

WHERE WE ARE

The Hookah Lounge

Dearborn, Mich



Photographs by **FARAH AL QASIMI**

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Leer en español

Where We Are is a visual column about young people coming of age and the spaces where they create community.

Coming of age is marked by a series of firsts. Your first kiss. Your first job. Your first drink.

Many who grew up in Dearborn, Mich., would add to the list: your first hookah.

Located just outside downtown Detroit, Dearborn is home to one of the United States' largest Arab American communities: Nearly 50 percent of residents identify as having Arab ancestry, according to the U.S. census. Middle Eastern shops, where you may find portable hookah cups, dot the streets. There is also the Arab American National Museum (which sells hookah-themed socks) and the Islamic Center of America, one of the nation's oldest and largest mosques.

And then there is the long list of hookah lounges, where locals spend hours leisurely smoking flavored tobacco through water pipes while catching up, watching soccer games or enjoying a live Arabic music performance.

"A spot like a hookah lounge, it's sacred," particularly for immigrants and refugees far from home, said Marrim (pronounced Mariam) Akashi Sani, 25, who is Iraqi-Iranian. "And it's something you have to create for yourself when you're displaced, and you might not ever be able to go back home because you don't really know what home is anymore."

For many young people in Dearborn, core memories were made at a hookah lounge: birthdays, graduations, that time you cried over the crush who didn't like you back or showed off your smoke ring skills to your friends. "It's like a rite of passage here when you start smoking hookah," Marrim said.



MUHAMMED VIRK, 28, at right, is Pakistani and went to what he describes as an “all-Arab” school. Making Arab friends and getting drawn into the ritual of smoking hookah was inevitable, he said. “They’ve always been the culture.”



Many of the lounges do not serve alcohol and are seen as alternatives to bars for customers who abstain for religious reasons. Some of them are upscale, giving off

“halal nightclub” vibes, said **MARRIM**, but most share the same features: plasma TVs mounted on the walls, leather seating, images of Islamic symbols. (“It looks like a diner and a banquet hall had a baby.”)

On any given weeknight, you may come across a rowdy group of 20-somethings at one table, and a pair of older men engaging in a hushed, intense conversation on the next.

