



Department of Public Administration

Program: Governance of Migration and Diversity

Student: Alicia Schippers (749169as)

Supervisor: Asya Pisarevskaya

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*More Than a Door: Club Identity, Discretion, and the Politics of Inclusion in Rotterdam's
Nightlife*

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Abstract

Exclusion in nightlife spaces is rarely the product of explicit rules alone. Rather, it emerges through a complex interplay of informal discretion, aesthetic norms, and fragmented governance. In Rotterdam, this dynamic plays out within a nightlife sector that is formally committed to inclusion yet still marked by persistent risks of racialised exclusion. This thesis examines how clubs in Rotterdam balance door policy practices and club identity with efforts to promote inclusive access. Based on 12 semi-structured interviews with managers, bouncers, and professionals involved in nightlife policy in Rotterdam, this study explores how club-led cultural production, discretionary access decisions, and weak enforcement frameworks shape who feels welcome in nightlife spaces. The analysis foregrounds the role of club identity as an informal regulatory force, enacted through music programming, aesthetics, staffing, and marketing, which curates audiences long before guests reach the door. It also highlights how bouncers, operating as street-level bureaucrats, exercise discretion in ways that both reflect and reproduce racialised patterns of exclusion. Governance frameworks such as the Panel Deurbeleid provide voluntary guidance, but enforcement remains limited and fragmented, leaving much of the work of inclusion to individual actors navigating tensions between commercial imperatives and normative commitments. The study contributes to research on aesthetic governance, institutional racism, and informal regulation in nightlife, offering insights for both academic debates and local policy.

Keywords: Rotterdam nightlife; racialised exclusion; access governance; institutional racism; club identity; discretion; nightlife regulation

Introduction

Nightlife venues play a significant role in shaping the social life of cities. They are not merely sites of leisure but spaces where cultural identities are produced and negotiated, and forms of inclusion or exclusion are enacted (Grazian, 2009; Koren, 2023). On the surface, many clubs promote themselves as open and diverse environments. Yet in practice, access is governed by a combination of informal policies and practices, aesthetic judgements, discretion, and commercial priorities. These mechanisms work to create symbolic boundaries that can reinforce structural inequalities even in the absence of overt intent (Talbot, 2004; Ray, 2019).

Importantly, the regulation of access begins long before the door. Through the cultural production of clubs, including music programming, visual aesthetics, guest lists, and social

media communications, certain audiences are subtly invited while others are discouraged (Koren, 2023; Aagerup, 2020). These upstream signals are reinforced at the door through discretionary judgements made by security staff. While often presented as neutral, such aesthetic criteria and informal decisions can carry racialised, classed, and gendered implications (Wicks, 2022).

In the Netherlands, debates about discrimination in nightlife have gained public attention in recent years, particularly in major cities such as Rotterdam. In response to concerns about racialised exclusion at the door, Rotterdam's municipality introduced the *Panel Deurbeleid*, a voluntary framework intended to promote fairer and more transparent access practices. The Panel offers training, advisory support, and a system through which complaints can be submitted and reviewed. However, despite these efforts, mystery guest investigations continue to suggest that racialised exclusion persists in Rotterdam's nightlife (Sfeerbezoeken, 2024). Moreover, engagement with the Panel by venues remains mixed. Some operators perceive it as a useful framework; others view it as a tool of supervision or an intrusion into their autonomy.

Although anti-discrimination frameworks formally apply to Rotterdam's nightlife sector, and initiatives such as the *Panel Deurbeleid* promote fair access, the persistence of racialised exclusion points to deeper, more embedded mechanisms at work. Existing research suggests that exclusion in nightlife is not solely the product of individual prejudice or explicit discrimination (Wicks, 2022; Søggaard, 2017). Instead, it often operates through routinised practices and informal norms that subtly produce and sustain boundaries of belonging.

At the same time, the governance of nightlife is fragmented. No single authority regulates inclusion in this field. Instead, governance emerges through the interplay of municipal actors, police, advisory bodies, club managers, and frontline staff, each with differing priorities and logics (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002). Clubs themselves face dilemmas in balancing commercial interests, brand identity, safety concerns, and inclusion norms (Van Liempt, 2016; Mahmoud, 2025). In this fragmented and informal regulatory landscape, exclusion risks becoming normalised or obscured.

Despite growing scholarly interest in the governance of nightlife, there is still limited understanding of how these mechanisms interact in concrete, everyday club practices (Grazian, 2009; Ray, 2019). In particular, little research has examined how club managers and security staff in European contexts such as Rotterdam experience and navigate the tensions between

maintaining a desired club identity and promoting inclusive access. While there is a growing body of research from Anglophone contexts like the US and UK on racialised exclusion in nightlife, particularly through music, style, and door policies, studies focusing on continental European cities remain limited. Empirical research examining how club managers and bouncers themselves navigate inclusion in these settings, especially in non-Anglophone cities such as Rotterdam, is still scarce. This thesis contributes to filling that gap.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating how exclusion is produced and negotiated in Rotterdam's nightlife sector. It examines how cultural production, discretionary decision-making, and governance frameworks shape inclusion and exclusion at the club door. Hence, the central research question guiding this study is: *How do clubs in Rotterdam balance door policy practices and club identity with efforts to promote inclusive access in nightlife?*

To do this, the study draws on five interconnected theoretical concepts; institutional racism (Williams, 1985; Tourse et al., 2018), street-level bureaucracy and discretion (Lipsky, 1980), cultural production (Koren, 2023), soft law (Zerilli, 2010), and policy dilemmas (Mahmoud, 2025). Together, these concepts offer an analytical lens for understanding how exclusion can be embedded in the practices and institutional arrangements of nightlife venues, even in contexts where actors may be formally committed to inclusion.

The research contributes to academic debates on institutional racism, discretion, club identity, and informal governance in shaping exclusion. By foregrounding the role of club identity and cultural production as informal regulatory forces, it expands on existing work on institutional inequality and everyday governance practices (Ray, 2019; Koren, 2023). It also contributes to scholarship on street-level discretion by showing how bouncers and managers navigate the competing demands of commercial, normative, and aesthetic pressures in real time. In doing so, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how racialised exclusion operates, not only through explicit discrimination, but through embedded aesthetic codes and the ambiguities of fragmented governance.

Societally, the research is highly relevant. Nightlife venues remain important public spaces where residents of a diverse city such as Rotterdam seek leisure, expression, and belonging. Yet they are also settings where exclusion can be acutely felt, with consequences for social trust and perceptions of fairness. In the context of wider debates on racism and diversity, understanding how exclusion persists in seemingly progressive spaces such as nightlife is of public interest. Finally, the findings may inform local policy discussions by

analysing how club managers and security staff experience the Panel Deurbeleid and where these frameworks could be strengthened to improve inclusion in nightlife.

The following chapters present the theoretical framework, methodological approach, and empirical findings of this study. The aim is not only to document current practices, but to shed light on the subtle ways in which racialised exclusion can be normalised, and on the challenges of fostering a genuinely inclusive nightlife.

Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the key theoretical concepts that guide the analysis of this research. The aim is to understand how racialized exclusion is produced not only through explicit entry decisions, but also through broader institutional structures, cultural practices, and governance mechanisms. In order to analyse how club managers and security staff navigate the tension between maintaining a club identity and ensuring non-discriminatory access, this section draws on five interconnected concepts: institutional racism, street-level bureaucracy, cultural production, soft law, and policy dilemmas.

The institutional logics of racialized exclusion in nightlife spaces

Before introducing the theoretical concepts, it is important to clarify how this study understands key terms. While “discrimination” and “exclusion” are sometimes used interchangeably in public debates, they are not the same. Discrimination refers to unfair treatment based on race, ethnicity, or other protected characteristics, whether direct or indirect (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Exclusion is broader, as it includes any processes, intentional or not, that limit participation or access to social spaces (Rawal, 2008). In nightlife, exclusion can occur through discriminatory acts, but also through a wider range of mechanisms such as aesthetic norms or informal discretion. Similarly, “inclusion” in this study is understood not only as legal compliance with anti-discrimination obligations, but as the broader effort to create spaces where diverse publics feel welcome. This analytical approach therefore examines both the risks of discrimination and the aesthetic and informal factors that shape who feels welcome in nightlife venues.

To understand how such forms of exclusion in Rotterdam’s nightlife may occur even without explicit intent, this section draws on a layered theoretical approach. It begins with foundational definitions of racism as a structural hierarchy, before narrowing down to the concept of institutional racism which is how racial inequality is sustained through everyday

institutional routines. It then connects these macro-level insights to meso and micro-level mechanisms operating in nightlife spaces, including informal norms and aesthetic judgements in access practices. Together, these theories provide a lens through which to analyse how exclusion can be embedded in practices that appear neutral or inclusive on the surface.

Racism is understood here not merely as a matter of individual prejudice or openly discriminatory act, but as a structural and institutional phenomenon that organises social relations according to racialised hierarchies. Grosfoguel (2016) defines racism as “a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries” (p. 10). Those positioned above this line are recognised “socially in their humanity” and granted rights and access to resources, while those below it are systematically dehumanised and denied full recognition (Fanon, 1967 in Grosfoguel, 2016). Importantly, racial hierarchies are not constructed through skin colour alone, but also through markers of ethnicity, religion, language, class, and culture (Grosfoguel, 2016).

