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Experiencing Amsterdam's Red Light District as a female resident: normalization, alliances and diversion

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ABSTRACT

Every year, Amsterdam's de Wallen neighbourhood attracts high numbers of tourists looking to experience a unique Red Light District (RLD). Yet de Wallen is a multi-use area, that combines sexualised consumption and leisure practices, with everyday residential urban functions and public spaces. This study investigated how female residents of this neighbourhood experience its sexualised nature, adjust their behaviour to it, as well as how they negotiate their feelings of belonging and being at home. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups. The results indicate that female residents navigate their ordinary lives in the neighbourhood with a sense of normality and familiarity, while acknowledging and maintaining a distance to the areas more extraordinary peculiarities, nuisances and darker, more unknown sides. They take ownership of their neighbourhood by creating a community, standing up for sex workers and reacting boldly towards sexual harassment. Becoming targets of objectification and sexualisation by male visitors to the area stimulates them to deconstruct power relations between genders. Generally speaking, this study shows how respondents residing in de Wallen manage to feel secure, spatially confident as well as attached and protective of an area that is both ordinary and extraordinary.

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Gendered space; harassment; home; red light district; sexualized space; tourism

Introduction

The goal of this article is to analyse how residents, who identify as women, experience living in Amsterdam's Red Light District (RLD), de Wallen. This research contributes to previous research on the gendered experience in

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urban spaces, and in particular of women's everyday living experience in an exceptional context, such as urban areas where sex work is practiced. Situated in the heart of Amsterdam, the cityscape of de Wallen is remarkable: historic houses built in the thirteenth century array along the canals, intersected by quaint bridges. At the time of the research, early birds would have considered de Wallen a sleepy residential area. Yet, throughout the morning, the narrow streets would turn into a lively neighbourhood. While flower shops placed their goods in front of their doors, the alleys were slowly packing with locals and tourists. Restaurant owners prepared their terraces for first visitors, families dropped their children at day care, whilst sex workers opened the curtains of their windows. With its characteristic intersection of residency, consumption, recreation and sexuality, de Wallen has been framed as the embodiment of a multi-use RLD that combines residential areas and (sexualised) commercial services (Aalbers and Sabat 2012; Boels and Weitzer 2015). As such it stands in contrast with single-use RLDs, which are often peripheral areas created solely for the purpose of sex-related consumption. The area is 'locally and internationally significant as one of the oldest venues for visible and legal urban sex work' (Aalbers and Sabat 2012, 112).

De Wallen is known for attracting clients of sex businesses, but many onlookers also stroll around its streets. Weitzer (2020) noted that there has been a rise of tolerating and normalizing sex work among the public, which increasingly advocates the decriminalization of sex work. Urban planners however have been questioning the high visibility of sex work, its moral implications and the mass tourism it draws. Since 2007, gentrification processes have caused around 130 red light windows to close down, with the aim to 'cleanse' the historic centre as well as controlling and reducing sex trafficking (van Liempt and Chimienti 2017). Entrepreneurs took the opportunity to settle in the area, resulting in an increase of higher-end stores, cafes, and galleries. Recently, Amsterdam's mayor Halsema has advocated the creation of an erotic centre in the outskirts of Amsterdam to remove even more windows and sexual businesses (Boffey 2021). Reasons for this intervention are to decrease the nuisances for local residents and to diminish the neighbourhood's 'immoral' image (Couzy 2020). Such developments echo Smith's (1996) pioneering work on New York and the delineation of the 'revanchist city' and conflicts relating to the ownership of the city, whereby the downsizing of the RLD fits into a neoliberal narrative of taking back control of the neighbourhood and its public spaces, reclaiming its 'enemies' and from crime.

RLDs are often subject to controversy regarding the rights to ownership they entail. They are generally framed as male-dominated and off-limits to women (Hubbard and Whowell 2008; Hubbard 2012; Sanders-McDonagh 2017). The scholarly critique of RLDs addresses them as sexual entertainment clusters that target male consumption, prioritizing the gratification of male sexual desires (Hubbard 1998; Sanders and Hardy 2012; Sanders-McDonagh

2017). Amsterdam's RLD is unique as its multi-use makes it 'no isolated space, but one which is intertwined with its surroundings' (van Liempt and Chimienti 2017, 1573). In other words, it combines its RLD destination status, with ordinary everyday mixed urban residential functions. In this paper, we attempt to understand de Wallen as a mixed-used sexualised space, from the perspective of its female residents. While RDLs have been studied from the perspectives of other users, the voice of female residents has hitherto remained an assumed yet unheard voice in literature. Therefore, this article presents how female residents experience and navigate the spaces of their everyday lives in a sexualised area with other actors who populate the area: (female) sex workers, tourists, commercial and criminal underworld and law enforcement. In so doing, we uncover their experiences of ownership of a unique yet changing urban neighbourhood.