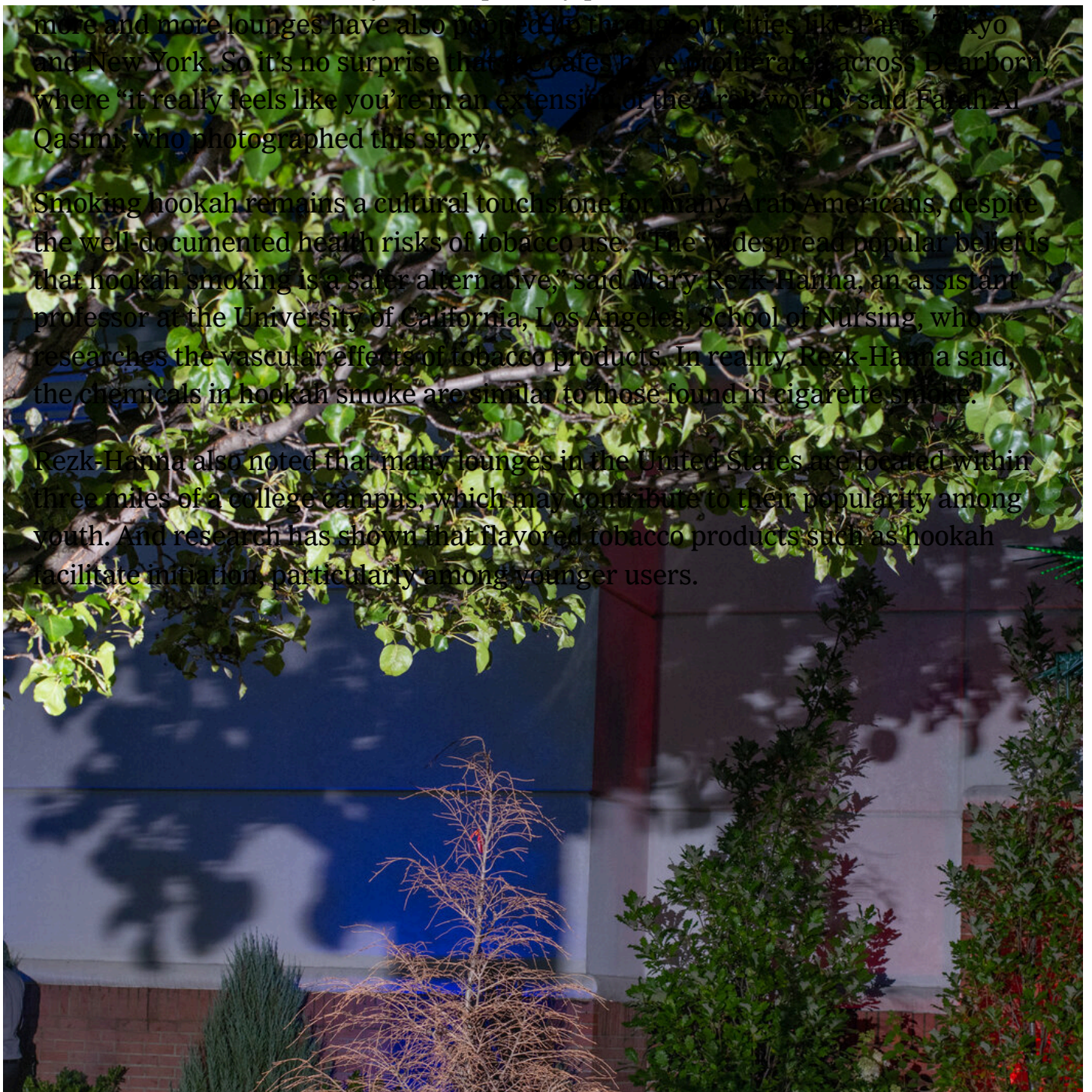


“For most people in Dearborn, going to the lounge is one of the things that we look forward to,” **MUHAMMED** said.

Hookah, also known as shisha, argileh or hubbly bubbly, is said to have its origins in India or Persia. These days, it's especially prevalent across the Middle East, but more and more lounges have also popped up in big city cities like Paris, Tokyo and New York. So it's no surprise that the cafes have proliferated across Dearborn, where "it really feels like you're in an extension of the Arab world," said Farah Al Qasbi, who photographed this story.

Smoking hookah remains a cultural touchstone for many Arab Americans, despite the well-documented health risks of tobacco use. "The widespread popular belief is that hookah smoking is a safer alternative," said Mary Rezk-Hanna, an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, School of Nursing, who researches the vascular effects of tobacco products. In reality, Rezk-Hanna said, the chemicals in hookah smoke are similar to those found in cigarette smoke.

Rezk-Hanna also noted that many lounges in the United States are located within three miles of a college campus, which may contribute to their popularity among youth. And research has shown that flavored tobacco products such as hookah facilitate initiation, particularly among younger users.





Like many young people in Dearborn, **MARRIM** started smoking hookah in high school. Despite the public health messages that she was bombarded with throughout her childhood, she says she was not terribly concerned about the health dangers of tobacco.

But she did wrestle with guilt, shame and fear because her mother used to say it was “haram” and “aib” — forbidden and shameful — for women to smoke. Had her mother warned of health risks, **MARRIM**, pictured below in front of a dollar store advertisement in Dearborn, said, “we probably would have listened.”



Still, **MARRIM** also felt a strong sense of liberation and community. She remembers being 13 and secretly making hookahs out of water bottles with her cousin. “That’s the age where you want to have secrets. You want to rebel a little bit.”



There was one particular lounge, and one particular booth, “where the major life events happened.” All of her teenage memories, she said, are wrapped up in that space.





When **MARRIM** was growing up, the legal age to smoke was 18; last year Michigan raised it to 21, bringing it in line with recently updated federal legislation.


While today's teenagers may not have the same legal access to hookah that she did, **MARRIM** thinks they will still find a way to smoke. "Kids break the rules — that's the way of the world," she said. "We were all kids and we tried it for the first time," she added. "Might as well do it in the safety of a lounge."



Smoking shisha is inherently a group activity. Each person spends a few minutes with the hose before passing it to the next person.

That social interaction is a key part of Middle Eastern culture, explained Marwa Alomari, 23, a friend of Marrim's who is Iraqi-Lebanese. She used to work as a tour guide at the Arab American National Museum and said the tradition of smoking hookah often came up in discussions about Arab hospitality and the value of community.

"We're taught early on, 'You don't eat alone; you eat in a group. You don't drink tea alone; you drink in a group,'" Marwa said. "You smoke hookah in a group. That's just how we've been nurtured."



ABIR BEYDOUN, 35, moved to Dearborn from Windsor, Ontario, at 17 and spent much of her late teens and 20s in its lounges. Like **MARWA**, she believes the businesses are essential to the fabric of the community.

“Because our city is so built around auto transportation,” **ABIR**, at right, said, “there’s not a lot of outdoor spaces where you can just, like, live and meet your people.”



A hookah lounge offers what sociologists refer to as a “third place” — somewhere people can connect outside of their home or work.





Dearborn's lounges foster connections not just between neighbors, young and old, but also with the broader Arab community.

Even now, **ABIR'S** childhood friends will frequently make the drive from Canada to visit her and hit up a Dearborn lounge. "They'll get the sense of like, 'I'm around my fellow Arabs,'" **ABIR**, who is Lebanese, said.