This understanding of racism is central to the concept of institutional racism, a term first used by Carmichael and Hamilton in 1967 and further theorized by Williams (1985), who rejected the individualization of racism and instead focused on its deeper structural and institutional roots. Williams (1985) describes institutional racism as the systematic structuring of advantage and disadvantage through institutional logics that persist because those positioned to change them often benefit from the status quo (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967 in Williams, 1985). Institutional racism is not dependent on the intent of individual actors but embedded in “regular practices, rules and the enduring features of society” (Mason, 1982 in Williams, 1985, p.329). As a result, such racism often remains invisible to those who profit from it as it is sustained through behaviours and standards perceived as the norm. In other words, these race-neutral framed practices may in fact uphold white privilege by operating through what Tourse et al. (2018) calls *institutional scaffolding* whereby the marginalization of racialized groups is sustained and legitimized. Verlot (2003) further stresses how racism is entangled in bureaucratic routines that diffuse responsibility and obscure discriminatory effects. Rather than overt intent, exclusion emerges through administrative patterns that are seen as standard procedure. To uncover these subtle mechanisms, Verlot (2003) calls for ethnographic attention to institutional practice, arguing that only by examining how policy functions in daily governance can the roots of institutional racism be properly understood.

Similarly, in the nightlife scene, racism often remains invisible as it can be embedded in exclusionary practices which are rarely framed in racial terms. Instead, regulation operates through aesthetic and behavioural expectations around security and atmosphere which can be shaped by racialized assumptions. Again, these are not necessarily the product of racist intent but are rooted in institutional norms that associate particular cultural expressions with disorder or risk (Talbot, 2004). Access practices at the door thus operate through a blend of formal rules and informal judgements that may reproduce racial boundaries without naming race explicitly.

Hence, a demand for racialized individuals to decode and conform to unspoken norms of whiteness gets generated. Wicks (2022), in her ethnographic study of British nightlife spaces, shows how racialised individuals are expected to perform “whiteness” by adopting particular dress codes, behaviours, and styles of self-presentation that align with dominant cultural norms in order to be perceived as legitimate participants in the nightlife scene. Similarly, May and Chaplin (2008) describe how nightlife venues operate through “codes to crack” where guests must decipher implicit cultural cues and display acceptable markers of identity to avoid exclusion. These codes are not neutral, they reflect racialised and classed norms of respectability and safety.

Dress codes, for instance, while framed in neutral terms, can function as informal mechanisms of exclusion. Bans on certain clothing items are typically justified in terms of aesthetics, yet may disproportionately target racialised youth (May and Chaplin, 2008). As such, expectations around what is deemed appropriate behaviour and appearance function as informal filters, favouring those who can align with these dominant cultural norms and marginalising those who cannot (Wicks, 2022). Thus, individuals who fail to conform to these unspoken expectations may face exclusion, regardless of their actual behaviour. As Williams (1985) underlines, institutional racism functions precisely through such embedded practices, where cultural norms structure unequal access. Building on this, Ray’s (2019) framework of racialized organizations contributes a conceptual lens that clarifies how institutions themselves are structured by race. Organizations are not simply spaces where racism occurs; they actively help produce and sustain racial hierarchies through embedded norms and standards of legitimacy. Ray argues that whiteness is often treated as the default within institutional settings, and that organizations function to maintain this status quo, even when no actor intends to discriminate (Ray, 2019).

These insights highlight the institutional logics club managers and bouncers must navigate in Rotterdam's nightlife. Importantly, this lens sheds light on the institutional and cultural factors through which exclusion may persist despite the absence of conscious intent. Even actors who are committed to inclusion must operate within this scaffolding (Tourse et al., 2018). Hence, institutional racism persists not through intentional prejudice, but through routinised, racialised expectations that remain structurally embedded.

Discretion and street-level bureaucracy in door policy enforcement

Bouncers play a key role in regulating access to nightlife venues. While formal access policies exist to outline club entry criteria, it is ultimately security personnel who decide who is allowed in and who is not. This discretionary role can be understood through Lipsky's (1980) notion of street-level bureaucracy, which pertains to the ways in which frontline workers exercise discretion when implementing policies under conditions of limited time, resources, and oversight, making judgments that are inevitably shaped by their own perceptions. Although Lipsky focused on public sector employees such as police officers or social workers, his insights offer a useful framework for analysing how bouncers similarly use discretionary decision-making in nightlife settings.

This discretionary process is not neutral. It is shaped by informal norms, aesthetic preferences, and assumptions about who fits the club's desired atmosphere which may reflect racialised and classed ideas of safety and style (Talbot, 2004; Søgaaard, 2017). Clubs seek to project a particular image, and in doing so, security staff take on the role of curating a crowd that aligns with that image. Foshaugen (2024) demonstrates how bouncers are expected to balance legal compliance with commercial pressures and branding demands, often under ambiguous mandates that leave significant room for informal interpretation. In this context, entry decisions are frequently based on symbolic cues such as style, group composition, body language, clothing, or perceived attitude, markers that can be culturally coded and subject to uneven interpretation (Wicks, 2022). Wicks further shows that such aesthetic and behavioural expectations are not merely incidental but form part of a normalised framework of inclusion and exclusion, where racialised biases are embedded in seemingly neutral standards of taste and style.

Furthermore, the expectation that bouncers must align their decisions with the club's commercial interests reinforces the reliance on symbolic judgements (Foshaugen, 2024). In making these decisions, bouncers rely on what Søgaaard (2017) calls 'vernacular risk thinking':

an informal mode of judgement in which perceptions of economic risk are intertwined with prejudicial ethnic stereotypes. Consequently, even in the absence of explicit racial criteria, discretionary decision-making can systematically reproduce racialised patterns of exclusion.

Through this lens, door policy enforcement emerges as a site where institutional racism operates through the everyday discretion of street-level actors. Recognising this process is essential to understanding how racialised exclusion is sustained, not only through formal policy frameworks, but also through the informal ways in which those policies are interpreted and enacted in practice.

Club identity and cultural production as tools for audience curation

To understand how inclusion and exclusion operate before individuals even reach the door, this section examines how clubs use identity and cultural production to curate audiences. Drawing on theories of branding, cultural production, symbolic boundaries, and performativity, it shows how clubs construct identities that operate as regulatory tools, influencing who feels welcome. This is done through visual cues, musical genres and marketing strategies which produce a nightlife space selective by design, often without explicit reference to race.

First, venues actively create demand by shaping their identity to attract desired guests and deter others (Koren, 2023). This is done through event themes, music genres, collaborations, and marketing language which together act as gatekeeping devices. Aagerup (2020), for example, shows how musical genres are carefully selected to align with the brand personality that venues aim to project. For instance, clubs targeting affluent or trendy crowds may avoid genres associated with working-class or racialised audiences, favouring instead those that signal cultural capital or prestige (Aagerup, 2020). These symbolic associations are not neutral. Indeed, genres like rap have been historically marked as threatening or uncultured, linked to Blackness and coded as low cultural value (Appelrouth & Kelly, 2013; Aagerup, 2020). Even when these genres enjoy mainstream popularity, clubs may avoid them or strictly contain their use to preserve a curated image of respectability or safety. These discourses reflect not only musical preferences but also help produce racialised hierarchies in cultural spaces, making certain identities more acceptable than others in nightlife settings (Appelrouth & Kelly, 2013). These are among the cues that subtly communicate unspoken expectations about who belongs (Koren, 2023). More broadly, music, event branding, and door policies operate together as tools to construct symbolic and material boundaries (Grazian, 2009). These elements do not operate simply to define atmosphere, but to manage composition of the crowd

itself, often along unspoken social lines. May and Chaplin (2008) further note that club visitors must “crack the code” which contain a certain acceptability in how to dress. These codes to crack are part of a broader interconnected system of door policies, dress codes, and music choices that function as both material and symbolic boundaries, shaping who is seen as legitimate in nightlife spaces, often privileging white, middle-class forms of sociability.

Davis (2009) brings further nuance by showing that club spaces themselves are not fixed but co-produced through performative acts. Drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity and Lefebvre’s notion of space as socially produced, Davis argues that the nightclub is remade each night by the way it is used. Its identity shifts depending on who shows up, what kind of event takes place, and how people perform within it. Audiences do not simply consume the space; they help constitute it. This fluidity, however, also means that power relations and cultural norms embedded in the venue can shift subtly from night to night. Some groups may find moments of belonging, while others are reminded of their marginal position depending on the night’s tone and the unspoken expectations of performance.

In short, club identity and cultural production intersect with practices of audience curation long before a guest arrives at the door. They shape which patrons feel entitled to enter and which ones are discouraged, through performance, branding, aesthetics, and the selective activation of cultural symbols. These strategies allow clubs to maintain social boundaries without needing to articulate exclusion explicitly, blurring the line between marketing and regulation.

Soft governance and the informal regulation of inclusion

Access governance in nightlife is shaped not only by formal law, but also by a range of soft governance instruments, non-binding frameworks that aim to influence behaviour through norms, guidance, and legitimacy rather than legal coercion (Zerilli, 2010). While venues are formally subject to national anti-discrimination law, how this obligation is reflected or enforced through local licensing remains ambiguous in practice. As a result, clubs retain considerable autonomy in how they shape access practices on the ground.

In this context, soft governance initiatives play an increasingly important role. A central example in Rotterdam’s nightlife is the Panel Deurbeleid, a voluntary framework that offers guidance and advisory tools to promote more inclusive access practices. While venues that formally sign the Panel’s covenant commit to certain measures such as establishing visible house rules, compliance is ultimately not enforced through legal sanctions, but relies on

voluntary alignment and reputational incentives. This positioning makes the Panel emblematic of the dynamics Zerilli (2010) describes as *non-binding coercion*: a mode of governance in which actors are expected to conform to certain norms, yet retain discretion over how fully they implement them.