The analysis draws upon data collected in April 2019, as part of the first author's Master thesis, and consists of both focus group interviews as well as in-depth interviews with female inhabitants of Amsterdam's RLD. This article gives substance to the notion that female residents—through their every-day practices, behaviours and responses—integrate and make sense of their own experiences and perspectives of the life of the neighbourhood and its public spaces, and ultimately negotiate their sense of home daily (see Beebeejaun 2017). With this research, we strove to uncover how and in what ways female residents of de Wallen experienced and behaved in this multi-use sexualised urban neighbourhood. Extending on theories on women's spatial confidence and behaviour in sexualised urban spaces, notably on RDLs, this paper thus illuminates our understanding of the gendered negotiation of sexualised spaces and the complexity of women's attempt to reclaiming their right to the city in ordinary/extraordinary settings.

Theory

Space, gender and 'the right to the city'

Within ordinary daily settings, people are confronted with and negotiate their sense of belonging and their rights to the city. Indeed, Beebeejaun argues that daily life is where 'the multiple temporalities of space are revealed as contested sites for identity and rights' (2017, 328). Public spaces are important sites of everyday life, and as collective spaces they serve as a mediator of rights and a crucial pillar in the debate on making cities more inclusive. They are sites of negotiations of 'concepts and practices of citizenship, exclusions, and prejudice' (Beebeejaun 2017, 325). While in principle, public space should be open and accessible to anyone (Fyfe and Bannister 1996), in practice prevailing norms, rules and practices within them can act as exclusionary social constructs, entailing that denizen (might feel compelled to) adjust their

behaviour accordingly (Beebejaun 2017; Mowl and Towner 1995). In spite of a 'participatory turn', planning regulations governing space and access to it do not fully account for inclusivity of perspectives and users (Beebejaun 2017). Arguably, the notion of an entirely open public spaces is 'an ideological weapon' (Belina 2003, 2), as movements to reclaim public spaces for all have concealed processes of eviction and exclusion of 'undesirables' (e.g. sex workers, homeless people), who threaten their more 'orderly' functioning. Enabling accessibility to space therefore means removing the undesirable to enable the 'orderly' to make use of public spaces.

Negotiations relating to the right to the city and spaces open to the public oftentimes touch upon gender inequality and performativity. Meyerhoff defines gender performativity as the positioning of gender 'in relation to others through repetition and enactment' (2015, 2). Gender performativity refers to the way various genders act, as well as how they relate to one another, and performances connected to gender can be produced and reproduced (Butler 1990; Meyerhoff 2015). In public spaces, extant gender relations and power relations may influence how women experience spaces, how safe they feel and how they use or avoid spaces. Wilson (2001) distinguished two opposite sides of the spectrum of research on gendered construction of the urban experience whereby cities are either reproducing exclusionary practices along gender dichotomies, or alternatively opening up and enabling spaces of diversity. Within the former, recent #metoo debates were not only raising the awareness of harassment towards women in workplaces but also in ordinary places like public spaces, signalling that sexual discrimination and violence against women remains part of everyday life in urban spaces (Beebejaun 2017; Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). Citing a 2014 survey published by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) reflected on how around half of the 42,000 surveyed women performed 'safety work' by adapting and adjusting their movement in response to fear of gender-based violence (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020, 222). In spite of these findings, Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) note and criticise the lack of focus in academia on gendered spaces and its implications, especially for women. Similarly, there are calls for city planners to dive deeper into the multiple uses of space to provide an inclusive right to the city, especially focussing on gender dimensions (Beebejaun 2017; Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020).

While gendered public spaces might reflect and produce values linked to sexuality (Koskela 2005; Bryant and Livholts 2007), sexualised spaces are public areas in which erotic structures and activities rule the environment (Green et al. 2008). Such spaces allow their users to express their sexual identity and desires in an uninhibited or open way. Arguably, sexuality is very much embedded in globalised cities, spurred on by leisure and consumption practices of locals and visitors alike (Collins 2006; Chapuis 2017). RLDs in particular are considered sexualised spaces (Sanders-McDonagh 2017; Koskela and Tani 2005).

