, designed in alignment with the theoretical framework, ensured that the data remained directly relevant to the study's aims. Reflexive note-taking, journaling, and post-interview reflections were used to document decisions and reduce researcher bias.

To ensure validity, this research relied on what Morse et al. (2002) have outlined as verification strategies, which include:

- "Methodological coherence": ensuring "congruence between the research question and the components of the method" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18).
- That the "sample must be appropriate": "consisting of participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18).
- "[C]ollecting and analyzing data concurrently": which creates a reciprocal relationship between what is already known and what is required (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18).
- "Thinking theoretically": this involves progressively developing and refining theories by continuously comparing new insights with current and emerging data, ensuring each theory is grounded on continual verification rather than assumption (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18).
- Finally, "the aspect of theory development": which entails shifting "with deliberation between a micro perspective of the data and a macro conceptual/theoretical understanding," in order to develop the theory "as an outcome of the research process," and "as a template for comparison and further development of the theory" (Morse et al., 2002, pp. 18-19).

This study treated validity and reliability as continuous methodological commitments incorporated into each phase of the research process rather than as post-hoc checklists. Rigour was achieved by constantly integrating theory and data throughout design, data collecting, and analysis, as opposed to depending only on methods like audit trails or member checks. As Morse

at al. (2002) explain, "strategies for ensuring rigor…include investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy, an active analytic stance, and saturation," which, "when used appropriately, force the researcher to correct both the direction of the analysis and the development of the study as necessary, thus ensuring reliability and validity of the completed project" (Morse et al., 2002, p 17).

In conclusion, this research design ensured that the study's objective, theoretical framework, and methodological approach all worked together, whilst prioritising flexibility, validity and internal rigour. Using semi-structured interviews, abductive analysis, and verification strategies, this research was able to remain responsive to the complexities of young people's identity, branding, and inclusivity in nightlife spaces by situating participants' personal narratives within branding practices, spatial politics, and social identity dynamics. While this research design is based on participants' lived experiences, it also allows for theoretical advancement through an abductive design that links empirical findings to broader conceptual debates surrounding branding, identity, and inclusion in nightlife contexts.

4. Results

This chapter outlines the thematic analysis of how young people in the Netherlands experience and interpret branding in nightlife venues, based on the semi-structured interviews conducted. The structure is organised thematically and reflects the core patterns identified in participants' perceptions and meaning-making process. It is specifically centred around branding, inclusion and exclusion, identity performance, judgements in taste and acts of resistance and/or negotiation.

The employment of semi-structured interviews allowed for responses which were both rich and subjective, allowing each participant to express their interpretations and experiences with nightlife to the extent they wished to share. This is a particularly effective approach for research which seeks to capture "participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon," such as this one (Adeoye‑Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360).

Interviewees' quotations are not presented as objective evidence, but rather as narrative sites to illustrate themes and foreground the voices of these specific nightlife attendants. This approach is well aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2016) understanding that "the aim of [thematic analysis] is not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key […] features of the data, guided by the research question" (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297).

Importantly, the interpretive nature that goes with qualitative analysis is acknowledged throughout. My own positionality as a researcher, which includes cultural proximity to the field, age proximity to the interviewees and familiarity with Dutch nightlife, inevitably shapes this analysis. Interpretation is, therefore, used as an active and situated process (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297).

This chapter is organised through five thematic sections each of which unpacks the ways interviewees perceive and navigate nightlife branding with relation to identity, belonging and social positioning. The sections are: nightlife branding as a cultural signal, inclusion and exclusion, identity performance and navigating nightlife, aesthetic boundaries and social signalling and resistance and sense-making. Finally, the last section acknowledges and critically discusses the limitations of the research.

4.1 Nightlife Branding as a Cultural Signal

Across the interviews, the concept of branding as a cultural signal emerged quite a few times, in the sense that it structures expectations and the ways it communicates inclusion and exclusion within nightlife spaces. Nightlife branding was not only read as a neutral aesthetic by the participants, but also as a message which often directly influenced whether they felt welcome or alienated. Tudor clearly articulated this concept:

> I saw a party like. Two weeks ago or something like reel on Instagram and it was a throwback party. EDM 2010. And I think that's pretty specific for people that are now our age around in their early 20s because they kind of grew up with that. 2010 EDM and I don't know if someone that's thirty would really appreciate that music that much (Tudor, 23 years old).

This refers to cultural signalling, where symbolic cues are used to convey a message about the targeted demographic, as discussed in section 2.1.1 (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367; Grazian, 2008, p. 05). The interviewee associated his age demographic with the advertisement of the event (which was not explicitly mentioned) and even acknowledged how another age demographic would not feel welcome at the event. Thus, music can be perceived as a cultural signal which conveys who belongs to an event and who does not.

Participants further discussed how visual branding elements were used to pre-emotively evaluate whether the crowd and atmosphere of a venue would align with their sense of belonging and willingness to attend. When discussing whether he perceives certain venues' branding as targeted towards a certain demographic, Manav noted that:

> I've never attended the super targeted events… but from the advertising, I could immediately tell. And from the branding, I could tell what kind of event it was gonna be, right. And from there, I can make my decision of do I want to attend it or do I not want to attend it? So it it was very obvious from the from the branding…it played a big role…the images play a big role…they wree also quite straight forward in terms of the wording…they would say out loud like this is for queer people…it was very obvious from the wording and the imaging (Manav).

Manav's choice not to attend certain events appeared to link to his perception of those spaces as strongly branded towards certain demographics. Whilst this was not explicitly stated in the interview, he later clarified he did not identify with the queer demographic to which the branding appealed, suggesting that such perceieved demographic misalignmnet could discourage participation. Whilst branding to a certain demographic is successful in informing them they belong in that space, it also signals to others outside of that demographic that they may not feel welcome there. Comparing Valentina's experience with Manav's, it can be deduced that the person's social positioning is the final determinant of whether they will feel comfortable attending an event that is not branded to their taste or demographic.

However, certain branding elements, such as dress codes, were experienced as purely moulding a vision. Klaudia expressed:

I feel…like some clubs want to have like very specific look and they want to maintain that. Let's say like that the posh club wants people to look very, like, elegant and bougie, and then they don't want a person who comes with a hoodie and sweatpants (Klaudia).

Attendant's appearance shaping the branding of a venue was also discussed by Tudor, who explained that "dress code wise techno is like all full black and kind of minimalistic, maybe more wild for bass music is just like, yeah, go wild, as colourful as possible" (Tudor). These perspectives link to de Bruin's (2011) argument of branding as a form of social sorting, in the sense that venues do not only code their desired clientele by music genre or themed nights, but also by fashion, explaining that particularly in Amsterdam "dress code was seen as essential in order to ensure that the wrong crowd was not targeted" (de Bruin, 2011, p. 117). Therefore, branding is not only an aesthetic, but acts as an affective mode of governance, shaping how individuals can express themselves through dress within venues.

Crucially, these branded expectations actively encourage or disinvite specific identities and modes of self-expression; they are not passive. This supports the framing of section 2.1.1, where branding was theorised as a mechanism of symbolic boundary-making. In sum, the participants did not perceive nightlife branding as merely promotional, but rather as interpretive and symbolic. It narrates who belongs, what to expect and what affective experience is offered. As demonstrated in this section, young people critically decode these signals to anticipate belonging and self-expression.

4.2 Inclusion and Exclusion

Beyond communicating specific styles and music genres, nightlife branding also communicates affective and spatial labour which invites particular audiences, whilst dissuading others. Participants perceived branding as producing feelings of inclusion and exclusion not only through the visual aesthetics themselves, but also in how signals intersected with their personal histories, social comfort and identity recognition. The findings in this section continue to support the theories presented in section 2.1.1 that branding operates as a symbolic boundary-making

mechanism and further reinforces de Bruin's (2011) argument of spatial aesthetics and crowd curation functioning as a mode of social sorting (de Bruin, 2011, p. 117).