Understanding these dynamics of soft governance and private regulation is crucial for analysing how access to nightlife spaces is managed in practice. In this governance landscape, formal obligations and advisory frameworks coexist with informal norms and discretionary enforcement. As a result, the risks of exclusion are shaped not only by legal standards, but also by how these standards are interpreted and enacted within the everyday practices of club governance.

Navigating governance dilemmas in a fragmented nightlife field

In nightlife settings, access practices are shaped not only by formal laws or licensing rules, but also by internal practices through which clubs curate their audiences and spaces (Koren, 2023). These mechanisms are largely informal and flexible, leaving significant room for interpretation and discretion at the door, as previously discussed in relation to street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980; Sogaard, 2017).

In this context, efforts to promote more inclusive access in nightlife settings are rarely straightforward. They unfold within a fragmented governance landscape in which competing priorities, interests, and values interact. The governance of nightlife is not exercised by a single regulatory authority, but emerges through the interplay of diverse actors, including club owners and managers, door staff, municipal authorities, police, and advisory bodies, each bringing their own norms, expectations, and priorities to the field (Chatterton, 2003; Mahmoud, 2025). This diversity of actors inherently produces dilemmas of value alignment and can generate tensions or inconsistent governance outcomes (Mahmoud, 2025).

These tensions are particularly visible in how clubs balance commitments to inclusivity with commercial imperatives and brand identity. As Talbot (2004) argues, market logics and the pursuit of a particular identity and aesthetic often sit uneasily alongside normative goals of diversity, placing clubs in situations where they must navigate contradictory pressures. Similarly, Van Liempt (2016) shows how formal collaborative frameworks often struggle to account for the situated complexities of real-time decision making, where actors must continuously negotiate between written guidelines and the fluid conditions of nightlife environments. The fragmented nature of governance, involving both formal and informal

regulatory mechanisms results in uneven implementation and varying standards across different venues and contexts (Mahmoud, 2025).

Moreover, governance interventions can produce unintended effects. Practices intended to enhance safety, such as increased police presence, may inadvertently trigger unease among nightlife participants and disrupt the immersive, carefree experiences they seek (Brands & Schwanen, 2014). Rather than fostering inclusion and security, such interventions risk reinforcing perceptions of surveillance or exclusion. Such unintended consequences further illustrate the instability and contested nature of governance in nightlife spaces.

Taken together, these insights underscore that fostering inclusive door practices cannot be reduced to the application of formal policy alone. Rather, it involves navigating a complex governance field in which commercial, aesthetic, regulatory, and normative forces intersect in subtle and sometimes contradictory ways. This perspective is central to the present study's analysis of how club managers and door staff experience and navigate these dilemmas in their daily access practices.

Summary

This conceptual framework provides a layered lens through which to explore how practices of inclusion and exclusion may emerge and become normalized in Rotterdam's nightlife. It combines two complementary perspectives: a governance lens, which highlights how formal and informal mechanisms such as soft law, street-level discretion, and institutional policy dilemmas shape the practical regulation of access; and a cultural production lens, which draws attention to how club identity and symbolic boundaries structure inclusion and exclusion before individuals reach the door.

The concept of institutional racism helps situate exclusion within broader structures of inequality, while street-level bureaucracy draws attention to the discretionary decisions made by bouncers and managers under pressure. Simultaneously, cultural production theory sheds light on how symbolic boundaries are constructed through music selection, dress codes, and other aesthetic choices that shape the club's atmosphere and clientele. These practices do not operate in isolation, but intersect with governance mechanisms such as the voluntary Panel Deurbeleid and broader licensing mechanisms.

Based on this framework, it can be expected that tensions will arise where inclusion norms come into conflict with branding goals or commercial risk perceptions. This study will

therefore explore how staff make sense of such tensions and how they justify their actions within an institutional context that offers both autonomy and ambiguity.

Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative case study design to explore how clubs in Rotterdam balance the challenges of maintaining their club identity while promoting inclusive access practices in nightlife. Hence, the central research question guiding the study is:

How do clubs in Rotterdam balance door policy practices and club identity with efforts to promote inclusive access in nightlife?

Sub-questions include:

- How is club identity constructed and communicated by managers and staff?
- How are door policy decisions made, and what role do discretion and informal judgment play?
- How do staff perceive and respond to the risks of racialized exclusion in door policy practices?
- What are the constraints and dilemmas faced by clubs in implementing inclusive practices?

Qualitative research is well suited to this study, as it allows for in-depth exploration of how people make sense of their experiences and practices (Lim, 2024). Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the research adopts an exploratory orientation, aiming to understand how club staff conceptualize and negotiate tensions around inclusion and identity in everyday settings.

A case study design was chosen to enable in-depth examination of these dynamics within a particular context (Barglowski, 2018). In this thesis, the “case” is defined as Rotterdam’s nightlife sector, a field shaped by local licensing policies, informal governance, and broader public debates on discrimination and inclusion, within which the Panel Deurbeleid operates as a voluntary initiative for inclusive practices. The case was selected for its relevance to local policy discussions (through the Rotterdam Inclusivity Project), and because it provides a rich site for exploring informal governance, discretion, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion in

nightlife. Findings aim to contribute to ongoing municipal efforts to foster more inclusive and equitable nightlife environments.

The study is grounded in an inductive qualitative approach, with coding and theme development emerging from the interview material (Lim, 2024; Elliott, 2018). The goal is not to build a formal theory, but to produce empirically grounded insights into the practices and dilemmas shaping access governance in Rotterdam's nightlife sector. Given the exploratory nature of the research, this approach enables flexibility and openness to unexpected findings, while remaining grounded in the lived perspectives of those working in nightlife venues. This inductive approach and the thematic coding process used are elaborated further below.

Case selection

Rotterdam's nightlife scene was selected as the focal case in the context of the Rotterdam Inclusivity Project, which aims to enhance inclusion and reduce discrimination in the city. Conducting the research within this framework made Rotterdam a logical choice, while also offering a dynamic empirical setting for examining access governance. As the Netherlands' second-largest city, Rotterdam hosts a diverse nightlife sector. It is also a national frontrunner in collaborative safety initiatives. It has implemented one of the country's first Safe Nightlife covenants (Veilig Uitgaan), supported by a dedicated nightlife police unit and extensive CCTV surveillance (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2016). In addition, the Panel Deurbeleid provides a mechanism for monitoring and addressing complaints about discriminatory door policies (Gemeente Rotterdam). These frameworks aim to foster a safer and more inclusive nightlife environment. However, research indicates that such formal governance arrangements do not always account for the discretionary practices of club managers and bouncers. Van Liempt and van Aalst (2016) show that private security staff in Dutch nightlife often operate according to commercial and situational logics, rather than the collaborative ideals set out in policy frameworks. For example, they explain how bouncers are frequently instructed by club owners to avoid police involvement to maintain an inviting atmosphere and protect the venue's license. This misalignment between institutional expectations and on-the-ground practices makes Rotterdam a valuable site for studying how access is negotiated in practice.

Sample selection

The research is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with key actors shaping and implementing door policies, namely club managers and security staff. Key informant interviews are particularly suited to capturing in-depth perspectives on professional practices

in sensitive fields (Kibuacha, 2024). They provide access to insider knowledge and contextually rich accounts of complex issues.

A combined purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used (Barglowski, 2018). Purposive sampling identified information-rich cases capable of offering depth and variation (Barglowski, 2018), while snowball sampling helped extend the sample by leveraging social networks in a field known to be difficult to access. Initial recruitment involved emailing all clubs that had signed the Panel Deurbeleid, as well as nearly all venues with a night license (*nachtvergunning*), using a contact list provided via Panel Deurbeleid networks. Snowball sampling (Barglowski, 2018) then helped expand the sample through referrals from interviewees and informal networks. In addition, direct field-based outreach at club doors was used to recruit bouncers, a group otherwise difficult to access. In total, twelve interviews were conducted: five with club managers, five with bouncers or heads of security, and two with professionals working in related initiatives (De Veilige Nacht and the Sociale Veiligheid Onderzoek). The sample includes clubs of varying size, location, and target audience, encompassing both signatories and non-signatories of the Panel Deurbeleid. The selection prioritized variation across venue types and staff roles, in line with best practices in qualitative research (Barglowski, 2018), rather than statistical representativeness. Findings from this case study may thus offer insights not only for local governance but for broader efforts to address exclusion in nightlife settings. A detailed overview of the data collection procedures is provided in the following section.

Operationalization

In line with best practices in qualitative research, operationalization in this study was flexible and thematically guided rather than indicator-based (Barglowski, 2018). In qualitative research, measurement depends on the extent to which data collection and analysis meaningfully capture the relevant concepts (Adcock & Collier, 2001). To ensure this alignment, the five key theoretical concepts of this study; *institutional racism*, *street-level bureaucracy and discretion*, *cultural production*, *soft law*, and *policy dilemmas* were used to inform the design of the interview guide and structure the analysis.

Following Adcock and Collier (2001), this approach emphasizes *content validity*, rather than measuring concepts through fixed indicators, the interview themes and questions aimed to capture the full content of each concept, as relevant in the lived experiences of nightlife staff. For example:

- *Institutional racism* was explored through questions on how staff perceive and manage risks of exclusion, and how social norms and assumptions influence gatekeeping practices.
- *Discretion* was addressed through questions on how door decisions are made and which informal judgments or pressures affect them.
- *Cultural production* was investigated through topics such as music programming, branding, staff composition, and audience curation.
- *Soft law* was explored through questions about the influence of voluntary frameworks (such as the Panel Deurbeleid), perceptions of their legitimacy, and responses to them.
- *Policy dilemmas* were examined through questions on how clubs balance the sometimes-conflicting goals of commercial success, desired identity, and inclusive practices.