Negotiating sex work areas as (female) resident

Studies on sexualised places have drawn on performative understandings of gender roles to give insights into how particular expectations, assumptions and constructs about gender might play out on the urban landscape (Hubbard 2005; Koskela 2005; Spain 2014; Sanders-McDonagh 2017). Many studies offer insights into the perspectives of clients or sex workers to prostitution areas (Aalbers 2005), yet there is relatively little research on the experiences and perceptions of (female) inhabitants whose everyday lives are anchored and integrated in sexualised spaces. For example, Boels and Verhage (2016) focused their attention on how the presence of sex work affected citizens in Ghent more generally. Their research revealed that some residents were bothered by what they perceived as the vulgar display of sex workers. Nevertheless, while generally residents accepted the presence of sex work, they were aggravated by the secondary effects of sex businesses in their neighbourhood. Negative side effects connected to the presence of sex work, such as disorderly tourists, drug and alcohol (ab)use or vandalism, lead to experiencing a lack of safety in their area. In comparison, Prior and Crofts (2012) work on the experience of people who lived in proximity of sex businesses in South Wales, Australia, showed how they had become accustomed to the establishments, and as a result, they had developed what seemed to be a higher tolerance level towards sex work and related spill over effects. Closer to this research in terms of target group, a body of research has looked at the experience of female locals in sexualised spaces, for example residential areas where street prostitution occurs. Tani's (2002) qualitative study on how female residents in Helsinki responded to the presence of street prostitution in their neighbourhood highlighted experiences of intimidation and sexualization (e.g. because of kerb-crawling), but also of receiving unwanted attention from men who were looking to engage with sexual services, as they were mistaken for 'a sign of a prostitute' (348). Also researching Helsinki, Koskela (2005) noted that her three types of perceptions of public spaces linked to prostitution and identified related forms of personal agency. Firstly, respondents perceived spaces to be 'elastic' in the sense that 'temporality and spatiality are intertwined' (Koskela 2005, 259). In other words, women adjusted their behaviour depending on the time of day, with effects on their spatial confidence and fearfulness (Koskela 1997). Secondly, spaces were experienced as 'tamed' by routinised daily activities (Koskela 2005). Through their own frequent physical presence in such public spaces, respondents felt they contributed to making space available and 'safe' for other women. Lastly, 'suppressed' spaces describe districts characterised by heightened video surveillance for safety enhancements. Women tended to benefit from this more than men, as they tended to experience more fear in public spaces. Yet surveillance also enhanced the feeling of imminent threat, as it was perceived as a 'sign of danger'.

Koskela (1997) pointed to various forms of agency that can shape the experience of (sexualised) public spaces. Women displayed a tendency to reconsider which public areas to visit, and with whom and at which time of the day (e.g. a walk in the park at night). This capacity enhanced their spatial confidence—while a lack thereof could result in feelings of (self)exclusion, discomfort, and fear, and acts of avoidance. Such dynamics can help to result in a sense of spatial confidence, especially in gendered and sexualised spaces (Koskela 1997). Tani (2002) noted the strategies of dressing down and playing down one's femininity as a coping mechanism to feel safer in the area; whereas Koskela (1997) noted the act of 'bold walking' as a form of confidently 'taking possession of space' through body language (Koskela 1997, 310). Examples of bold walking were keeping their heads up (as opposed to avoiding eye contact), appearing fearless and confident in their body movements. Ultimately, with the enactment of strategies such as 'bold-walking' indicates the challenges to gender equality in sexualised spaces like RLDs. Beyond individual level responses, Tani (2002) also noted how female residents coalesced around an action named 'Prostitution Off the Streets', in an effort to reclaim their residential area and transition it towards a more peaceful environment. Similar movements have been noted in Manchester and San Francisco, mainly led by female residents, aiming at eradicating sex customers from 'their' neighbourhood (Tani 2002).

Gendered experiences of de Wallen red Light District

A few studies have sought to explore the specific gendered experiences of de Wallen paying attention to the enacted coping strategies and mechanisms that female visitors to the area develop and adopt. Sanders-McDonagh's ethnographic work (2017) in Dutch and Thai contexts set out to explore female visitors' experience and consumption of sex tourist landscapes. Her respondents were usually attracted by the 'otherness' of sex workers and the experience of being in a sexualised space. Their interactions with the space included partaking in window-watching and peep shows, practices which enabled them to fetishize and objectify sex workers and fantasise about sex (Sanders-McDonagh 2017). The researcher also noted that the majority of women were less likely to attend performances at sex venues, and merely pass by the prostitution windows. Similarly, in her ethnographic research among international visitors in de Wallen, Chapuis (2017) argues that women experienced the RLD as eluding them, as they did not identify as primary consumers of the area. Their consumption of RLDs occurred on a symbolic level, as 'onlookers' rather than users of sex services. Female tourists commonly felt Amsterdam's RLD was 'a place where "good girls" should not go' and experienced a moral conflict when visiting (Chapuis 2017, 626). Moreover, manifestations of femininity in the area seemed to be associated with

sexuality and male fantasies, leading to a sense that femininity was equivalent to sexuality (Chapuis 2017; Koskela 2005). Although some were curious and compelled by the 'thrill of desire' (Chapuis 2017, 616), most respondents experienced de Wallen as a confronting area.

The reviewed articles identified a number of strategies enacted by female tourists to actively differentiate themselves from sex workers and (Chapuis 2017; Sanders-McDonagh 2017). As Chapuis showed (2017), female visitors were avoiding making eye contact with sex workers, and used irony when sharing images of the area on social media. They also wondered about the life of window workers, pondering on whether they could envisage doing this type of work. Chapuis (2017) and Sanders-McDonagh (2017) related the practice of 'Othering' to status and social hierarchy differentials. Additionally, in their use of language to describe sex workers, they tended to express a feeling of superiority towards the 'Other', through disgust and derision. When visiting the area, female tourists would consider their own outfits carefully. They aimed to balance feeling attractive and adequately authoritative to reject unwanted advances. Next to dressing down, some respondents held back on alcohol and limited their time alone in the RLD, while also engaging in precautionary measures. The research showed how gender performances gave way to a number of reactions, tactics and negotiations. These tactics link to more general work on respectability mechanisms and class distinctions, for example narratives of what it means to be a working-class woman (see Skeggs 1997).