Some participants conveyed experiencing acute moments of discomfort or exclusion, usually due to the affective dynamics of the crowd rather than just the venue itself. Wessel explained how he felt he did not belong due to the people attending the venue that night - a venue which he frequents often:

> I have felt out of place. It's also in Club Puma... It was a night for, as I told you, you have these student associations which are more like corporal, so more like fancy, dressed like that. Those are not my people (Wessel, student).

Even though Wessel was not explicitly excluded from this crowd, a sort of social friction took place, in the sense that the behaviours of the crowd did not align with those of Wessel. He continued to explain, "I felt very out of place because it was really just weird people" (Wessel). This supports the claims by Livingstone (2013) that participation "always advances certain interests," as stated in section 2.1.2 (Livingstone, 2013, p. 24). Even though Wessel could visibly access the space, the social cues and affective atmosphere which resulted from the values of these corporate student associations excluded people like him; although he is a student as well, he does not identify with their culture and social values and, as a result, felt excluded.

Similarly, Steven described a widespread feeling of disconnection from bars in Leidseplein - a popular bar street in Amsterdam:

> I don't feel connected to any of them, even though they're Dutch…it's such a different vibe or intentions all of them…I'm a cis white straight male… I am Dutch…if you would look to my identity profile I would fit in perfectly with those others. But. I guess not (Steven, Dutch).

Steven's experience is quite similar to Wessel's - even though they are surrounded by people of their demographic, the dynamics of the crowd made them feel excluded.

Inclusion within nightlife is not solely based on demographics, but it is also deeply contextual and symbolic, filtered through social positionings and personal reflections.

Eirini also discussed her experience in the bars at Leidseplein:

> The cafes and the bars in Leidsplein, I was basically surrounded by Dutch students of a specific group….I don't know the posh people in quotation marks, let's say it like that. Yeah, I did not feel very included there. Like, yes, I went there with colleagues. They had invited me. But still like I did not see any similarities between me and those people also because I don't, I don't really. Feel that I can be a part of that group in any moment in my life…Leidseplein was here before all these new clubs came to be so. Then of course, people like people that are Dutch and have grown up here and their parents before that were going out there. Of course they're going to end up there because it's kind of like passed on. Well, in our case, in my case as an international and other internationals that we just moved here, it's not really something that we feel connected to as well because I would have to do with feeling connected with it (Eirini, Greek-Serbian).

Even though she was surrounded by her colleagues and people her age, Eirini did not feel included due to cultural differences. She perceived the historical significance in Leidseplein as something her Dutch colleagues could relate to, but it was something alienating to her, as it is separate from her cultural history. Wessel also gave an example of how one of his old roommates was often excluded in nightlife spaces in Utrecht due to cultural differences: "[his roommate] said that he had sometimes a lot of trouble getting in clubs because he was…from like Turkey or Syria or something…he did have experience that quite a bit" (Wessel). Since this is not something my interviewee personally experiences, I could not gain enough information on the experience to base the analysis off, however, this definitely adds to the broader discussion on discriminatory door policies with Dutch nightlife, as discussed in section 2.2.2 (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252).

Similarly, Steven also felt excluded from nightlife as he was not part of the targeted demographic. He explained how he was not allowed inside a gay bar:

> They look to me..like, you're not gay…you're not coming in…those other guys were let in and they are very muscly straight looking men…I looked the most gay (Steven).

Whilst many participants provided examples of feeling excluded in relation to branding and aesthetic codes, others reported a more neutral or welcoming experience, whether they strongly identified with the brand itself. Valentina attended an emo music event, a genre she admitted she does not typically enjoy:

> I don't necessarily like emo music, but my friends were there and I always think that theme parties or music when you know the music genre, it's - it's better for me, cause then I know what to expect (Valentina).

When asked if she felt out of place at this party, she explained that she "did not feel out of place" as she and her friends "went in with an open mind" and no one was "looking at [them] judging or seeing if [they] could sing everything along" (Valentina). Valentina's example suggests that branding through genre does not always provoke exclusion, but the experience of inclusion can also depend on how participants engage with the space and the expectations they go into the space with.

Many participants reported they felt queer-branded spaces were perceived as inclusive, with Eirini even stating "it's all about inclusivity and making people of the LGBTQ community feel welcome and comfortable to party in their own taste" (Eirini, queer). Yet, there is a certain irony in excluding someone based on appearance from a seemingly inclusive space. Eirini shared a similar experience with her straight guy friends who were not let into a gay club with her friends who "are completely straight and they weren't let in the club because of that" (Eirini). Perhaps a place can be both inclusive and exclusive at the same time; it just depends on the positioning of the person. As Eirini put it, in regards to queer presumably inclusive spaces, "it's not as inclusive as…they would like to think" (Eirini). The idea that inclusion implies the possibility of exclusion and that

symbolic borders are maintained even in places that aim to subvert prevailing social norms—such as queer-branded spaces—is supported by this paradox (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 94; Hae, 2011, p. 3450). Such boundaries may not always be drawn consciously; rather, they are in place through collective cultural signals, intentional aesthetic planning, and feelings of group belonging, as already discussed in relation to branding as a system of social classification.

Inclusion is also discussed as relational and contingent, beyond branding elements. Valentina detailed her discomfort as often being tied to safety and surveillance, which shifted the tone of the night for her:

> It wasn't like a bad situation that happened... it was just a creepy guy and he was like staring at me and like trying to touch me all the time... It did like kind of change my perception of the night... so it does shift your perception." (Valentina)

She continued to explain how her discomfort and this situation impacted her behaviour:

> I could, like, feel his hands and I moved…a couple seconds later he was again next to me…so then I changed again and then I changed a couple of times until he, like, gave up and went away. So yeah, I have to physically change how I'm acting (Valentina).

This situation indicates how branding does not solely determine belonging, but the embodied experience of safety and recognition in a venue co-constitutes how the atmosphere will play out and if people feel safe enough to act how they please. Unfortunately, Valentina was not the only girl to discuss discomfort in nightlife spaces due to men behaving inappropriately. Kelly also explained how her and her friend group stopped going to a nightlife event they frequented weekly (Techno Tuesday) because "there were some creeps that were literally just creeping at girls in the crowd and targeting them…that is actually one of the main downsides of why we stopped going there" (Kelly).

This reflects the idea that nightlife branding is truly experienced and not just observed, as discussed in section 2.3.2 (Schrøder, 2018, p. 105).

Contrastingly, Klaudia offered an ambivalent perspective on her sense of belonging in a nightlife setting she frequents often (Radion) and thoroughly enjoys:

> I wouldn't say I feel at home [there]... it isn't that feeling for me that like I feel at home or that I belong there because I also feel I'm not a very…typical…it's also not that…I go to techno parties each weekend and everything and…I also don't dress like people there. So so yeah… belong there but like I prefer that…I really liked it but it doesn't mean that, like, I feel that I belong there…it was just a nice vibe…that I want to go back again (Klaudia).

This scenario illustrates how Klaudia interprets brand signalling within the space (namely dress, music and crowd aesthetics) and recognises herself as adjacent rather than central to this branding. Her enjoyment of the atmosphere is independent from a sense of belonging, which could suggest that affective engagement and brand resonance may exist even when one does not fully identify with the branded social identity of the venue.

 She further expressed, "when I go to the techno parties I feel that like I can really just like dance how I want and do what I want" (Klaudia). Moore's (2016) claim that "nightlife is the space where people can safely step aside from their daytime personalities to fully experiment and play with their nocturnal selves" is partially echoed here - even though she prefers techno parties and expresses herself better there than mainstream clubs, she does not experience a rooted sense of belonging (Moore, 2016, p. 56). This could indicate that a sense of belonging is not necessary for attendees to enjoy themselves.