A detailed operationalization table is provided in Appendix B, summarizing how each concept was translated into interview themes and corresponding codes used in analysis. This enables readers to assess the fit between theoretical concepts and empirical material (Adcock & Collier, 2001).

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, an approach well suited to exploring complex and sensitive issues while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences (Lim, 2024). The composition of the interview sample is described above (see Sample selection). Given the informal and discretionary nature of door policies, this method was especially appropriate for capturing nuanced practices of inclusion and exclusion (van Liempt & van Aalst, 2016).

Twelve interviews were conducted, both in-person and online, depending on participant preferences and availability. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview guide addressed key themes relevant to the study but remained flexible to the flow of conversation. Topics included club identity, audience curation, door policy practices, discretion and judgment at the door, perceived dilemmas around inclusion, and views on initiatives like the Panel Deurbeleid and mystery guest testing. To address sensitive topics such as racialized exclusion, questions were phrased carefully to avoid defensive reactions. Rather than directly naming race or discrimination, the language *inclusion* was used to promote open dialogue.

All interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis. Informed consent was systematically obtained, and anonymity was guaranteed. The interviews generated a rich and multi-layered dataset, capturing both institutional and personal perspectives on nightlife access governance.

Data analysis

The data were analysed through an inductive thematic coding process supported by ATLAS.ti. The aim was to identify how actors in Rotterdam's nightlife sector reflect on and enact practices of inclusion and exclusion in door policies.

Thematic analysis offers a systematic yet flexible means of identifying patterns and meanings across qualitative data (Elliott, 2018; Lim, 2024). The analysis followed an inductive logic, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing a pre-defined coding structure (Lim, 2024; Lobe et al., 2020). This approach was well-suited to the exploratory aims of the study. Coding began with open coding of early transcripts, generating initial codes around concrete practices and beliefs (Elliott, 2018). As analysis progressed, the code list was refined iteratively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), with attention paid to maintaining consistency in how codes were applied and adjusted across the dataset.

Time constraints shaped the process to some extent. The analysis did not involve multiple rounds of formal re-coding of the entire dataset. Rather, the coding evolved through a balance of systematic application and openness to new patterns as they emerged. Thematic categories were then organised in relation to the sub-questions, supporting a structured interpretation while remaining grounded in the empirical material (Lim, 2024).

The coding tree (Appendix B) provides a visual summary of the final thematic structure used in this analysis. It presents the four central themes, aligned with the sub-questions and the key code clusters that were grouped under each theme. This representation serves to clarify how the inductive coding informed the analysis. Not all codes used during the coding process are shown in this visualisation, as some codes were developed for practical purposes (for example, collecting suggestions for policy recommendations) and did not directly inform the thematic structure of the findings.

While the sample offers diversity across venue types and staff roles, it is acknowledged that additional interviews might have revealed further nuances. The findings are thus presented as

analytically rich insights rather than an exhaustive account of all perspectives (Barglowski, 2018).

Ethics

Ethical considerations are central to qualitative research on sensitive topics (Hedgecoe, 2015). While this study does not involve a vulnerable group in the traditional sense, it touches on reputationally sensitive issues such as discrimination and institutional practice. As such, careful attention was given to participant rights, confidentiality, and informed consent. Participants were fully informed of the study's aims, their right to withdraw, and how their data would be handled under GDPR regulations. Verbal consent to participate and to record the interviews was obtained in all cases. An informed consent form was prepared for the interviewees detailing their rights as a participant. Anonymity and confidentiality were safeguarded by omitting names of clubs or venues to avoid identification.

Particular care was taken in how the topic was introduced. In recruitment materials and early stages of interviews, neutral and softer language (inclusion, club identity) was used to foster openness and reduce defensiveness. This approach aligns with common ethical practices in sensitive fieldwork, where framing can significantly affect willingness to participate and the depth of insights shared (Hedgecoe, 2015).

Positionality

Researcher positionality inevitably shapes access to the field, interactions with participants, and interpretation of data (Barglowski, 2018). Positionality refers to how the researcher's identity, background, and social position influence the research process.

As a young woman of colour with a Surinamese background, my positionality provided both insider and outsider status. On the one hand, my relatively young age and informal communication style sometimes helped put interviewees at ease, creating a more conversational atmosphere. On the other hand, my identity may also have influenced which topics participants felt comfortable discussing, particularly around race and exclusion. Although I did not foreground my own background during interviews, it may have implicitly shaped the degree of openness or defensiveness encountered in certain conversations. Moreover, my role as a student conducting research for the Rotterdam Inclusivity Project likely shaped expectations among interviewees. Some participants may have assumed I was aligned with policy actors or municipal goals, while others may have viewed me as a neutral academic observer. This ambiguity may have affected how openly certain topics were discussed,

especially when participants spoke about the Panel Deurbeleid or public discourses around inclusion.

Throughout the process, I remained reflexive about these dynamics, aware that my own background, including my personal experience of how race shapes interactions inevitably informed my reading of the data. For instance, I am conscious that in my own experience, conversations about discrimination often feel different when speaking with a white person versus a person of colour, an awareness that informed how I interpreted interview material. At the same time, I sought to use my positionality to build rapport and enable meaningful conversations on a topic that is not always easy to discuss.

Analysis

How is club-identity constructed and maintained in Rotterdam's nightlife venues?

Club identity in Rotterdam's nightlife venues is shaped through a range of symbolic and material practices that extend far beyond formal door policies. Managers and bouncers consistently described how the club's atmosphere, musical programming, visual aesthetics, marketing language, and staff composition work together to cultivate a particular image, one that signals beforehand who the night is for (Koren, 2023). These identity-building practices operate not merely to express a particular brand personality, but to curate the audience even before they reach the entrance. This matters, because these practices already influence inclusion and exclusion upstream of the door, shaping who feels invited and who does not.

Curating audience through music, events, and atmosphere

Music emerged as a central tool for constructing club identity, with nearly all interviewees identifying genre choice as key in shaping audience composition. In one venue, for instance, with a self-described “*rather alternative*” identity (manager), a bouncer described how the selection of punk and rock music attracted a clientele which he characterised as “*gothic*”.

In other clubs, genre selection was more varied, and it was described how changes in music programming could shift the club's demographic profile. As one manager explained:

“But it is that for a certain period we did programme predominantly Afro and hip-hop and R&B, so also just, music flows with black backgrounds. And that actually really attracted more black audiences. And that hasn't stuck so much now, so to speak. But we

do have a kind of fixed target audience. Not fixed target group, regulars who do just come here every weekend, who also come to the house parties, which is generally a bit more white audience” (manager).

This underscores how aesthetic decisions about music shape who feels at home within a space. While managers typically avoided framing these decisions as explicitly exclusionary, perhaps for reasons of social acceptability, several acknowledged that music sends social signals about belonging, as this manager illustrates, supporting Aagerup’s (2020) claim that genre selection helps project brand personality and can implicitly shape audience composition.

Another manager more openly reflected on how music affects atmosphere and crowd management:

“We sometimes tell them to avoid some types of music to keep things from getting too aggressive. That’s allowed, yes, look sometimes it’s hip-hop, R&B which can go a bit too far to get the atmosphere down. But then again, what often happens is that if you play that alternately, it can be fun again and make it cosy again”.

Several interviewees also highlighted the fluidity of club identity when hosting external promoters. A bouncer explained that *“the club has its own identity, but organisations that throw parties there also bring their own identity.”* Managers described the balancing act of selecting which events to host and how to present them in marketing materials in order to manage audience expectations and reducing misalignments at the door. One manager gave an example of how targeted social media visuals shaped the crowd:

“But ‘event name’ then, for example, very young. Because they also have a lot of young People on Instagram, so that’s just 18 to 21. And Everyone then recognises themselves in that marketing, so they then want to come”.

This reflects Davi’s (2009) insights, drawing on Lefebvre and Butler, that club spaces are not fixed containers but performatively produced and reconfigured each night by the crowd and the way the space is used. Identity, in this sense, is not static but enacted and this performativity can subtly shape which audiences feel addressed or out of place.

Dress codes as implicit signalling

Dress expectations emerged as another mechanism through which clubs regulate access. While not all venues enforced formal dress policies, interviewees described common practices of turning away guests based on attire. Items such as tracksuits, caps, and certain types of bags were frequently mentioned as grounds for refusal. Though these decisions were framed in terms of maintaining style, some bouncers openly acknowledged that such judgments were sometimes informed by racialised perceptions. One bouncer noted:

“I have often said no to clubs where I got ridiculous requests like, we don’t want boys with Gucci caps and those bags, and then you know they mean Moroccans or light-skinned groups”.

In some cases, managers encouraged guests to adjust their outfits in order to gain entry:

“Yeah sure, because if the same guy comes with a, with jeans and, and a shirt, then it’s ok”

These examples reflect the idea of *codes to crack* where guests must decode implicit cultural expectations to gain access. These codes are socially selective, rewarding those who align with dominant markers of style and respectability and marginalising those who do not. (May and Chaplin, 2008).

Compared to Grazian’s (2009) vivid accounts of U.S. nightlife, where dress codes and bans on hip-hop fashion explicitly reproduced racialised exclusions, the patterns observed in Rotterdam appeared more subtle. While practices such as refusing guests in tracksuits or caps may serve similar exclusionary functions, interviewees rarely framed these in racial terms, and underlying intent was often difficult to determine. This more ambiguous landscape aligns with Wicks’s (2022) observation that exclusionary dress codes often operate through normalised, taken-for-granted aesthetic norms. These findings suggest that even seemingly neutral practices of aesthetic gatekeeping may contribute to the exclusion of marginalised groups.