By looking at the specific neighbourhood of de Wallen, a multi-use sexualised neighbourhood, this article contributes to more detailed insights into the gendered experience of women residing in a space that is both an ordinary and extraordinary setting of everyday life.

Methods and research design

This article is based on data collected in April 2019, with 19 respondents identifying as female residents of Amsterdam's RLD. Of those respondents, 11 were interviewed in-depth, while the remaining joined one of two focus, consisting of three and five women. With regard to gathering refined experiences from female residents with various lifestyles, respondents were sampled to allow for variations in age, duration of residency and civic status. 11 women interviewed were aged between 21 and 41, the rest was aged between 52 and 74. The respondents existed of seven short-term (0–4 years), four middle-term (5–14 years) and eight long-term residents (15+ years). Respondents' civic status varied (from single to married with/without children). The majority of the participants were Dutch, followed by Australian, French, and American respondents. Their professions ranged from working in the cultural sector to being a student, doctor, and drug store assistant.

Respondents were contacted *via* community centres located in the RLD and people formerly engaged in Project 1012, a regeneration initiative aiming to replacing windows and coffee shops with other establishments. Moreover, leaflets including an explanation of the study research project were shared in venues such as childcare centres and shops in the neighbourhood. Once initial contact was made respondents referred friends and acquaintances. People were not recruited on the streets due to the high amount of tourists who do not belong to the target group of this research.

The choice of qualitative research was determined by our 'goal of empowering and giving voice to respondents' experience' (Hesse-Biber 2010, 455). As the purpose of this research was to investigate women's personal views, own opinions and perspectives on living in a particular space, de Wallen, conducting qualitative interviews was the most suitable to gain this data. Due to the high amount of sensitive subjects, follow up questions were used to dive deeper into themes like sexuality, sex work and harassment. Moreover, according to Kieffer et al. (2005) focus groups fit researching communities, since they allow respondents to explore strategies collectively, leading to action and change. Focus group participants were invited to join focus groups alongside acquaintances: being acquaintances eased the participants, which eventually resulted in opening up and revealing more (Peek and Fothergill 2009). During the interviews and focus groups, respondents were asked about their experiences of sexualisation and of multi-use related to urban space. Respondents were asked about where, when and how they move in Amsterdam's RLD as a sexualised, multi-use district. Two maps of de Wallen were made available to respondents during the interviews and focus groups: a generic street map, and a map indicating specific window sex work areas. Respondents were asked to reflect on their experience of de Wallen as a sexualised space by asking about their perception of the women in the windows and interplay with them, in addition to their opinion about sex stores and peep shows. Moreover, respondents were asked about their experiences with harassment or unwanted sexual attention, and their behaviour and response in those situations. This notion also comprised the perception of fear and threat and to which degree these feelings are experienced by female residents and their reflection and reaction to them. De Wallen as multi-use space was assessed by interviewing participants about the usage of public spaces and amenities in the area in general. More precisely, this included questions about women's leisure time and the spots they decide to visit or intentionally stay away from, to explore how the multi-use area is experienced.

All interviews were held in de Wallen at participants' homes or cafes, one meeting took place online, since the participant was not physically present at the time of the data collection. The benefit of interviews at home was the familiarity and calmness of the space. In contrary, interviews at public places appeared to activate their memories and motivated them to share

insights about the neighbourhood and space. The one-on-one interviews were audio-recorded, whereas focus group interviews were videotaped, both in agreement with respondents and based on formal consent forms. The Dutch and English language was chosen to hold interviews, which lasted 40–80 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and subsequently coded in Atlas.ti. Transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were coded separately, through open, focused and axial coding to data (Charmaz 2006). The analysis resulted in three themes: negotiating a sense of home through normalization and detachment; experiencing and responding to objectification; and reclaiming ownership of an authentic sexualised space under threat.

Results

Negotiating home—normalization and detachment in an extraordinary neighbourhood

Among our respondents, there were many different reasons for living in de Wallen. Long term residents for instance moved to the area due to the affordable housing market in the 80s. In general, respondents were fond of the central location, historic gems and buzz that the area has to offer. Many residents decided to stay because of the convenience of living in the city centre and the feeling of belonging to the '*buurtje*'—a neighbourhood with a village feel—where people know, greet and look out for each other.