In contrast, Kelly described an imagined sense of inclusion that would be possible from ethnically targeted events:

> There is like these big Asian parties in Rotterdam, and my cousin told me about it. And honestly, it sounded really fun. And if there was one in Amsterdam, I would love to go, especially because, like, I don't know that many Asian people here.

And I think it will be really fun to go with, like, your Asian friends. And it's just like I would feel very appreciated because it is like targeted specifically for me (Kelly, Chinese-Luxembourgish, resides in Amsterdam).

This suggests that branding which directly reflects a participant's identity can pre-emptively foster a sense of belonging to the nightlife setting, even if they have never attended the space, as contended in section 2.1 (Sinclair, 2008, p. 222). In this case, branding acts as a signifier of cultural proximity.

Beyond perceived inclusivity in relation to cultural proximity and expression, Maria gave a contrasting point which emphasises the role of nightlife staff as affective producers of inclusion: "If they're also not just machines and you can have interactions with them, I think that plays a really big role in how welcoming a place is" (Maria). This further expands branding beyond visual aesthetics into embodied interactions: the nightlife staff have the ability to amplify a venue's brand and perceived atmosphere. This is also discussed by Grazian (2008) and reiterated in section 2.1.2, which expresses the role of nightlife staff as able to enhance the overall mood experienced by nightlife participants (Grazian, 2008, p. 16).

Overall, inclusion was not experienced as binary by participants, but rather, the sense of belonging was shaped by branding, overall atmosphere, safety, crowd dynamics and one's own positionality.

4.3 Identity Performance and Navigating Nightlife

Across the interviews, nightlife was not only described as a space of leisure, but also a stage for expressing, exploring or regulating identity. In contrast to branding, which symbolically represents expectations (as explored in section 4.1) or the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (as explored in section 4.2) this section focuses on the ways individuals actively navigate nightlife though their own practices, which include their appearance through fashion, their behaviour and their mood - choices which all interact with their expectations of certain nightlife spaces.

Wessel frequently emphasised the social freedom nightlife has provided him with in experimenting with his identity:

We just really…crazy in a way like we just dance a lot, drink a lot, do stupid sh*t. I think because I'm with these people also, I feel like I can really express myself (Wessel).

This ability to perform in a more outgoing version of himself was closely linked to those he surrounded himself with - because he felt safe with his trusted social group, who all have the same objectives in going out, he could freely express himself. However, this freedom was contingent:

I've gone out...with like some people I knew a little bit less and in those cases I can still express myself, but it's just I cannot be as freely as normal... I don't know these people as well (Wessel).

Wessel's situation suggests that identity performance may not be a fixed act, but rather a relational one which can be intensified or muted depending on social proximity and comfort. This mirrors what Glavev (2023) discusses, where identity formation is not one fixed process, but is rather shaped by various symbolic acts (as elaborated in section 2.2.1) (Glavev, 2023, p. 68).

Identity performance through dance was a theme which emerged as a mode of self-expression in some participants. Wessel explained that "before [he] went out [he] got a bit shy when [he] danced with random people, and now it's just the outgoing whatever" (Wessel). Nightlife, thus, acted as a space of transformation, which not only allowed him to express himself, but also cultivated confidence and re-shaped what he perceived as possible for himself. Gaining confidence through dancing within Dutch nightlife spaces is something Valentina also discussed:

When I was growing up here, like my parents, they always ask me, they put on music and they're like, oh, come dance with me. And I always felt kind of shy, so I never really danced with them. So I was sure that that's why I'm not the greatest dancer, in like salsa music and stuff like that. But then when I went out here, I noticed that of course the level of dancing is way lower than in Latin America. So

I felt like. You know, even though I'm not the greatest dancer in Latin America standards, I'm pretty OK to Dutch standards, so I felt more confident to start dancing when I went out. So in that sense, maybe going out here helped me explore my dancing side (Valentina, Columbian who grew up in the Netherlands).

Surprisingly, attending nightlife in the Netherlands helped Valentina get more in touch with her Latin American roots and feel more confident in her dancing. This links to Moore's (2016) notion of a "nocturnal self," as Valentina was able to use this nighttime identity to further explore her cultural identity (Grazian, 2008, pp. 08, 24). Another participant who contested such a feeling was Omiros, who expressed:

I wouldn't be as talkative in my day-to-day life as in the night to night life…it doesn't work, being introverted and going out, so you kind of flip the switch when you decide to go out (Omiros).

Additionally, Joe claimed that nightlife "definitely helped [him] explore," and that he "think[s] it's a big part of why [he has] become so social" (Joe). As demonstrated through these examples, nightlife settings can foster environments which allow participants to experiment with their identity and put on a separate persona than that of their daytime self.

Whilst some participants discuss how nightlife helped them explore parts of their identity, Maria reflected on how her diverse background has shaped her adaptability in nightlife:

I don't see myself as a very singular identity…I have a like, really diverse background, so I feel that not only do I adapt, but just my taste and interactions are also very diverse, so I fit into different things (Maria, Greek who grew up in Greece, the United Arab Emirates and Kazakhstan).

Her approach to nightlife was to move fluidly between settings, adapting her act to various crowds and environments, rather than securing her identity in a single mode. Whilst some participants have found freedom in performing their identity within nightlife, others reflected on how the overall expressiveness of the space acted in reframing their self-expression. In Joe's case, he expressed:

The real me doesn't stand out in a crowd at Club NYX or De Zalta. You know, I'm not necessarily flashy or colourful or super loud amongst other people that are loud (Joe).

Joe's experience highlights that within nightlife, identity performance is not just about one's ability to express oneself, but also their relative expressiveness within the crowd. Identity can become decentered, even in spaces such as Club NYX (a queer club in Amsterdam) or De Zalta (a Norwegian bar Joe and his friends used to frequent often) where comfort and expressiveness are very apparent for the attendee. Joe's statement implies that nightlife settings cannot only magnify identity but also make it relatively subdued, in contrast to Wessel's heightened freedom when surrounded by familiar friends. This affirms the earlier notion discussed by Glavev (2023) in section 2.2.1 that identity formation is relational and dynamic, rather than fixed, and shaped through both affective and symbolic engagement with those surrounding the nightlife space (Glavev, 2023, p. 68).

Ultimately, identity performance in nightlife can be seen as complex and contingent, based on the experiences of my interviewees. For some, it provided an opportunity for experimentation, confidence, and being more themselves. For others, it involved a productive process of strategic restraint or negotiation. What unified participants' perceptions was not the presence of a singular nightlife identity, but the fluid ways they read, negotiated meaning, and mediated in the symbolic environments surrounding them — a process that was co-determined by branding, affective atmosphere and proximity to others. This reflects the performative nature of identity as outlined by Grazian (2008) and Moore (2016), whereby young people draw on nightlife branding aspects (such as dress codes, music and crowd dynamics) as signals that signify how they enact or withhold aspects of their identity (Grazian, 2008, p. 94; Moore, 2016, p. 56).

In this context, belonging is no longer an experience that can be confirmed or denied; rather, it is perpetually signalled, decoded, and performed in the moment. The branding of space, then, is a locale in which identity is not simply declared but also continually rewritten, through negotiation with perceived social narratives and bodily responses.

4.4 Aesthetic Boundaries and Social Signalling

Aesthetic and moral judgements were consistently remarked upon by interviewees within nightlife branding, usually expressing some unease towards what they perceived as inauthentic or judgmental atmospheres. As noted in section 2.2.2, de Bruin (2011) explains that branding indicates who is welcome in a space, explicitly through promotional material and implicitly through aspects such as the overall aesthetic of the space, door policy and entrance price (de Bruin, 2011, pp. 29–30).

With regard to dress codes, Christos voiced moral discomfort towards venues which enforce dress codes, stating:

> I don't like dress codes. I don't know. It's something that is weird. Why you have to come on this clothes and there's, you know, kind of come in. That's like 0 inclusivity. Like 0 inclusivity (Christos).