Staff as carriers of club identity

Beyond music and dress codes, interviewees also emphasised the importance of staff in performing and communicating club identity. Several managers described intentional efforts to hire a diverse team that aligned with the desired target audience. One manager explained:

“We find it very important that our staff is diverse, and we make sure that for every night the target group matches the people behind the bar, because that makes people feel more comfortable.”

Others also highlighted the symbolic role of security staff in shaping first impressions at the door as they are the “*first face people see*” (manager). One manager expressed frustration when external security guards failed to grasp the club’s vision, sometimes resulting in inconsistent or exclusionary entry practices:

“Security of course is a particular type most of the time, they do their best but it is difficult to find a good one”, “Endless with security, endless conversations with security”, “It is very difficult to get them to the point of understanding, what is the club you know?”, “We have already had a security who said like, how could you, like, especially someone who looks a bit odd or different and they found that a bit tricky”.

These examples show that club identity is not only projected through aesthetics, but also enacted through embodied labour, a point that further echoes Davis’s (2009) argument that nightlife spaces are co-produced by both staff and audience performances.

These findings suggest that club identity is a performative process shaped by music, branding, staff interaction, and style, long before guests reach the door. While these choices may appear neutral, they may intersect with racialised boundaries, shaping who feels invited into the space. In this way, aesthetic and cultural production play a key and often underexamined role in governing inclusion and exclusion in Rotterdam’s nightlife.

How are decisions about door policy made, and what role do discretion and informal judgment play?

Across the majority of interviews, door policies emerged not as rigidly codified systems, but as flexible practices shaped by discretion and informal norms. While some clubs had formal rules or clearly stated entrance guidelines, many respondents, particularly bouncers described access decisions as interpretive, guided by intuition and prior experience.

Negotiating informality: “Rules are too black and white”

Interviewees frequently highlighted the limitations of formal rules in capturing the complexities of access decisions, describing them as “*too black and white*”. Managers and

bouncers alike stressed that written guidelines such as bans on certain clothing items or intoxicated behaviour served as necessary but insufficient tools. One manager described his policies as intentionally “*coulant*” (lenient) while emphasising the importance of trust in his staff’s social intuition and adaptability:

“Certainly, that I think that's very important for any staff that they trust security. Because after all, yeah if something is going on then you'll have to rely on them” “door policy itself that is really a consultation between a door host and a headquarters”.

Opinions about the appropriate degree of discretion varied. Some, like the manager above, emphasised the importance of trusting door staff to make judgment calls and described access decisions as a process of consultation. Others stressed the importance of transparency, arguing that a clear and visible door policy signals fairness and accountability. One head bouncer explained how often those who do not have a transparent door policy are those who have something to hide and he did not agree with this:

“As a company, you can respond to that, you can say, gee, you know, I can't refuse them because they happen to be Moroccan or Surinamese or whatever. And we don't do that, so we do want a fair door policy”.

This tension highlights the challenge of negotiating informality in an environment where rigid rules may feel unrealistic, but unstructured discretion can enable bias, intentional or not.

How staff navigate discretion

In line with Lipsky’s (1980) notion of street-level bureaucracy, security staff at the door operate as frontline decision-makers, tasked with interpreting broad guidelines in real time. While bouncers all mentioned consistently enforcing obvious rules such as denying entry to intoxicated guests or checking for valid ID, these were described as only a baseline framework. Beyond these basic parameters, entry decisions involved a significant degree of intuitive judgment, frequently referred to as “*gut feeling*”.

This intuitive discretion was particularly invoked in doubt cases, where guests were not clearly violating any formal rule but where their behaviour or demeanour raised concerns about their fit with the expected atmosphere of the night. One manager noted:

“Hey you can have the right clothes on and we don't discriminate, but we can see from you when we speak to you that you are still a certain trait or type. But according to the

list you would be allowed in. I still think it's important to have that understanding at the door”.

Hence, most bouncers described relying on accumulated experience and emotional cues (Søgaard, 2017), a process that inherently carries risks of informal profiling and bias. One bouncer explained how prior encounters could shape decisions:

“And if you have played all kinds of festivals before that, and the week before that and the week before that, and these guys have also, not these guys then but the people from asylum seekers boats, Syrian guys, have caused a lot of problems, then you tend to start refusing these. That's just how it works, then you stand there, then you think these I am not going to let in”.

This illustrates how pattern recognition can subtly entrench stereotypical associations even in the absence of explicit intent (Søgaard, 2017).

Moreover, the discretionary space afforded to bouncers is shaped by managerial expectations and club identity (Talbot, 2004). As discussed in the previous section, clubs seek to attract specific audiences aligned with their desired atmosphere. Managers often try to guide bouncers to align their judgments with the club’s vision, sometimes requiring ongoing efforts. One manager mentioned having “*endless conversations*” with her bouncers to explain what kind of club experience they aim to create. Bouncers, in turn, internalise these expectations and use symbolic cues such as appearance, body language, group composition to filter entrance accordingly. One manager explained:

“And security filters a bit whether they fit our image, whether they fit our well, image, vision more, image sounds that if you don't belong that you are not allowed in, so vision more”.

In this way, discretion at the door is not simply individual, but embedded in the club’s wider cultural production and regulatory logics (Koren, 2023).

This section highlights how door policy enforcement operates through a layered interplay of discretion and informal judgment. While bouncers act as street-level bureaucrats making real-time decisions under conditions of uncertainty (Lipsky, 1980), their judgments are shaped by club identity and managerial directives (Talbot, 2004; Koren, 2023). Discretion remains central, both valued for its flexibility, and contested for its potential to reproduce exclusion, particularly along racialised lines. These findings underscore that informal,

discretionary practices, influenced by both individual perceptions and club culture are crucial in shaping who is allowed into Rotterdam's nightlife spaces. This suggests that efforts to promote fairer access must address not only formal regulations, but also the everyday interpretive work through which exclusion, intentional or unintentional is produced at the door.

How do staff perceive and respond to the risks of racialised exclusion in access decisions?

In interviews, the topic of racialised exclusion surfaced in subtle ways. While staff did not mention the topic too much, or sometimes used terms like *background* or *ethnicity*, they were aware that certain access decisions could be perceived as discriminatory, particularly when relying on behavioural or stylistic cues. Managers and bouncers varied in how openly they reflected on these risks: some, especially in clubs striving for a mixed or inclusive crowd, emphasised inclusivity in their discourse, while others did not address the topic as much. Staff thus faced a delicate tension, how to maintain the club's brand, while managing the reputational and ethical risks of potential exclusion. How they navigated this tension is key to understanding how racialised boundaries can persist in nightlife, often without overt intention.

Stigma and coded assumptions

As previously discussed, visual and stylistic cues played a central role in access decisions. Items such as tracksuits, caps, and certain types of bags were frequently mentioned as grounds for refusal. Yet several bouncers acknowledged the sensitivity of such decisions, recognising that they could be perceived as racially or culturally biased. One bouncer noted that "*It is not about ethnicity, but some people think it is*". Another reflected on how stigma operates when he lets in certain guests:

"I mean, suppose, I let 4 youths in with neck bags and and they cause a fight inside. Yes, I did let them in, and then they sort of are right again, like yes, you see."

This highlights how stigma surrounding certain appearances, often associated with young racialised men creates complex dilemmas, in which, even when bouncers want to avoid prejudice, they are aware that incidents may be publicly read as confirming negative stereotypes, by managers, the public, or fellow staff, thereby reinforcing pressure to make exclusionary decisions.

Thus, routine judgments about style can inadvertently reproduce patterns of exclusion. As Tourse et al. (2018) argue, institutional racism often operates through routinised scaffolding: cumulative, everyday practices that uphold unequal access without explicit prejudice.

This is further reflected in systematic observations. Recent mystery guest research by the Panel Deurbeleid (2024) found that although ID checks were only conducted in 43.6% of visits overall, darker-skinned and light-skinned test persons were asked for identification significantly more often than white visitors. By contrast, women were asked in only 1.9% of cases. This selective application of ID requirements reveals a racialised element within everyday access decisions that often remains unspoken but contributes to patterns of unequal treatment.

Risk awareness and communicative strategies

Staff showed varying degrees of reflexivity about the risks of being perceived as discriminatory. For bouncers in particular, this was an operational concern. As previously mentioned, when dealing with “doubt cases”, several mentioned the risk of accusations of racism. This concern shaped how refusals were communicated. A common strategy, reported across interviews, was to use neutral pretexts such as “*the club is full*” to avoid confrontation. As Koren (2023) notes, such communicative strategies function as forms of coded exclusion, designed to deflect potential conflict.

Interestingly, racialised bouncers sometimes described experiencing more leeway in this regard. One stated: “*I have colour myself, so they can’t say I am racist*”. This suggests that personal identity can offer bouncers a perceived shield against accusations of racism, giving them more freedom in sensitive situations.

Summary

Overall, the interviews show that staff perceptions of racialised exclusion are shaped by both operational pressures and social stigma. Even in the absence of explicit prejudice, the need to maintain a certain club atmosphere, combined with reputational concerns, drives staff to manage risks through discretionary judgments and coded communication. The findings from the mystery guest research confirm that these practices translate into observable differences in treatment at the door. This highlights how racialised exclusion persists less through overt bias than through the cumulative effects of informal, aesthetic governance and underscores the importance of fostering greater reflexivity and accountability at the level of everyday decision-

making.

What constraints and dilemmas do clubs face in implementing inclusive practices?

Efforts to foster more inclusive door practices in Rotterdam's nightlife unfold in a governance landscape marked by fragmentation, soft governance, and commercial autonomy. Within this space, actors face concrete dilemmas in balancing inclusion with operational, legal, and financial considerations (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002; Mahmoud, 2025).