Respondents generally acknowledged that window sex work made their neighbourhood exceptional, yet they were used to it in their daily lives. Similar to Boels and Verhage (2016) findings, residents got familiar with the presence and visibility of sex work and did not give it much heed anymore in their everyday life. Yet adding to this work, the sexualised sphere and the activities that went with it were seen as affording the area a unique and authentic identity, to which respondents expressed proud attachment. The fact that outsiders were intrigued and curious about the experience of living in such a notorious part of the city added an extra dimension to their sense of how 'cool' it was to be a resident.

It's very cool to say to people like, I live in the Red Light District [...]. It keeps being nice, I live here for six years now and every time I have a new job now and people say 'where do you live' and I'm like 'in the middle of de Wallen' and they're like 'wow, how's that?' (Interviewee 14, 26 years old).

Part of seeing de Wallen as a normal neighbourhood rested on how respondents related to local sex workers. Female visitors in Chapuis' research (2017) referred to sex workers as 'whores' and 'sluts'. In contrast, in this study sex workers were labelled by female locals as 'sex workers', 'the girls', 'the

women' or 'the ladies'. Instead of 'Othering' them, like visitors did by using degrading names and thus socially positioning themselves 'higher' than sex workers (Sanders-McDonagh 2017), the interviewed female residents tended to acknowledge sex workers as part of the neighbourhood life. For example, Interviewee 7 (27 years old) bonded with sex workers operating near her place of work during her cigarette breaks and saw them as neighbours and people working in the area. Older residents would acknowledge long-standing friendships or neighbourly bonds with long-standing sex workers, yet they felt more distant from and critical of younger sex workers with a more international profile. Contrarily, especially younger female residents related to sex workers on a more neutral and tolerant basis. During the focus groups, respondents explained how they would go to lengths to avoid making the sex workers feel inferior or judged—for instance by avoiding looking at them.

While on the one hand acknowledging the sex workers were part of the life of their neighbourhood, on the other hand many respondents felt that the sex business was a far-removed and elusive sphere, overall a 'mystery to them', as they considered it to be aimed at visitors rather than locals. Interviewee 6 described:

'In my everyday life I don't have anything to do with it. [...] Well, I read about it in the neighbourhood paper and the Parool. Personally, I don't have anything to do with prostitution of course.' (Interviewee 6, 69 years old, our translation).

Respondents were relatively cautious about expressing their views and beliefs about sex work. Even though most respondents assumed human trafficking, criminality, exploitation, and violence towards sex workers to be happening frequently, they were not sure whether this information is accurate. While the red light windows were familiar in their daily lives, what went on behind closed doors was part of an uncharted territory. In other words, they distinguished the street level manifestations of the RLD with the economic and social realities they represented—while the latter were 'normal', the former were, in the words of Interviewee 8 (23 years old), an 'alternative reality', which was hard to see through non-transparent and hence tended to be misjudged and hard to grasp. The contrast was even more striking deep in the night, when the windows would close for business. For female residents, the desertedness of spaces at particular moments of the day made them feel more fearful and spatially insecure (see also Beebeejaun 2017), as if the windows and visitors buzzing around were providing a shield between the residents and the darker reality of the neighbourhood. Whether the area seemed under control and the degree of spatial confidence, depended very much on how tamed the space was, as well as the time of the day and location. Interviewee 15 explains:

Something in the night, sometimes at 5:30, there is some point where de Wallen, everything is closing here and everybody is going out of this area, tourists at least,

they don't sleep here and then it can be a little bit, when there's nobody around, it can be a little bit more, I don't know, of a bad vibe. (Interviewee 15, 26 years old)

Awareness of cameras and police presence in the area constitute a source of security:

There are cameras everywhere, two police stations, a host, police on bikes, on horses, by foot, all over the place. I really don't think it's unsafe. The only risk is a random person, but that's not a higher risk here than somewhere else. I don't feel unsafe. (Interviewee 7, 27 years old)

The buzz of tourists, party goers and employees working in the sex industry as well as in non-sex related businesses 'tamed' public places for women (see Koskela 1997), creating a buffer between their daily lives and the inner world of the sexualised neighbourhood.

Adding to a sense of detachment from the inner workings of their neighbourhood, respondents reported a sense of loss of control over time. Firstly, older residents felt they did not know the female sex workers anymore—as they felt the women behind the windows seemed to change all the time, reducing a sense of shared familiarity. Secondly, they also felt that de Wallen as sexualised area had changed, from a place where people predominantly came to actively engage in sex work, to an area where people came to experience the spectacle of sex work. As more visitors came to 'look' and 'watch' only, it turned all the neighbourhood into an object of visitors' consumption. A respondent from the focus group for instance, reflected on the sex work and sex-related activities in the neighbourhood and exclaimed: '[...] There's gonna be a point that we look back at this and that we think what the f*** was that'. (Interviewee 15, 26 years old).

Experiencing objectification and deconstructing gendered power imbalances

Previous research has shone a light on the objectification of sex workers in RLDs (see Boels and Verhage 2016; Nelson and Seager 2005). In this study, our respondents reported the experience of the objectification through unsolicited sexual interest or innuendos towards them, expressed by less explicit, symbolic gestures, such as a persistent stare. While older female residents barely experienced unwanted attention in de Wallen—they reported being hollered at by tourists when looking out of their window at home. In contrast, mainly participants aged below 30 experienced harassment frequently.