He elaborated on this dislike towards dress codes that such requirements are not only exclusionary, but also classist:

> Maybe it has to do with like… the economic position of someone like maybe it's going to be like …someone that can't afford that unfortunately, can't attend…I don't like suit, why should I wear one? Why should I attend? And if I go with-without a suit, people are gonna be like, why are you not wearing a suit? It's like judgmental. Very judgmental (Christos).

The point addressed by Christos resonates with what de Bruin (2011) suggests (discussed in section 2.2.2), that the makeup of a crowd is often curated through gatekeeping rituals, such as the classist door policies discussed by Christos (de Bruin, 2011, p. 47). A similar sentiment was echoed by Omrios, who made a distinction between venues which are "genuinely inclusive" and a venue which "is just advertised that there is for everyone" (Omiros). He further explained:

> Even if a venue is advertising to be in this way, you can tell by the venue and you know, the way it's decorated, the way they do…certain things like…how nice the

people are there to greet you….you can usually tell when a club is designed for everyone and when a place is just advertised that there is for everyone (Omiros).

Omiros' observations link with Christos' point and both align with the theoretical claim in section 2.2.2 that exclusion is both physical and interpersonal and occurs both via interaction and spatial design (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252).

Contrarily, Tudor also connected aesthetic branding to elitist selection when referring to a promoter job he had seen, where "you always had to dress like in a suit. Your aspect had to be 10 out of 10 because they only wanted to attract people like with money" (Tudor). Whilst this instance is concerned with Milan, it further demonstrates the ways branding and fashion are perceived in regard to socioeconomic boundaries, resonating with the concepts discussed in section 2.1.1, social sorting occurs in nightlife through gatekeeping practices (Rivera, 2010, pp. 237, 247, 248). Whilst Tudor expressed that he believes targeted demographic branding like this exists for other parties, explaining how with promoters for the DnB community, they "try to be as exclusive as possible" and they need to ensure your personal branding (your social media presence) reflects that they are interested in "drumb and bass music in general" (Tudor). These two examples of promoters show how moral expectations for the event being promoted are already set long before the night has begun.

Additionally, participants described feeling emotional discomfort towards venues with an atmosphere that they perceived morally out of sync with their values. Maria described feeling she did not belong at a club where people "were behaving like animals, honestly pushing each other around, fighting, being rude…it was just so like, what am I doing here?" (Maria). She contrasted with her self-perception: "I treat others kindly and I am always very considerate to those around me. I don't have to know you to be considerate to you" (Maria). Even though these negative experiences are based on the crowd at the venue, Maria reflected that:

The venue itself is fine…it's just the people that it attracts…they're always aggressive and mannerless, so there must be something in the, if not the venue itself then the events that attracts a worse crowd (Maria, residing in Amsterdam).

Thus far in this results section, by looking at the lived experiences of the participants through the earlier established theoretical lens, it is reasonable to deduce that nightlife branding holds a significant amount of authority over the crowd makeup of the evening. Many participants expressed in one way or another that the crowd has an effect on their overall experience, such as Kelly detailing "if the crowd is very welcoming and open, that affects my mood" (Kelly). Maria's remark could suggest that the venue intentionally cultivates a more aggressive or chaotic atmosphere as part of its branding ethos. However, such an environment can feel exclusionary to individuals whose values prioritise safety, respect, and emotional comfort, ultimately undermining their sense of belonging. Omiros contends that there is a link between safety and belonging through his view that:

> You can sense this…when people feel safe, they're going to be way more creative in how they look and way more expressive in these spaces of genuine allowance to be whoever you are (Omiros).

This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy and Brakus et al.'s (2009) notion of brand experience (as discussed in section 2.1.2), entailing that branding is complicated, multi-sensory and emotional and that experiences, such as nightlife, should be designed to provoke emotional responses from its attendants (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 97). Within this context, the moral and emotional evaluations made by participants are co-produced through branded design elements such as music, the lights and crowd dynamics, rather than being incidental. Not only do these evaluations shape aesthetic perception, but they also influence whether participants feel a sense of belonging.

These reflections reveal that branding is not neutral; it is experienced and criticised through embodied, aesthetic, and moral lenses. The perceived authenticity of a venue, the behaviour of the attending crowd, and the exclusiveness or all-openness of the venue's branded codes and practices all affect how young people determine where they feel they can be, and be themselves.

4.5 Resistance and Sense-Making

In this study, participants did not accept nightlife branding at face value. They described instances where they found a sense of comfort in venues and formed attachments to them, as well as actively avoiding venues that clashed with their values. This process is reflective of the theories detailed in section 2.3.2, explaining that sense-making, particularly with nightlife branding, is not only through interpreting the messages associated with the venue, but also through expressing themselves socially and emotionally towards the brand.

Joe embodied such a sense-making practice when detailing the memory of a bar which had become a ritual hangout spot for him and his friends:

> The venue's called De Zotte…the owners changed since then, so we don't go there anymore. But it was a bar owned by some person from Norway and we had some really good friends from Norway. They found the bar and we'd go there. We'd go for a few drinks and then you'd walk down the canals… it was one of those calm evenings where you just talk and you hang out with friends that you can talk to for hours…it became the staple of our friend group…yeah, just a place to hangout with our friends…it was very low key, not super popular…it was kind of in the background, I think that was the main thing that attracted us to it (Joe, Dutch-Kenyan).

Even though the initial connection was a cultural one between his Norwegian friends and the bar owner, the rest of their friend group deeply associated with this place and felt a familiarity that exceeded cultural boundaries. This aligns with the theoretical claim in section 2.3.2 that nightlife venues are also places of gathering which help foster a collective identity (Green, 2018, as cited in Yassai-Gonzalez, 2023, p. 14).

However, Joe's relationship with the venue changed once the ownership and branding changed:

> The owners were no longer Norwegian. A lot of the drinks changed, a lot of menus, changed a lot of what was possible before it changed… But that was

impossible with this new owner…we would have continued to go there until we went our …different ways (Joe).

He expresses a moment of redirection and resistance to the venue, which he once felt a familiarity and belongingness towards. Joe was not the only participant who described regularly visiting a venue because of their own perceived comfort:

If I find a venue or event I like, I will usually keep going to the same…event instead of branching out…I enjoy the place. I feel comfortable in that place. So I want to go back there…there's also places where I know that's not gonna be the case. And those are places…I don't gravitate to (Manav).

Amongst my participants, resistance to nightlife branding was not only due to the venue's branding, but also aligned with their personal circumstances changing:

When I was like 20 or something that I was like, OK, let's get, like super drunk, like we don't care. It's like a night out…we're crazy …let's just…dance and …not think about it…now I also love to go out but because…I'm getting older and my priorities [are] changing…I feel it's just different (Klaudia, 25 years old).

This perceived interpretive shift to nightlife, which came with age, illustrates the core of audience reception theory (as discussed in section 2.3.1), arguing that audiences are more than passive consumers and they actively produce meaning whilst engaging with media and responding to their corresponding mediated environments (Walmsley, 2021, p. 308). In this particular case, participants were not just decoding the branding, but also positioning themselves in relation to it, either through repetition, avoidance or developing an alternative meaning to the space. As Joe described, sometimes the deduced meaning is not linked to a brand at all: "I think it's more my friend group that I felt connected to than the venue specifically" (Joe). His emphasis on the ritual associated with the space and his friendship over the visual branding of the space reflects the argument posed by Hollands and Chatterton (2003) and Pine and Gilmore (1998) (described in section 2.1) that branding is at the intersection between service design and cultural signalling and should be positioned as a cultural phenomenon that greatly influences

attendant's interactions with nightlife spaces (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003, p. 367; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98).

These findings, taken together, support the notion that sense-making in nightlife is not a static process, but rather dynamic, driven by changes in participants' interpretations, emotional responses to a venue and crowd, and social positioning. These findings support the study's main argument that branding in nightlife is co-created through experience, identity, and atmosphere, and that young people are negotiating inclusion, acknowledgement, and belonging, as evidenced by this thematic emphasis on social sorting, identity performance, spatial gatekeeping, and brand meaning-making.