Policy ambiguity and limited uptake of soft governance tools

One existing framework aimed at fostering more inclusive practices is the Panel Deurbeleid, which offers clubs guidance on fair and transparent door policies. However, engagement with this tool was uneven across interviews. The one club interviewed that had signed the covenant expressed appreciation for the Panel's guidance. For others, this was not the case. Several managers were either unaware of the Panel or saw it as irrelevant to their operations. One manager explicitly described such initiatives as an unnecessary interference, suggesting that if their business already runs smoothly, external involvement was unwelcome:

“But I think as a business you just never want to have that. Look, it could, and it we would just go through it, but I I I also think somewhere it's a piece of, we're already doing well mentality”.

Another, while open to the Panel's aims, expressed confidence that their practices already met its standards; *“but mostly we are ahead of what they come up with anyway”*, implying limited added value.

These reactions reflect the Panel's ambiguous position. While it is formally an advisory body, it is sometimes perceived as an external oversight mechanism, particularly because it combines support for venues with support for club-goers in filing complaints of discrimination. This dual role undermines its potential for collaborative engagement. How can the Panel simultaneously advocate for club-goers while maintaining trust with clubs? This ambiguity limits its uptake as a governance tool.

A similar ambiguity applies to the legal framework around discrimination. While Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution prohibits discrimination, and the *Algemene Wet Gelijke Behandeling* (AWGB) applies to services such as nightlife venues, this general legal expectation was not experienced by interviewees as an active influence on daily door policy

(Horecanota, 2024). Interviewees did not refer to these laws, nor to the possibility of sanctions. In practice, as the municipality's own documents acknowledge (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2023), complaints of discrimination are handled through a fragmented system: individuals can report incidents through multiple varied systems such as RADAR, the national platform discriminatie.nl, or the Panel Deurbeleid. Only when there are repeated complaints received or when the College voor de Rechten van de Mens (Horecanota, 2024) issues a judgment, an investigation might be initiated and a file built for the mayor. Even then, consequences for clubs remain rare. This lack of clear accountability contributes to what Zerilli (2010) describes as non-binding coercion. While clubs are formally expected to meet anti-discrimination standards, enforcement remains minimal and ambiguous, leaving room for autonomous interpretation. As a result, daily decisions remain shaped primarily by internal norms and professional discretion rather than by an active regulatory framework.

Commercial pressures and identity trade-offs

A second key area of tension emerges from the intersection of commercial imperatives and cultural production. As discussed in the theoretical framework, clubs curate their desired audience not only through formal rules, but through the symbolic construction of identity via music, branding, visual aesthetics and staff selection (Koren, 2023; Appelrouth & Kelly, 2013). However, this identity construction can be disturbed by economic considerations. Several managers highlighted dilemmas they face in balancing brand integrity with financial viability. One bouncer reported:

“I think as an organisation, so [club name] has to deal with, how am I going to say this, they also have the bills to pay. So, if they get a request on a Thursday from an organisation that doesn't quite fit [club name], but they don't have anything standing on Thursday, and, but the organisation is willing to pay a few €1,000 for the rental of [club name], then it's attractive as an organisation to respond to that. Even if it doesn't quite suit your organisation”.

Another manager pointed to the role of bottle service where guests purchase entire bottles of alcohol, typically accompanied by a showy display as a clear example of financial pressures shaping access decisions. Such guests were described as not the most desired, yet very profitable:

“You just have to make turnover, you have to make a profit and you have to make trade-offs. OK, If I don't let these guys in now, then maybe, maybe there's a better atmosphere,

but I'm missing €400. If you can have it as a club to make that trade-off, then I think you can be very consistent in what you do and don't want in”.

Alongside the absence of robust accountability mechanisms in Rotterdam, these cases illustrate there are few external incentives to prioritise non-discrimination. Moreover, the persistent reliance on the aforementioned street-level discretion (Lipsky, 1980; Søgaaard, 2017) contributes to sustaining these tendencies. In the interplay of economic priorities, reliance on front door discretion, a lack of clear standards or accountability, and the pressures of brand maintenance, commitments to non-discrimination risk being consistently overshadowed by commercial imperatives and discretionary practice.

Discussion/Conclusion

This study set out to explore how clubs in Rotterdam balance door policy practices and club identity with efforts to promote inclusive access. It contributes to existing research by showing that exclusion in nightlife does not stem solely from overt discrimination or individual bias, but emerges through the subtle interplay of cultural production, informal discretion, market pressures, and weak governance alignment. In this context, inclusion is not simply a matter of legal compliance, but a negotiated practice full of everyday dilemmas.

One key contribution of this study is to highlight the role of club identity as an informal regulatory force. Through music programming, marketing, aesthetic choices, and staff selection, clubs actively shape who feels welcome and who does not. These signals work long before clientele reaches the door, influencing who is attracted to the venue. The Social Safety Report (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2024) suggests that when visitors share similar expectations and intentions, this can foster a safer and more predictable atmosphere. From this perspective, clear identity-building can have positive effects by helping to align expectations and reduce conflicts at the door. However, this study also shows that such identity-building practices are rarely neutral. They can unintentionally create an atmosphere in which certain groups feel disproportionately unwelcome. The diversity of nightlife depends on a variety of venues and styles, but when certain aesthetics and cultural norms become consistently privileged, the risk of structural exclusion increases (May & Chaplin, 2008; Koren, 2023).

Another important insight concerns the central role of discretion in door policy enforcement. Bouncers operate as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), making real-time

judgments in uncertain and fast-paced settings. These decisions are shaped by managerial expectations, personal experiences, and subjective assessments of appearance, style, group composition, and behaviour (Søgaard, 2017). While some staff expressed awareness of the risks of exclusion, reliance on “gut feeling” leaves considerable room for unconscious bias. This is particularly evident in the handling of grey zones, where refusals are often presented in neutral terms (“the club is full”) yet reflect underlying racialised biases (Wicks, 2022; Koren, 2023).

At the governance level, the study highlights several tensions. While anti-discrimination obligations exist in Dutch law, enforcement remains limited, and as a result the issue carries relatively low priority for many venue operators. The Panel Deurbeleid provides a useful voluntary framework, but lacks broad visibility and suffers from an ambiguous position, acting both as an advisory tool and as a channel for complaints. Moreover, local municipal controls tend to prioritise operational and safety concerns, such as noise levels or terrace size over active monitoring of anti-discrimination practices, as several interviewees observed. This fragmented governance landscape, in which public actors and private operators engage with the issue of inclusion in very uneven ways, contributes to the fragility of inclusion efforts. While some actors take the issue seriously, many others see it as secondary to other commercial and branding priorities. Without clearer institutional signals, incentives for deeper engagement with inclusion remain weak. Importantly, these governance dynamics are experienced in very concrete ways by actors on the ground. Managers and bouncers navigate practical dilemmas: how to balance brand identity with reputational risks; how to align door policy with shifting audience expectations; how to manage access decisions in the absence of strong external guidance or clear enforcement. The challenge is not simply one of bad intent, although deliberate exclusion certainly persists in some spaces, but of navigating a context where formal standards are weak and commercial imperatives remain strong.

Theoretical contribution

Theoretically, this study contributes to a growing body of literature on the governance of exclusion in nightlife, and in particular on how discretion, cultural production, and governance gaps shape exclusion in practice. It suggests that concepts such as cultural production and informal discretion should be more centrally integrated into analyses of exclusion in nightlife governance. Specifically, it proposes that inclusion in nightlife should be understood as a form of negotiated practice, not an automatic outcome of legal compliance, but as something shaped by intersecting commercial, cultural, and regulatory forces. This expands existing work on

street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) and institutional scaffolding (Tourse et al., 2018), by highlighting how organisational cultures and market priorities interact with weak governance to produce fragile and uneven inclusion outcomes.

This study also helps nuance existing international literature on exclusion in nightlife. Whereas studies such as Grazian's (2009) have documented more overtly racialised exclusions in U.S. settings, for example, through explicit bans on hip-hop fashion the Rotterdam case illustrates how comparable dynamics may emerge through more implicit mechanisms. In this context, dress codes and aesthetic expectations are rarely framed in racial terms, yet they may still result in selective patterns of access. By adding an empirically grounded account from a non-Anglophone, continental European city, this thesis broadens the geographic and conceptual scope of nightlife research. It highlights how exclusion can persist even in spaces formally committed to inclusion, and how these processes can unfold through subtle and institutionally embedded practices.

These findings also invite reflection on how seemingly neutral practices are shaped by broader institutional and organizational structures. As Tourse et al. (2018) argue, exclusion can be sustained through institutional scaffolding: layered, routinised patterns that normalize unequal access without relying on overt prejudice. Similarly, Ray's (2019) concept of racialized organizations reminds us that institutions often uphold dominant norms under the guise of neutrality. In the Rotterdam case, decisions made at the door, whether about clothing or behaviour may appear pragmatic or aesthetic, yet reflect deeper assumptions about legitimacy and belonging. This suggests that addressing exclusion requires not only attention to individual attitudes or surface-level practices, but to the institutional logics and expectations in which they are embedded.

Policy implications

Several practical implications emerge from these findings. Addressing exclusion in nightlife spaces cannot rely solely on voluntary agreements or symbolic governance tools. Stronger alignment is needed between legal obligations, advisory instruments, and commercial realities. In concrete terms, this means clarifying institutional roles, who is responsible for guidance, who for enforcement, creating more transparent accountability mechanisms, and fostering more active dialogue between city actors and venue operators.