Tani (2002) argued that while navigating sexualised spaces, women might become associated with a 'sign of prostitution', mistakenly becoming a target of sexualised attention. Female residents talked about unwanted sexual attention in the form of verbal and physical harassment. As interviewee 7 (27 years old) stated, this manifested itself for her as follows: 'In summer, they would

ask Are you finished, are you going to work, which one is yours, which window?'. Besides that, interviewees shared stories about (groups of) men violating their personal space, getting too close, or encircling them; but also just like a creepy 'hey' (Interviewee 9, 26 years old), 'gross looks' (Interviewee 14, 26 years old) or even the request to perform sexual acts. Moreover, the two focus groups discussed being the target of smacking and kissing sounds, and what Interviewee 18 (26 years old) called 'sissing', an 'ss' sound. Interviewee 14 (26 years old) reported physical harassment: 'I once had that I was walking over a bridge there and then someone was on a bicycle passing me by. And he really hit me in the ass very hard'. According to the interviewees of this research, the offenders exercising disrespectful, violent, and sexist behaviour were mostly (male) tourists in de Wallen. Yet, catcalling and harassment in general was not necessarily tied to the neighbourhood, but according to Interviewee 4, 9 and 10 it could take place anywhere else in the city.

Echoing the findings of previous research, our respondents developed tactics to deal with harassment (Chapuis 2017; Koskela 1997; Koskela 1999; Sanders-McDonagh 2017; Tani 2002). Residents expressed the need to educate visitors about the nature of de Wallen as multi-use neighbourhood—by getting them to understand and respect the fact that people actually live there, thus acknowledging their right to the neighbourhood (see Beebeejaun 2017). Moreover, our findings shed a different light on known strategies, contributing to existing knowledge. Interviewee 4 (41 years old) strongly believed that women had agency on whether encounters with men would escalate or not. In order to handle or prevent harassment, women developed coping mechanisms, yet there was some disagreement here. Reminiscent of Koskela's (1997) idea of 'bold-walking', Interviewee 11 (60 years old) for example, noted the strategy of walking in the neighbourhood with confidence, feigning total control of the situation. In order to prevent unwanted remarks, the participants from the first Focus group mentioned wearing a coat or scarf over their potentially sexually provocative outfit until they left their neighbourhood. Moreover, some put on flat shoes at first, and changed into high heels after leaving de Wallen (Focus Group 1). Nevertheless, while respondents enacted these strategies, their effectiveness in countering unwanted attention was questioned, as in the exchange below.

Interviewee 14 Yeah. Sometimes when you have like a party and you're really dressed up, then sometimes I'm almost afraid to go out, because you know you will get more comments than normally and always it's like that, if you were wearing

Interviewee 12 Heels or something

Interviewee 14 Yeah, heels or a skirt or more makeup or anything, you will get comments on it, always

Interviewee 13 And it's also when I'm walking on Saturday morning with no makeup and my [...] shabby trousers on. Then early in the mornings, you also get comments so it's

Interviewee 14 Yeah. I once had

Interviewee 12 It almost doesn't matter, you're just a girl.

In this excerpt, counterstrategies almost did not matter, as unwanted attention and harassment kept coming. Like Chapuis (2017) and Koskela (2005), femininity or being 'just a girl' in de Wallen may translate into sexuality and potentially lead to harassment. Compared to other studies, many female residents emphasized that they felt free in their choice of outfits and felt comfortable in anything they wear. Nevertheless, considering that they avoid wearing specific outfits in de Wallen or cover themselves shows that in fact they do experience limitations and unconsciously practice gender performativity to avoid gender violence (see Meyerhoff 2015).

Apart from reflecting on the clothes they wore, respondents reported changing their body language according to temporality and day of the week, adding to the spatial and temporal negotiations proposed by Koskela (1997). In particular, they moderated their facial expressions and body language to prevent giving out an impression of 'approachability'. Interviewee 12 explained:

[...] always when I get into this neighbourhood, when I'm thinking at night like on a Friday or Saturday or at night, I realize that my face is changing. So I was walking a bit like this (makes angry face), because if people want to make eye contact with me, I don't want to be like too happy or nice, too approachable. (Interviewee 12, 26 years old)

Next to taking preventive action, respondents also opted to respond to harassment in different ways. Respondents reported using swear words, raising their voices, or involving third parties in the situation thus diffusing a situation. This mechanism was used to communicate confidence, labelled as 'bold-countering'. By virtue of the fact that they expected and anticipated harassment, focus group members felt ready to counter felt they unsolicited sexual attention in de Wallen. Yet they did not always get a chance to counter harassment boldly. One focus group raised an interesting point, namely that men would leave as fast as they could after the act of harassment. Feelings of anger would occur, because even though they were prepared to counter 'boldly', they did not get the opportunity to do so. Even if women felt spatially confident, able and willing to deconstruct the power and gender relations in an urban space, the possibility to counter the harassment was taken from them.