5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how young people in the Netherlands perceive and make meaning of branding within nightlife spaces, particularly surrounding themes of inclusion, exclusion and audience reception, by grounding qualitative inquiry supported by interdisciplinary literature. The key research question - how do young people in the Netherlands perceive and interpret branding in nightlife spaces - was addressed through the utilisation of semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis and a theoretical framework. This framework drew from branding theory, nightlife studies and audience reception theory, which also addressed the three sub-questions that helped guide the key research question.

This last section synthesises the findings in relation to the research question and key theoretical lenses. Further, the broader societal and academic implications of the study are reflected upon, alongside its methodological limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Answering the Research Question

The interviewees of this study did not perceive nightlife branding as purely neutral or simply a marketing tool, but it was understood as a cultural signal in which visual, spatial, social and affective codes communicated the societal expectations and perceived norms of the venue. As illustrated in Chapter 4.1, branding usually served as a form of social sorting, with Tudor interpreting an event's branding as "pretty specific for people" of his age group (Tudor, 23 years old). This underscores the idea that nightlife branding does not simply advertise an event, but

also conveys social boundaries in regard to who belongs in the space and who will be out of place. Social boundaries within nightlife are not always fixed, but they are personally felt. Branding was often experienced as inviting or rejecting, reflecting on the work of Rivera (2010), who discussed the ways nightlife social sorting signifies which individuals feel welcome based on a number of social classifications, such as social connectivity, cultural capital, image, and race (Rivera, 2010, pp. 237, 247, 248). Participants interpreted branding through the lens of their own tastes, personalities and social identities, such as Maria, who felt her values were not aligned with the crowd surrounding her at a specific venue. This connects to Livingstone's perspective of audiences reading media through their own experiences and identities and of them being active meaning-makers within media (Livingstone, 2013, p. 24; Bird, 2003 as cited in Livingstone, 2015, p. 441).

In line with the concept of brand experience as a sensory affective process, as outlined by Brakus et al. (2009), participants described the venue in terms of emotional responses, expectations and their levels of comfort. In some cases, participants' perception of belonging and comfort within the venue affected their decision-making around which venues to attend or avoid, such as Manav, who does not branch out to venues he does not know, as he prefers to stick to those he feels "comfortable" at (Manav). The study, therefore, suggests that brand experience in nightlife extends beyond visual identifiers such as logos or promotional materials, including the emotional and sensory atmosphere of the venue itself.

Critically, branding was also linked with experiences of exclusion. As discussed in Chapter 4.2, interviewees noted how factors such as door policies, crowd composition and dress codes reflected cultural or classist dynamics. Whilst some felt welcome by branding which matched their identity, such as Wessel within Dutch student nightlife in Utrecht, others felt alienated, such as Eirini in Dutch bars in Amsterdam. Christos' depiction of how higher-class attire door policies are exclusive to those of different socioeconomic backgrounds also provided an interesting perspective with regard to nightlife inclusivity. This supports de Bruin's (2011) claim that "a specific door policy in place…control[s] the ethnic, social and cultural make-up of their consumers," further supporting the point that the makeup of the crowd is often curated through gatekeeping rituals (de Bruin, 2011, p. 47).

Aside from feeling excluded, some participants described moments they either attempted to perform or suppress aspects of their identity within nightlife. Wessel explained that when he is

surrounded by people he does not know as well, he "cannot be as freely as normal" in his expressions (Wessel). Valentina also noted having to alter her behaviour at a venue where a man was crossing her personal spatial boundaries and how this affected her overall perception of the night (Valentina). However, she also expressed that nightlife allowed her to express parts of her Latin American identity, claiming that she "felt more confident to start dancing when [she] went out. So in that sense, maybe going out here helped [her] explore [her] dancing side" (Valentina). This supports Grazian's (2008) concept of a "nocturnal self", which was commonly referenced throughout this research (Grazian, 2008, pp. 08, 24). Omiros and Joe also expressed that nightlife has given them confidence in their day-to-day social abilities, which supports Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz's assertion that nightlife is beneficial for young people's social well-being (Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023, p. 95).

As explored in Chapter 4.4, branding was evaluated in more than just terms of taste, but also in terms of authenticity and safety. There were many distinctions made amongst participants with regard to mainstream branding and underground spaces, most associating a more inclusive and freeing atmosphere with underground spaces. Kelly also expressed how she and her friend group stopped attending a free, weekly event due to not feeling safe there because of the crowd.

The final analytical section examined how participants reinterpreted branding. As mentioned by most participants, they did not view nightlife the same way as they got older, with some detailing that they now prefer to go out to events they are truly drawn to for a good experience, rather than for the sake of going out. This reflects Livingstone's idea that media is interpreted through individual's lenses based on their social positioning - the same branding that worked on Klaudia at 20 years old is no longer effective on her 25-year old self, even though she still enjoys attending nightlife (Livingstone, 2013, p. 24; Bird, 2003 as cited in Livingstone, 2015, p. 441).

In addition to the key research question, three sub-questions were also explored:
1. How does branding function as a symbolic signal in nightlife spaces?
   This query was addressed through sections 4.1 and 4.2, which disclosed how branding conveys expectations about dress, taste, crowd dynamics and behaviour within the space. These signals add to the symbolic construction of social belonging within a nightlife space and are dependent on the participant's social positioning.

2. How do young people perceive inclusion or exclusion within these branded environments?

Sections 4.2 and 4.4 revealed the ways participants interpreted a venue's atmosphere in regards to safety and belonging. Whilst some participants described feeling included in certain spaces, others highlighted a lack of belonging, despite not being explicitly excluded by the venue. This showcases that symbolic inclusion does not always convey emotional comfort and belonging to a space.

3. How is identity performed and negotiated in nightlife spaces?

In sections 4.3 and 4.5, the ways participants performed aspects of their identity in terms of alignment or resistance to branded expectations is outlined. Identity was shown to be fluid and relational, shaped by peer group dynamics, perceived venue-specific norms and branding.

Overall, it is apparent that young people perceive nightlife branding in the Netherlands as generally inclusive, often specific to their own tastes. Whilst many participants addressed a perception of exclusion through this branding in one way or another, they each had positive remarks on Dutch nightlife branding.

5.2 Societal and Academic Implications

Overall, this thesis has several implications for the ways we comprehend branding, youth culture and nightlife within contemporary urban settings.

From a societal perspective, this research highlights how branding attributes in nightlife venues contribute to feelings of inclusion and exclusion, shaping where young people feel welcome, seen or safe. In a society such as the Netherlands, which is extremely diverse in cultures, sexualities and overall perspectives, and both racialised and class dynamics are entangled with urban leisure, the findings show that branding is not a neutral background phenomenon, but an active force in enforcing social boundaries (de Bruin, 2011, pp. 29–30; van Liempt & van Aalst, 2015, p. 1252). This is particularly significant considering the age group studied (18-25), who are in a transitional process in their life of identity formation and self-exploration (Brands et al., 2014, pp. 99-100; Moore, 2016, p. 51). Nightlife acts as a performative space that allows young people to further experiment with themselves beyond their

daytime personalities; a space that allows the performance of a nighttime personality, which, in turn, assists their daytime selves (Moore, 2016, p. 51). However, as this study showed, experimentation is often mediated and sometimes even constrained by the symbolic codes embedded within nightlife branding. By combining the theory and findings from the interviews, it is clear that nightlife holds great importance in the lives of young people, serving as a means to destress from daily life and understand themselves better. Thus, it is important to look at nightlife branding from a societal lens, as everyone deserves to feel included in a space that fosters a significant amount of meaning and importance to their identity.