Limitations and directions for future research

Like all qualitative studies, this research has limitations. First, it focuses on the perspectives of club managers and security staff; the experiences of club-goers, particularly those who may feel excluded remain an important gap. Including those perspectives would provide a fuller view of how exclusion is experienced from the other side of the door. Second, while the sample included a range of clubs with different audiences, more extensive fieldwork would further broaden the understanding of Rotterdam's nightlife landscape. Comparative research across cities and across different types of venues would also shed light on how governance configurations shape inclusion. In particular, the small number of Panel signatories in the sample limited the ability to compare governance effects between signatory and non-signatory clubs. Third, although this study addressed race and ethnicity, other intersecting dimensions of exclusion, such as gender, sexuality, or disability deserve more attention. Notably, interview data suggested that racialised men faced more barriers at the door, while women were more likely to encounter risks related to safety and harassment inside venues, a dynamic also noted in the Social Safety Report (2025). Finally, as this study relied primarily on interview data, it was unable to systematically observe real-time practices. Future research incorporating observational methods could offer deeper insights into the embodied and affective dimensions of nightlife governance. As with all small-scale qualitative research, the analysis was shaped by time constraints, which limited the depth of coding and iterative refinement, a factor that should be considered when interpreting the scope of these findings.

In conclusion, this study foregrounds how inclusion in Rotterdam's nightlife is not simply a matter of legal compliance, but a negotiated and situated practice, shaped by cultural production, discretion, market pressures, and weak governance alignment. Without stronger efforts to align regulation, cultural, and commercial goals, risks of exclusion will persist. Often, these risks take subtle forms that actors themselves may not fully recognise. The findings invite both further theoretical reflection on the intersections of culture, market, and governance in exclusionary spaces of nightlife, and practical reflection among stakeholders. Without such reflection and alignment, the goal of fostering a genuinely inclusive nightlife in which all residents feel welcome after dark will remain difficult to achieve without a more honest reckoning with the ways power and exclusion operate through everyday decisions. Ultimately, unless institutional actors send clearer and more consistent signals that inclusion matters, not only as a legal obligation but as a governance priority, many venues will continue to treat it as optional rather than essential.

Policy recommendations

The findings of this study have clear societal relevance. Nightlife venues are important public spaces for social interaction in a diverse city such as Rotterdam, yet they remain settings where patterns of exclusion can occur, often through subtle and informal mechanisms. Addressing these issues is not only a matter of legal compliance, but of fostering social trust and fairness in public life. To this end, the following recommendations aim to inform both municipal actors and nightlife professionals in their efforts to promote more inclusive access practices.

First, there is a need to improve communication and trust between stakeholders. At present, the governance of nightlife access is fragmented, with club operators, municipal actors, and advisory bodies operating with limited dialogue. For managers who are open to improving inclusive practices, there is a clear demand for more direct and genuine engagement. The municipality should therefore consider investing in intermediary actors who can visit venues, experience nightlife from the inside, and serve as trusted points of contact between clubs and city authorities. Crucially, these intermediaries should not be tasked with controlling operational aspects (such as license enforcement or terrace size), but should act as a resource for dialogue and a trusted point of contact for clubs, in order to foster smoother cooperation. This would help build relationships and ensure that policies are informed by an understanding of everyday club realities.

Second, clubs themselves can take concrete steps to foster inclusion. Internal communication is key. Staff should be trained in non-escalatory communication, both at the door and inside venues. Positive interactions with guests reduce the risk of conflict and contribute to an atmosphere where all patrons feel welcome. In particular, many bouncers face challenges when refusing entry to guests. Providing staff with training and guidance on how to communicate refusals in a respectful and transparent manner can help reduce misunderstandings and accusations of bias.

Related to this, clubs should adopt clear and visible house rules regarding behaviour, intoxication, age, and dress. While many nightlife professionals view such lists as too rigid for the complexities of door policy, clear standards can provide both guests and staff with a shared frame of reference, reducing ambiguity and supporting fairer decision-making. Combined with an improved communication between management and security staff, this can also help reduce

tensions at the door. It is important to stress that these recommendations are not intended to give clubs a means of concealing discriminatory intent behind formal rules, but rather to mitigate both actual and perceived discrimination by promoting greater transparency and consistency. At the same time, clubs should be encouraged to clearly communicate their identity, through marketing, aesthetics, and staffing in ways that help guests understand the intended audience and reduce misaligned expectations at the door. However, this should be done with awareness of how such signals can also unintentionally exclude, and clubs should reflect critically on which identities and norms they are centering.

In addition, the presence of a dedicated door host, someone whose role is to welcome guests and manage communication, can complement the work of security staff, who may not always have time to engage extensively with patrons. During interviews, several clubs described how collaboration between a door host and security personnel was particularly effective in fostering a positive experience at the entrance.

Beyond door practices, ensuring adequate staffing inside venues is equally important. Sufficient staff numbers not only improve service, but also contribute to perceptions of safety and trust among guests. The presence of “floor angels” or other visible staff members to whom guests can easily turn supports a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. While this recommendation does not directly address issues of discrimination at the door; it remains important. Interviews highlighted how staffing levels significantly influence overall guest experience, though it is acknowledged that budget constraints may pose challenges for smaller venues.

Finally, the municipality should strengthen accountability mechanisms for cases of deliberate discrimination. While the Panel Deurbeleid serves an important advisory function, it should not be perceived as a control instrument, there must also be clear and enforceable consequences for venues where repeated, intentional exclusion is evident. Without such measures, discriminatory practices risk remaining unaddressed and unchanged.

In addition, the municipality should carefully consider how existing funding priorities shape the nightlife landscape. For example, while initiatives such as the Safe’r Spot programme aim to enhance safety, some club managers questioned their practical value. Greater investment in collaborative, venue-driven approaches or in strengthening direct relationships between the city and clubs may foster stronger engagement and trust. When clubs feel recognised and

supported as partners, rather than peripheral actors, this can help create the conditions for more sustained commitment to inclusive practices.

Together, these measures can help move beyond symbolic commitments toward a more genuinely inclusive nightlife in Rotterdam.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Interview guide

Hallo! Fijn dat je er bent!

Intro

- Voorstellen - naam universiteit, masterprogramma (Governance of migration and Diveristy)
- Uitleg scriptie
 - Onderzoek naar hoe clubs balans vinden tussen hun gewenste clubidentiteit, de intenties die ze daarvoor gebruiken en het voeren van een inclusief deurbeleid
 - Doel is om beter te begrijpen hoe keuzes worden gemaakt rond sfeer, bepaalde doelgroepen, en toegang in de praktijk tot stand komen.

⇒ Wat werkt er? Wat gaat er moeielijk? Wat voor beleid ondersteuning zou helpen?

- Thema's ⇒ clubidentiteit en doelgroep, toegangsbeleid in praktijk, betaand beleid, wat kan er worden gedaan?
- Alles blijft vertrouwelijk en anoniem

Kennismaking

- Wat is jouw rol binnen de club?
- Hoelang werk je al in het nachtleven? Hoelang werk je hier al? Hoe is het om hier te werken?
- Hoe zou je de sfeer en het publiek van deze club omschrijven?
 - En in vergelijking met andere plekken?

Clubidentiteit en doelgroep

- Voortbouwend op deze vraag, wat is jouw beeld van deze club? Hoe zie je haar identiteit/reputatie? Vanuit jouw perspectief en die van club-gangers, doe denk je dat jullie overkomen?
- Willen jullie een bepaald soort sfeer creëren? Zo ja, welke?
 - Veranderd dat ook met events? Hebben jullie een vaste identiteit?
- Welke soort publiek trekken jullie aan? Is dit intentioneel?
- Hoe trekken jullie een bepaald soort publiek aan? (Bijvoorbeeld muziek, marketing, dresscode?)
- Denk je dat jullie zo de identiteit van de club beïnvloeden? Hoe dan?
- En dan met event programmering hoe gaat dit? Trekken die verschillend publiek aan? Kiezen jullie specifiek events die bij jullie past?

Toegangsbeleid en praktijk

- Kun je me vertellen over jullie deurbeleid? Bestaan er formele of informele richtlijnen?
- Hoe wordt het deurbeleid gecommuniceerd naar het personeel? (Deze vraag aanpassen afhankelijk van of ik met een manager spreek of met de beveiliging)

- Hoe en wie beslist er uiteindelijk wie er binnen komt?
- Wie wordt er geweigerd? Hoe gaat dat dan?
- Voor beveiliging: heb je zelf veel ruimte om te beslissen wie er binnen komt? Heb je vaste richtlijnen?
 - o Alleen voor beveiliging aan de deur:
- Hoe zit jouw rol aan de deur er concreet uit? Wat is een typische avond?
- Hoe word je gebriefd voor een avond? Wordt er vooraf iets besproken over het gewenste publiek of sfeer?
- Twijfel je soms wel eens over iemand toelaten of weigeren? Waar let je dan op? Twijfel je soms ook achteraf over je beslissing?
- Hoe ga je om met de druk die je aan de deur voelt? Bijvoorbeeld als iemand zich onterecht geweigerd voelt?
- Voel je je voldoende gesteund door het management als er discussie ontstaat aan de deur? Of gewoon gesteund in het algemeen?
- Voel je wel een dat er verschil is tussen jouw inschatting en de visie van het management?
- Zijn er duidelijk richtlijnen over wat wel en er niet mag? Of vertrouw je eerder op gevoel?

Goede balans

- Hoe zorg je dat het deurbeleid past bij de sfeer en het imago van de club?
- Zijn er al eens bepaalde situaties geweest waarin het lastig was om sfeer, doelgroep, en toegangsbeleid goed op elkaar af te stemmen?
- Hoe ga je daarmee om? (Vooral vraag voor beveiliging)
- Komt het wel eens voor dat je twijfelt of iemand past bij de sfeer die je wil neerzetten? Hoe ga je daar dan mee om?