Yet some other respondents opted for a different coping mechanism, notably disregard, indifference towards comments and unwanted attention. Mostly this was motivated by a sense of powerlessness, resulting from previous failed attempts at tackling harassment, as the following quotes show.

I've tried all kinds of strategies but nothing really works (pause). Just ignore it and keep on walking or don't look at them, look at the ground, look happy, look sad. Doesn't matter. I just maybe curse back at them, doesn't work because they were even more angry and curse back again. (Interviewee 13, 26 years old)

[...] I sometimes wonder like, what if I would turn around now. What would he do? I think they would all chicken out. [...] There's big talk but still it's annoying, but if you already know you're not going to do really anything with it, why even bother doing it, just leave me alone. (Interviewee 12, 26 years old)

Our findings connect to and extend the conclusion of previous research (Koskela and Tani 2005). Specifically, we encountered tactics relating to gender performativity and constructs, as our respondents reflected on their hyper-awareness and experience and intuition-led behaviour while negotiating urban sexualised spaces. Bold-countering and bold-dressing were mobilized to reclaim their right to the city, to have and manifest control over their neighbourhood and interactions with harassers. Similarly to Skeggs (1997), the respondents performed their refusal to be recognized for what—at least from their experience—was expected of them. Through performativity they could 'do' bold, or dressed-down and in this way, they refuse to comply with temporal or context-led expectations. As in Skeggs's work, the respondents refused to be 'fixed' in their identities.

Reclaiming ownership of an authentic sexualised space under threat

De Wallen's '*buurtje*' feel and authenticity were perceived as being under threat as a result of gentrification and mass tourism to the area, leading to ever-homogeneous spaces of leisure and consumption in the area. The main grievance was with the so-called 'Nutellafication' of the neighbourhood, a term used by respondents to refer to a transformation whereby shops selling snacks (often pancakes and waffles with chocolate spread, hence the name) for tourists were taking over retail locations in hoards. The number of sex shops catering for tourists was also on the increase, changing the aesthetics and feel of the area. One of our older interviewees (3, age 54) bemoaned the growing number of 'vulgar'-looking shop windows, 'showing big dildos and otherer silly stuff', while interviewee 6 (69 years old) lamented the 'distasteful' sex shops. Yet rather than pleading for their closure altogether, Interviewee 11 argued that alternative and more fitting aesthetics were possible:

Done tastefully I notice I don't have a problem with it. The one just on the corner here with the vibrators in the window, it's a tasteful window. I have a lot more problems with the funny little shops, the ones where you've got, I don't know if he still has them, but basically magazines where nothing's left to the imagination. (Interviewee 11, 60 years old)

Vulgar shops and snack parlours stand out and were perceived as not belonging to the 'authentic' neighbourhood; whereas other windows and sex

shops were considered as normal attributes of the area, and hence go mostly unnoticed. Linking this to Smith (1996), it would appear that our respondents react against a revanchist discourse of gentrification in the area, insofar as they see it as a reactive movement that replaces one enemy—the windows—with a more undesirable one—the bland pancake bars and tourist trinket shops. Our respondents find themselves caught in a revanchist discourse that does not coincide with their experience of place, whereby the ‘enemy’ that is removed is replaced by faceless and more insidious enemies.

Longer standing residents in particular experienced de Wallen as having ‘village’ qualities, a close-knit community with strong social interactions and cohesion. If anything, the sense of community was perceived as reinforced by ‘joining forces’ to counterbalance the tourism expansion in the area, as in the words of Interviewee 8 (23 years old). In joining forces, the residents—especially the longer-standing ones—aimed to keep their grievances regarding the liveability of the area in the public attention, for instance through articles in the local news, or by setting up and engaging with the ‘We Live Here’¹ campaign (see Figure 1). This campaign aimed to raise awareness of the fact that de Wallen is also home to many, drawing attention to residential—as opposed to red—windows.

This community-initiated campaign, also supported by the municipality, also helped bringing people together and create bonds between participants.



Figure 1. Amsterdam's Red Light District, Zeedijk. Source. Photo by author.

Through this campaign, for instance, Interviewee 5 (34 years old) had the opportunity to get in touch with other residents, which she lacked beforehand. Creating a space for residents, where opinions are shared and collective goals are pursued, helped to nurture a stronger feeling of home, belonging, ownership and control. As Interviewee 19 (23 years old) put it: 'Don't be shy or insecure, it's your city, your street.' Collectively, they fought for their right to the city, overcoming a feeling of exclusion.