From an academic perspective, this thesis contributes to the fields of nightlife studies, branding research and audience reception theory. It responds to de Bruin's (2011) crucial call for attention to further evaluate the ways branding intersects with ethnic and classist marginalisation, as well as adds to Livingstone's observation of media being "'read' through the lens of audiences' lifeworld contexts," (Brands et al., 2014, p. 96; Bird, 2003 as cited in Livingstone, 2015, p. 441). Through the integration of these perspectives, this research presents the concept of nightlife branding as not only economic, but also cultural and political, whereby it shapes experiences around belonging, visibility, and recognition.

5.3 Limitations of the Research

This research acknowledges that there are several limitations, as with any qualitative study. Whilst sufficient efforts were made to recruit participants within the target age range (18-25) and diverse in terms of culture and sexuality, three individuals who initially agreed to be recruited (and would have contributed to greater variety in terms of age and identity) ultimately withdrew from the research due to personal circumstances and time constraints. As such, the sample is slightly less varied with regard to age and sexual orientation than initially intended.

Despite this, many participants reflected on their nightlife experiences from when they were 18 (or simply younger than their current ages), allowing for temporal comparisons across different life stages. This offered valuable insights on the ways nightlife branding perceptions can evolve, rather than advocating for the perceptions of the younger end of the target age range. Moreover, whilst broader LGBTQ+ perspectives would have enriched the dataset, multiple participants discussed inclusion and identity in other nuanced ways, providing meaningful

reflection on social dynamics and spatial belonging, whilst discussing their perceptions of queer nightlife spaces.

Another limitation of the study is its geographic concentration. Although the purpose of this research is to uncover young people's perceptions of inclusion and exclusion within Dutch nightlife spaces, the findings of this study may not be generalised to nightlife cultures exceeding national contexts. Whilst many participants compared their experiences with Dutch nightlife to those of other countries, the perspectives remain exclusive to young people residing and attending nightlife in the Netherlands.

Finally, as this study is grounded on personal lived experiences, the data are subject to limitations of memory, selective disclosure and social desirability. Although the chosen research method of semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to speak freely and reflectively, it is possible that certain experiences were either omitted or underemphasised.

Despite these limitations, the study's methodological approach, theoretical foundation, and various perspectives provide solid and meaningful insights into how young people interpret, negotiate, and resist branding in nightlife settings.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

By building on insights from this research, there are a few directions further research could be pursued. First, comparative studies could be implemented to examine how nightlife branding perception shifts across age, gender, sexual orientation and cultural background. Secondly, observational research could be conducted within nightlife venues to provide complementary data on how branding effectively functions within those venues. It would be interesting to compare the data from during the night with the next morning or a few days after, to further examine if perceptions are different when immersed within nightlife and afterwards. Furthermore, future studies could examine the perspectives of those in charge of curating nightlife branding, such as the designers, promoters and venue owners, to gain a deeper understanding of the intentionality behind certain aesthetic or symbolic choices. Compared with the perspectives of nightlife attendants, branding could then be understood from the perspective of those who implement branding and those who perceive it. Finally, further research into queer and culturally specific nightlife venues (such as more underground spaces or diasporic parties) would offer important counter perspectives to the dominating narratives of mainstream nightlife.

5.5 Final Remarks

Nightlife is often considered a space of escape, freedom, and collective enjoyment. Whilst that is true to an extent, this thesis has shown it is also a heavily branded and socially stratified space, where aesthetic codes, music genres, door policies and visual styles carry much deeper meanings. Branding in nightlife is much more than a marketing tool; it is a form of cultural communication, inviting some and excluding others. For young people who are navigating self-expression, identity and finding their place within a community, these signals are not superficial; they influence decisions, feelings of safety and emotional resonance. As this research has shown, branding is both a mirror and a map, reflecting social hierarchies and providing direction to how young people traverse through the night.

Appendix A: Anonymised Overview of Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Sexual Orientation
Maria	22	F	Greek	Straight
Eirini	22	F	Greek-Serbian	Bisexual
Christos	22	M	Cypriot	Straight
Omiros	24	M	Cypriot	Straight
Wessel	21	M	Dutch	Straight
Klaudia	25	F	Polish	Straight
Joe	23	M	Dutch-Kenyan	Straight
Manav	22	M	Indian-Portuguese	Straight
Steven	21	M	Dutch	Straight
Valentina	24	F	Colombian	Straight
Kelly	22	F	Chinese-Luxembourgish	Straight
Tudor	23	M	Romanian	Straight

Appendix B: Measuring Instrument

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Introductory Questions

Q1: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Prompt if needed: For example, where you're from, what you're studying or working on, what your hobbies are, or anything else you'd like to share.

Q2: If you do go out, what does a typical night out look like for you?

Follow-up: Are they more bars, clubs, festivals, or house parties?

Q3: How often do you go out to nightlife venues, and what kind of places do you usually go to?

Follow-up: Are there any venues which you regularly visit?

Q4: Do you often go out with the same people, or does that vary?

Follow-up: How does who you're with affect where you choose to go?

Q5: Can you think of a recent night out that stood out, wether in a good or a bad way?

Follow-up: What made it this memorable?

1. Brand Experience and Spatial/Aesthetic Cues

Q1: Can you tell me about a nightlife venue in the Netherlands that left a strong impression on you, either positively or negatively?

Follow-up: What aspects of the space stood out to you (e.g., music, lighting, crowd, design)?

Q2: How would you describe the "vibe" or "atmosphere" of a venue you've enjoyed or disliked?

Follow-up: What do you think the venue was trying to communicate through that vibe or atmosphere?

Q3: Have you ever felt either out of place or particularly "at home" in a venue?

      Follow-up: What do you think contributed to feeling that way?

2. Meaning-Making and Identity

Q4: What influences your choices the most when you are deciding where to go out?

      Follow-up: Do you think your background or identity has a part in how you perceive certain nightlife venues or events?

Q5: How do you think your social or cultural background shapes what you take notice of or care about in a nightlife venue?

      Follow-up: Do you know if others in your circle had similar or different reactions?

Q6: Do you think certain venues are perceived as being "for" a certain demographic of people?

      Follow-up: Can you give an example and share how you/your social group perceive this (i.e. do you still feel welcome, does it affect your decision to attend)?

3. Cultural Belonging and Self-Expression

Q7: Are there any specific nightlife spaces where you feel you can fully express yourself?

      Follow-up: What enables that kind of expression to feel possible there?

Q8: Have you ever changed how you dress, behave, or present yourself to better "fit in" at a particular venue before going out?

      Follow-up: (If yes) What specifically about the venue made you feel you had to change these aspects?

      (If no) Have you taken notice of any venue conveying a message about what is acceptable or unacceptable in their space?

Q9: Do you feel that nightlife helps you explore different parts of your identity, or does it limit your expression in some ways?

> *Follow-up:* What kind of venues support or limit this exploration for you?

4. Branding as a Gatekeeping Mechanism

Q10: Have you ever observed or personally experienced exclusion (whether subtle or direct) at a nightlife venue?

> *Follow-up:* How do you think the venue's brand or policies played a role in this?

Q11: In what ways do you think aspects such as door policy, dress codes or social media presence affect who attends certain nightlife venues?

> *Follow-up:* Do these aspects send any signals about who's welcome and who isn't?