Bestaand beleid

- Heb je al eens gehoord over initiatieven zoals het panel deurbeleid? (Indien niet, uitleggen wat het is)
- Wat vind je van zulke richtlijnen? Nuttig? Denk je daar soms over na?
- En heb je ook al gehoord over Mystery Guest bezoeken of een recent rapport dat is uitgekomen over sociale veiligheid (uitleg over wat het is, dingen zoals betere communicatie, sterke clubidentiteit). Worden of zouden deze gebruikt worden binnen de club denk je?

Verantwoordelijkheid en ondersteuning

- In hoeverre voel jij je verantwoordelijk voor inclusiviteit binnen de club? Aan de deur?
- Wat zou jij nodig hebben om je meer gesteund te voelen? Vanuit gemeente, politie bijvoorbeeld.
 - o Alleen voor beveiliging aan de deur:
- Voel jij je verantwoordelijk voor het bewaken van inclusiviteit? Of ligt dat eerder bij management? Of de club in zijn geheel?
- Heb je training of ondersteuning gehad? (In inclusiviteit, het omgaan met mensen, over gedrag 's inschatting). Als je dat al krijgt, hoe gaat dat dan?
- Zou je dat nuttig vinden?
- Voel je je betrokken bij het team? Heb je het gevoel at je erbij hoort?

Wat kan er worden gedaan?

Tot slot ben ik benieuwd: wat zou volgens jou kunnen helpen om dit spanningsveld beter te navigeren? Dus hoe je inclusiever kunt zijn zonder je iegenheid te verliezen. Wat is er bij jullie al helpvol?

- Zijn er al interne maatregelen genomen bij jullie om uitsluiting te voorkomen?
- Wat zou jij aanbevelen aan beleidsmakers, of wat vind je dat er ontbreekt qua begeleiding hierin?
- Dus hoe kunnen jullie tot een voor iedereen (bezoeker-ondernemer) tot een werkbare set aan afspraken komen voor toegankelijke horeca?

English version:

Hello! Great that you are here!

Intro

- Introduction – name of university, master’s programme (Governance of Migration and Diversity)
- Explanation of thesis:
 - o Research on how clubs balance their desired club identity, the intentions they use for this, and maintaining an inclusive door policy
 - o The aim is to better understand how choices are made regarding atmosphere, certain target groups, and how access decisions are made in practice
⇒ What works? What is difficult? What kind of policy support would help?
 - o Themes ⇒ club identity and target audience, door policy in practice, existing policies, what could be improved
 - o Everything will remain confidential and anonymous

Getting to know you

- What is your role within the club?
- How long have you been working in nightlife? How long have you been working here?
What is it like to work here?
- How would you describe the atmosphere and audience of this club?
→ And compared to other venues?

Club identity and target audience

- Building on that question, how do you see this club? How do you perceive its identity/reputation? From your own perspective and that of the club-goers — how do you think the club is perceived?
- Do you aim to create a particular type of atmosphere? If so, what kind?
 - o Does that change with events? Do you have a fixed identity?
- What type of audience do you attract? Is this intentional?

- How do you attract a certain type of audience? (For example, music, marketing, dress code?)
- Do you think this influences the club's identity? How so?
- And regarding event programming, how does that work? Do different events attract different audiences? Do you specifically choose events that fit the club?

Door policy and practice

- Can you tell me about your door policy? Are there formal or informal guidelines?
- How is the door policy communicated to staff? (Adapt this question depending on whether I'm speaking with a manager or with security staff)
- How and by whom is the final decision made about who gets in?
- Who gets refused entry? How does that happen?
- For security staff: do you have much discretion in deciding who gets in? Do you have set guidelines?
 - o Only for door security staff:
- What does your role at the door concretely look like? What is a typical night like?
- How are you briefed for a night? Is anything discussed in advance regarding the desired audience or atmosphere?
- Do you sometimes hesitate about whether to let someone in or refuse entry? What do you pay attention to in those moments? Do you ever have doubts afterwards about your decision?
- How do you deal with pressure you feel at the door? For example, when someone feels unjustly refused?
- Do you feel sufficiently supported by management if a discussion arises at the door? Or do you feel supported in general?
- Do you ever feel there's a difference between your judgement and the management's vision?
- Are there clear guidelines about what is and isn't allowed? Or do you rely more on your instincts?

Striking a good balance

- How do you ensure that the door policy matches the club's atmosphere and image?
- Have there been situations where it was difficult to align atmosphere, target audience, and door policy?

- How do you deal with that? (Mainly for security staff)
- Do you sometimes hesitate whether someone fits with the atmosphere you want to create? How do you handle that?

Existing policies

- Have you heard of initiatives such as the Panel Deurbeleid? (If not, explain what it is)
- What do you think of such guidelines? Useful? Do you think about it sometimes?
- And have you heard of Mystery Guest visits or the recent report about social safety (explain what it is — things like better communication, strong club identity)? Are these used or could they be used in your club?

Responsibility and support

- To what extent do you feel responsible for inclusivity in the club? At the door?
- What would you need to feel more supported? From the municipality, police, for example.
 - o Only for door security staff:
- Do you feel responsible for safeguarding inclusivity? Or is that more the management's responsibility? Or the club's as a whole?
- Have you received any training or support? (On inclusivity, handling people, judging behaviour). If so, what was it like?
- Would you find that useful?
- Do you feel involved with the team? Do you feel you belong?

What could be done?

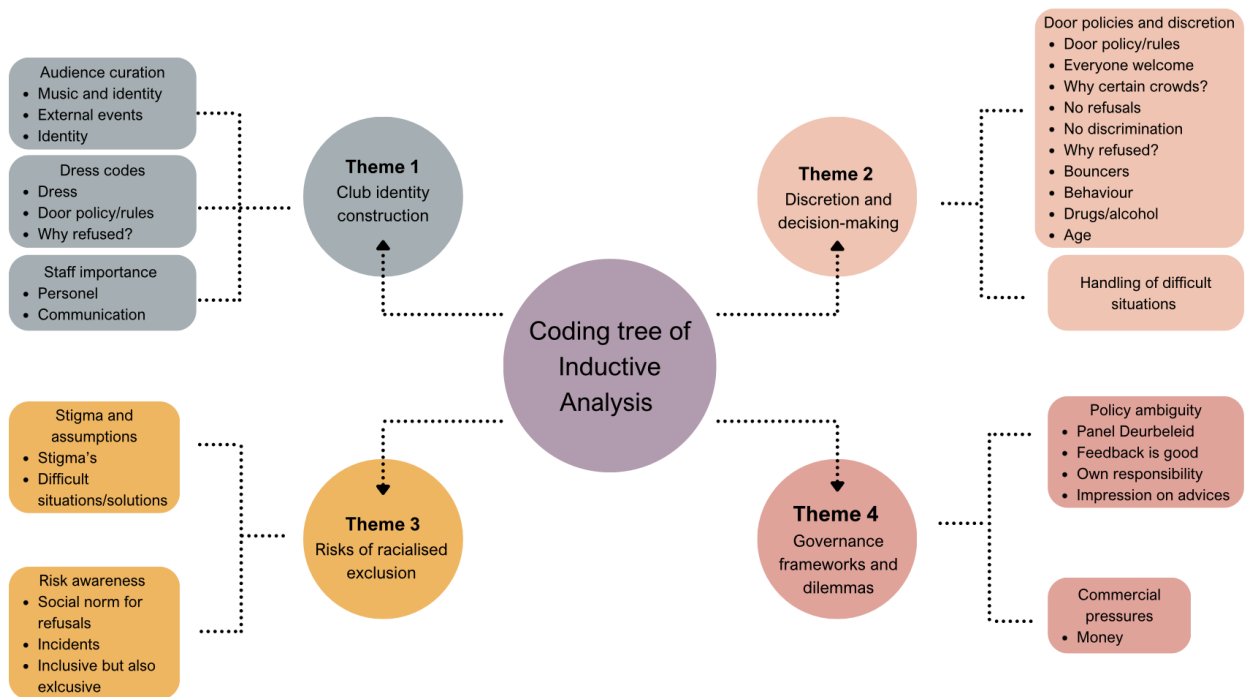
Finally, I'm curious: what do you think could help navigate this tension better? How could clubs be more inclusive without losing their unique identity? What has already been helpful in your club?

- Have any internal measures already been taken to prevent exclusion?
- What would you recommend to policymakers? What do you think is missing in terms of support?
- In other words, how can clubs and policymakers arrive at a workable set of agreements for accessible nightlife for everyone (both for visitors and entrepreneurs)?

Appendix B - Operationalization table

Concept	Interview themes / questions	Main codes used in analysis
Institutional racism	Handling of complaints or doubt situations, targeted group, sense of responsibility about inclusion	Risk awareness, stigma, assumptions, inclusive/exclusive
Street-level bureaucracy & discretion	How decisions are made, discretion in refusals, handling of cases, guidelines	Handling of difficult situations, bouncers
Cultural production	Audience and identity curation, perceived vision of club + how that is translated	Music and identity, identity, events, staff, communication
Soft law	Influence of Panel Deurbeleid, views on voluntary frameworks	Panel Deurbeleid, views on feedback, own responsibility, impressions on advice
Policy dilemmas	Balancing identity, inclusion, or the handling of tricky situations	Money, handling difficult situations

Appendix C - Coding tree



This coding tree presents the inductively generated codes and overarching themes that emerged during data analysis. It served as a conceptual guide for structuring the analytical chapters.