Conclusion

This research shed light on the experience of living among red lights from an insider view, the view of female residents of de Wallen. In contrast to previous research on de Wallen, which took into account the perspective of outsiders, such as clients and visitors, this paper gives voice to a, so far at least, neglected group. De Wallen was experienced as an idiosyncratic area, where a number of distinct spheres of activity come together in a place they call home. De Wallen is indeed a busy global tourist destination, a sexualised neighbourhood, a hotspot for drifters and drug addicts and ultimately, but also ultimately, a place of residence and everyday life. These features were experienced by female residents as sometimes contradictory, often conflicting, but also self-reinforcing. They lent the area a familiar yet quirky character, a homely yet unconventional '*buurtje*'. Respondents did not romanticise the neighbourhood: they reflected on the presence of almost parallel worlds there, from the normal day to day life of families, to the drugs underworld, sex work and excessive tourist driven consumption. Taking ownership and claiming their 'right to the city' (see Beebeejaun 2017) was executed in different ways for several reasons and essential to female residents in everyday life.

Generally respondents 'normalised' the presence of windows in their neighbourhood and their daily lives, associated them to the extraordinary nature of a unique part of the city. The windows, sex workers and customers were integral part of the normal life of the neighbourhood. Rather than dwelling on its peculiarities, they distanced themselves from the happenings of the red lights, yet acknowledged their existence. There was also a lot about the neighbourhood that respondents did not know, nor wished to know about—what was behind closed doors remained a mystery. The feeling that a dark world lurked behind the windows was present, yet the windows and buzz of users of the neighbourhood served to create a shield between respondents and this darker reality, taming the space, especially during opening times (see Koskela 1997).

Respondents reported their discomfort at being perceived as part of the sexualised nature of the area, even when they were going about their normal everyday lives. Even though in general, female residents argued that sexual harassment is not necessarily bound to de Wallen only, femininity was often

conflated with sexuality here, as women moving in this space tended to experience being seen as 'a sign of prostitution' (Chapuis 2017; Koskela 2005). Yet there were coping strategies and mechanisms, including adapting body language and facial expressions, but also reflecting on how to educate visitors to be more respectful. These strategies pointed to an acute sense of space and time, being able to read situations and settings and adjust behaviour accordingly. Being harassed and heckled by visitors to the area was a common experience. While some respondents would adjust their behaviour to avoid attracting attention, others would act more boldly towards sexual harassment. This included attempting to deconstruct hierarchies and power relations, and to maintain respectability (Skeggs 1997), rather than internalizing a sense of 'weaker gender' (Chapuis 2017). Yet even bold countering behaviours, where respondents would challenge their harassers, were often mixed with a sense of powerlessness in the face of harassment and heckling, harassers could walk away, and the flow of visitors would bring about new challenging situations.

Female residents manifested their sense of home by expressing their attachment to this idiosyncratic neighbourhood, as well as in uniting against an emerging common 'enemy'—the homogenisation of the area driven by mass tourism, not just the sexualised space itself. In some ways, the homogenisation of the area was a bigger threat to the authenticity of the '*buurtje*' than the RLD itself. On the one hand, de Wallen was a magnet to tourists and hence tamed the space for its residents through its lively character. On the other hand, a process referred to by respondents as 'Nutellafication', whereby bland and homogeneous food and retail activities were multiplying in the area, removed the originality and uniqueness that actually made the respondents feel proud and attached to de Wallen in the first place.

Local campaigns such as 'We live here' attempted to 'claim back' the neighbourhood for its residents, restating a right to a sense of home and ownership of the area. Couzy (2020) argues that the city of Amsterdam wants de Wallen to return to a historic, beautiful neighbourhood attracting fewer party tourists and overconsumption behaviour. Recently plans of the city lean towards replacing the Red Light District with an erotic centre located in a peripheral area of the city. This development could have two-sided consequences for residents: the feeling of loss of authenticity through the removal of red lights, and/or an enhanced feeling of comfort due to fewer nuisances caused by mass tourism and undesired visitor behaviour. The findings resonate with Belina's work on evicting the 'undesirables' and reclaiming public space, whereby local processes of change and street-level transformations in the name of 'law and order' are tied up with more global developments in capitalist economies (2003). Respondents experienced the changes to their neighbourhood as bringing undesirable developments—bland retail, asocial behaviour—devoiding the area of its unique, albeit controversial, character.

In terms of research limitations, it is important to acknowledge that all research participants identified as cisgender women. Moreover, the majority of participants was either aged below 30 or above 50, overlooking an age group that could have been interesting to look at regarding topics like sexuality and harassment. Future research on the gendered experience of living in a sexualised area should account for more diverse intersections of gender, age and sexuality, giving voice to the particularities of varied lived experiences. Lastly, recruiting *via* community centres and respondents' own networks might have created a bias in the sense that those people are more prone to engage with the area be more committed to its development and change, in addition to having greater social bonds within their neighbourhood. Those limitations stimulate further research on how diverse gender groups experience public and/or sexualised spaces, specifically RLDs, and dive deeper into subjects such as masculinity, femininity and gender performance.

Note

1. <https://welvehere.amsterdam/about/> last accessed 26 April 2020.

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