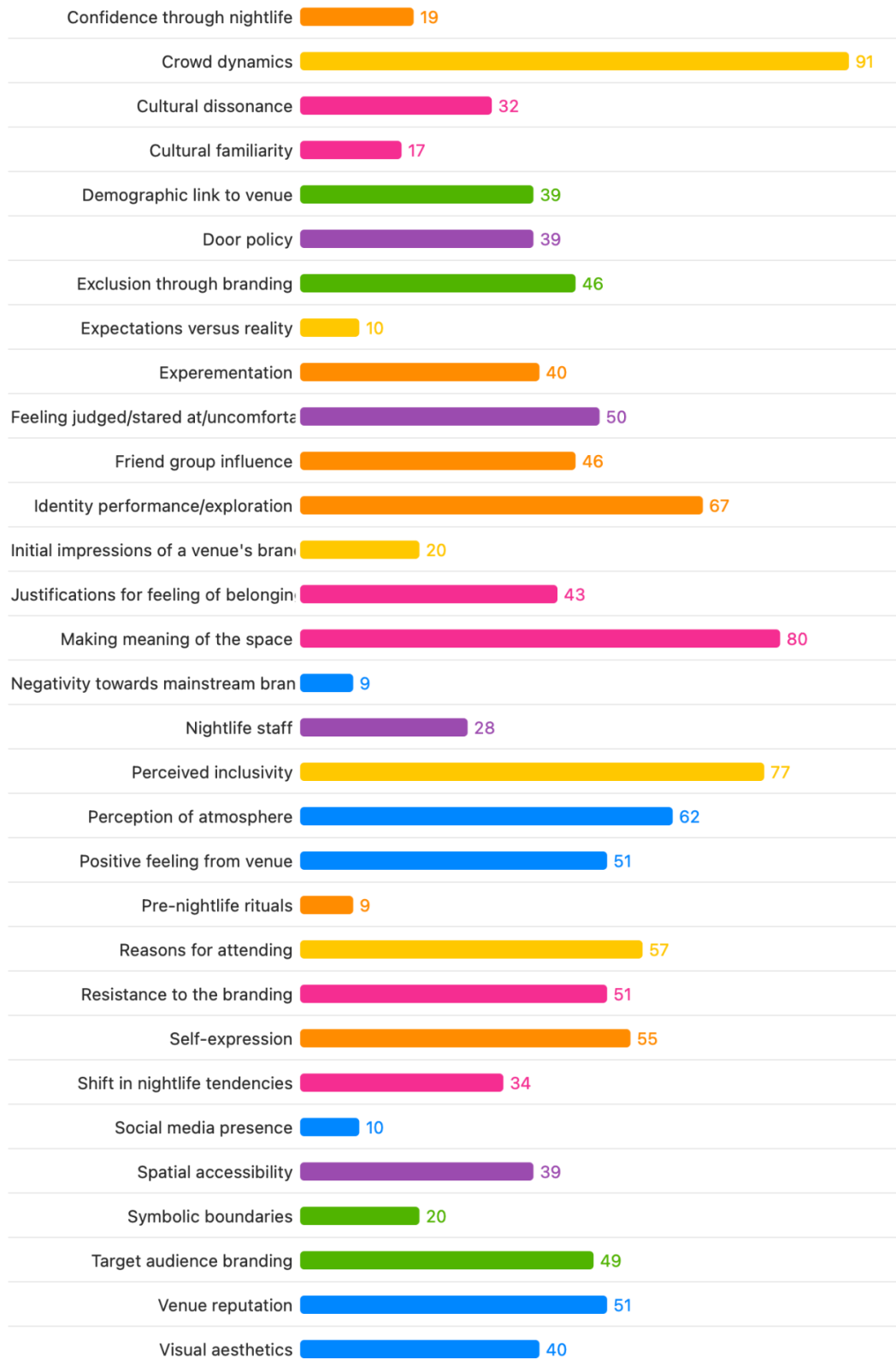Q12: Do you perceive any nightlife venues in the Netherlands as trying to form a certain branding image by including or excluding certain demographics of people?

> *Follow-up:* How do you interpret that branding?

Q13: What role do you think nightlife staff (such as bouncers or promoters) play in creating or enforcing a venue's brand?

> *Follow-up:* Have you had any specific interactions that stood out in this regard?

Coding overview ATLAS.ti

Code	Count
Confidence through nightlife	19
Crowd dynamics	91
Cultural dissonance	32
Cultural familiarity	17
Demographic link to venue	39
Door policy	39
Exclusion through branding	46
Expectations versus reality	10
Experementation	40
Feeling judged/stared at/uncomforta	50
Friend group influence	46
Identity performance/exploration	67
Initial impressions of a venue's brand	20
Justifications for feeling of belonging	43
Making meaning of the space	80
Negativity towards mainstream bran	9
Nightlife staff	28
Perceived inclusivity	77
Perception of atmosphere	62
Positive feeling from venue	51
Pre-nightlife rituals	9
Reasons for attending	57
Resistance to the branding	51
Self-expression	55
Shift in nightlife tendencies	34
Social media presence	10
Spatial accessibility	39
Symbolic boundaries	20
Target audience branding	49
Venue reputation	51
Visual aesthetics	40

31 Code(s)

The codes emerged through a deductive combination of the themes branded as social sorting, audience reception, spatial politics and identity work, and inductively using the data. The codes allow systematic analysis of how participants made meaning, engaged in identity work, and negotiated branded places in nightlife. Codes were created, applied, and managed using the ATLAS.ti software as described in Chapter 3.

Table B1

Deductive Codebook

Thematic Area	Code
1. Branding as Social Sorting	Branding as identity construction
	Branding and emotional experience
	Branding and symbolic inclusion/exclusion
	Selective aesthetics
	Cultural capital and branding
	Dress codes and behavioural norms
	Experience economy in nightlife
2. Audience Reception and Identity Interpretation	Interpretation of branding cues

	Perceived belonging or exclusion
	Social identity shaping perception
	Reading space as safe or unsafe
	Audience negotiation of venue meaning
	Cultural fit vs misfit
3. Spatial Politics of Inclusion/Exclusion	Gatekeeping practices
	Door policy as social control
	Spatial aesthetics as exclusion
	Race, class, and entry decisions
	Neutral policies with discriminatory outcomes
	Perception of staff or security behaviour
4. Youth Identity Formation in Nightlife	Performing identity in nightlife
	Nightlife as a space of experimentation

	"nocturnal self"
	Peer performance and visibility
	Queer or racial identity expression
	Identity safety

Table B2

Codebook: Definitions of Deductive and Inductive Codes Used in Thematic Analysis

Code Group	Code	Definition	Quote Example
Audience Reception	Crowd dynamics	How the behaviour of those surrounding the venue shapes interviewees' experience	*"I've noticed that if you pay for an event.More likely, you'll find other people who are just there for the music they're there to have a good time and they're just in general good people to be with"* - Manav
Audience Reception	Expectations versus reality	How their expectations differed from the experience	*"Everyone kept raving about it, saying go club NYX, everyone has to experience club NYX. I think it's an overrated venue"* - Joe
Audience Reception	Initial impressions of a venue's branding	The initial impression a venue left on the interviewees	*"It was a big venue and there was a lot of music options and there was a lot of people. Everyone was having a good time"* - Manav
Audience Reception	Perceived inclusivity	Aspects of the venue/night that made interviewees perceive inclusivity	*"I feel like all venues are trying to make a safe space for everyone and be as inclusive as possible."* - Tudor
Audience Reception	Reasons for attending	Why they chose to attend that event specifically/why they choose to go out at all	*"You forget about life for a while… in a good way, you enjoy the moment."* - Joe
Brand Experience	Negativity towards mainstream branding	Interviewee's negative experience/attitudes towards mainstream/generic nightlife branding	*"Mainstream clubs when people are just like recording everything, which is also super fine. But like, then I feel like you're way*

			more like. Not in the in the moment.” - Klaudia
Brand Experience	Perception of atmosphere	The overall perception of the atmosphere	*“A shared sentiment of enjoyment and safety”* - Maria
Brand Experience	Positive feeling from venue	Positive expression in relation to a venue	*“It's nice to enjoy music that you like in nature. I would say 'cause that was deep in nature.”* - Eirini
Brand Experience	Social media presence	Interpretations/views of the venue from social media	*“I saw on social media that they had nights like just for Taylor Swift or just for One Direction or just for K pop. And I think that's really fun because then you can bring people together that. Are interested in the same music as you and that you can vibe with with no like introduction needed basically.”* - Kelly
Brand Experience	Venue reputation	The reputation of the venue they have gathered themselves or heard	*“I would say it's like quite basic. Like it's not not really specific, but I think that's also the appeal to it. Yeah, I think Puma is more like like like just a very basic bland clubbing experience as like not anything that stands out really.”* - Wessel
Brand Experience	Visual aesthetics	Interviewees' reactions to the visual elements of the venue	*“Club Puma or the alternative club, you really have all these like light effects, you really have all this fog machines, you know, it's really like an experience. So I think that does add to like the vibe a bit.”* - Wessel

Branding and Social Sorting	Demographic link to venue	Whenever interviewees associate certain venues with specific demographics	*"Because of what they promote in there and because of maybe historical stuff, because Leidseplein was here before all these new clubs came to be so. Then of course, people like people that are Dutch and have grown up here and their parents and their parents before that were going out there. Of course they're going to end up there because it's kind of like passed on."* - Eirini
Branding and Social Sorting	Exclusion through branding	Interviewees' perceptions of branding signalling who/what is not welcome in their space	*"I feel like like some clubs want to have like very specific look and they want to maintain that let's say like that the posh club wants people to look very, like, elegant and bougie, and then they they don't want a person who comes with a hoodie and sweatpants. So yeah, I get that, but it is very exclusive."* - Klaudia
Branding and Social Sorting	Symbolic boundaries	Any subtle cultural or social signals which convey who/what belongs or does not in a space	*"Yeah, maybe if you go really, if you really dress alternative, you might get turned away."* - Wessel
Branding and Social Sorting	Target audience branding	How interviewees perceived branding, which was intended for a certain demographic	*"I do think it's mainly like for the young people"* - Klaudia
Identity Formation	Confidence through nightlife	Interviewees' descriptions of how nightlife helped their confidence grow	*"I think it does maybe more extroverted. And it is definitely also given me in a weird way some confidence. As in, like if you've been like, of course also a setting*

			where you can really get away with a lot of behaviour." - Wessel
Identity Formation	Experimentation	Whenever interviewees describe nightlife spaces as giving them the opportunity to experiment with themselves	*"I think night life has made me more. I don't know if it's the word, a little more liberated. I don't know if that's a word, but maybe more free in that sense made me more able to even get to know myself better. By just being in an environment where I don't feel restricted like I don't feel like I have to be put myself in a box that makes sense. And then from that event from my that translated into my day-to-day life where in my day-to-day life I I felt more comfortable just expressing myself however I wish to."* - Manav
Identity Formation	Friend group influence	How nightlife decisions are affected by the interviewees' friends	*"I mean, people have different tastes, so I have an example in my head. Now I will go with a different group. To a place that plays more house techno music. Than to and then I would go to with a different group to a place that has more like live music for example. Because it depends on their taste."* - Eirini
Identity Formation	Identity performance/exploration	How interviewees use nightlife to explore and express parts of their identity	*"I know what is expected going out and I mean if you're out and you're actively enjoying it and making an effort to be*

			extroverted, then it's fine. But it doesn't work. Being introverted and going out. So you kind of flip the switch when you decide to go out." - Omiros
Identity Formation	Pre-nightlife rituals	Any sort of preparatory behaviours prior to going out	*"Before you go, you meet up with your friends and you hang out. You like warm up for the party, obviously. And then you go all together to the venue."* - Kelly
Identity Formation	Self-expression	Feeling free to act/dress/behave in any way that lets them express themsleves	*"When I was growing up here, like my parents, they always ask me, they put on music and they're like, oh, come dance with me. And I always felt kind of shy, so I never really danced with them. So I was sure that that's why I I'm not the greatest, the greatest dancer. In like salsa music and stuff like that. But then when I went out here, I noticed that of course the level of dancing is way lower than in Latin America. So I felt like. You know, even though I I'm not the greatest dancer in Latin America standards, I'm I'm pretty OK to Dutch standards, so I felt more confident to start dancing when I went out. So in that sense, maybe going out here helped me explore my dancing side."* - Valentina

Sense-Making	Cultural dissonance	Moments of alienation/discomfort due to cultural boundaries/symbols	*"The cafes and the bars in Leidsplein, I was basically surrounded by Dutch students of a specific group. That a specific group in Pop Cult- in the Dutch pop culture. Kind of as, I don't know the posh people in quotation marks, let's say it like that. Yeah, I did not feel very included there. Like, yes, I went there with colleagues. They had invited me. But still like I did not see any similarities between me and those people"* - Eirini
Sense-Making	Cultural familiarity	Feelings of belonging/familiarity due to cultural signals	*"Club Puma student nights. It's like you have students. Mostly Dutch, mostly like. It's kind of people from the same group I belong to."* - Wessel
Sense-Making	Justifications for feeling of belonging	The reasons interviewees felt they belonged to the space	*"I prefer to go to places that may be more internationals go or more people that are part of the LGBTQ community. Which I'm also in in case I didn't mention that earlier. Yeah, just places that I feel that are a bit more inclusive"* - Eirini
Sense-Making	Making meaning of the space	The way in which interviewees understand a venue's social and cultural "feel"—not only visually, but as a whole sensory and affective experience	*"The location was also very nice. It was just, you know, the entrance was in some back alley. So you didn't have the busyness of the streets and everything. So it was the only thing you could hear was people laughing.*

			Which was really nice. You didn't have to hear any traffic. The lighting was nice as well. It was. It was a nice calm ambiance where it's still loud, of course. 'cause it's a bar. People are laughing, people are talking, but you don't have the business of the bars around you. You don't have scooters, you don't have bikes, you don't have trams, you don't have cars, just you and your friends in the moment.” - Joe
Sense-Making	Resistance to the branding	Any scepticism or resistance against the branding	*“I feel like I am not. I don't fit in in the, in those preppy Dutch places also, because my own friends, even though they are Dutch, we all have an international background…my best friend and she's half Dutch, half Italian like my other close friends. They're from Nigerian backgrounds, and the other one is Polish, or one it's Chinese background, but they're all also Dutch. Oh and Indonesian, so I feel like even though we are always stuck in Dutch like we grew up here, we went to Dutch like most of my friends are from high school…. they're just not my kind of vibe.”* - Valentina

Sense-Making	Shift in nightlife tendencies	How interviewees reflect on their nightlife behaviours changing	*"I definitely used to go out more especially three years ago there my stamina was way higher than now as a master student that's that's now I go out like. At least once a month, or once every two months"* - Kelly
Spatial Politics & Gatekeeping	Door policy	Interviewees' perceptions and/or experiences in regards to door policy	*"I don't like dress codes. I don't know. It's something that is weird. Why you have to come on this clothes and there's, you know, kind of come in. That's like 0 inclusivity."* - Christos
Spatial Politics & Gatekeeping	Feeling judged/stared at/uncomfortable	Any moment they expressed feeling discomfort at a venue	*"I guess the places that make me feel uncomfortable is when in regards to safety, where I feel like men are creepy and there's not really someone in from the staff that you can go and talk to like super fast."* - Valentina
Spatial Politics & Gatekeeping	Nightlife staff	The mention of nightlife staff in regards to how they affected their experience	*"I think they play a crucial role because they are the people that you will be interacting with and if you have like a negative experience with like maybe getting into the club or something then that will obviously affect your experience. I always appreciate it when they are friendly and and. Then, like if if they're friendly, it's doesn't know it. Hmm. Like if they're unfriendly. In my mind that will directly affect the like venues reputation in*

Spatial Politics & Gatekeeping	Spatial accessibility	How interviewees' abilities or tendencies to visit nightlife venues is influenced by their physical location, design, or geographic placement/how their night was affected by this	*my eye because it says like a lot." - Kelly*
			"But I think this big venue and the centralised bar and just that everything was kind of far away. And like I also went with a group big group of people. So there was always. People wanting to do something else and the group splits, reconvene, split, reconvene. So it was very like. Separated experience, I'd say." - Kelly

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