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## **Defining the Gay Tourist Niche: Marketing and Ethical Considerations**

**Niche tourism is associated with the differentiation, competitive advantage, and sustainability, of tourist destinations. However, limitations and moral implications of niche strategies have been raised. These apply particularly acutely to the gay tourist niche. Depth interviews reveal the ambivalence of gay individuals towards gay tourism. Sexuality appears an inadequate basis for distinguishing tourists. Gay tourism descriptions are perceived as stereotypes; unrepresentative and potentially insulting. The variety and multiplicity of tourism pursued by gay individuals is not recognised. Nor are concerns for the alienation, isolation, and stigmatisation, produced by gay tourist labels. The effectiveness and ethics of defining tourists based on sexuality, is therefore challenged.**

*Keywords: Gay Tourism; Tourism by gay people; Niche Tourism; Qualitative Research*

*Track: Tourism Marketing*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The validity of identifying and describing gay tourists as a niche group, is one which raises many questions pertinent in themselves, and to the niche tourism debate as a whole. This is a debate which concerns the purpose, reliability, and ethics of distinguishing niches. These considerations, when categorising gay tourists, are perhaps especially controversial.

Currently the literature on gay tourism remains limited. Hence underlying assumptions may be based upon limited evidence, survey techniques, and sample variety; raising questions about accuracy (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Hughes, 2004; Casey, 2009). Previous studies have focussed mainly on the motivations of gay tourists for travelling (Hughes, 2002b; Clift and Forrest, 1999; Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Casey, 2009), tourism impacts on gay space and identity (Pritchard *et al.*, 1999; Hughes, 2002a), and particularities of gay sub-groups (Hughes, 2006; Melian-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2011).

This study builds on these, but takes a wider, holistic overview, of the descriptions of, and identification with, gay tourism, by gay people. Research explores attitudes towards and experiences of gay tourism, by gay individuals, in the hope of better describing such a niche. Implications of this for tourism marketing are then discussed.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Gay tourists have been identified as a distinct and growing niche (Holcomb and Luongo, 1996). Thanks in part to the increases in global gay rights permitting such tourism openly (Pritchard *et al.*, 1999). They have been typified as frequent and intensive holidaymakers, who are highly educated, high earning, and with high disposable income (Holcomb and Luongo, 1996; Hughes, 2002a; 2006; Melian-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2011). Gay tourists are also credited as fashion forward, early adopters, and trend setters (Stuber, 2002).

As such, characterisations of gay tourists align with those positive descriptions of niche visitors generally; as a growing market, and as being more middle and upper class, educated, with higher disposable incomes, and being higher spending (McKerchner and Du Cros 2002; Urry, 2002; Butcher, 2003). Hence niche visitors are frequently linked to image enhancements, and being more lucrative per head in terms of spending (Brooker and Burgess, 2008; Schmallegger *et al.*, 2011). They may also be characterised as more culturally sensitive and environmentally aware than typical tourists (Tao and Wall, 2009; Graci, 2012). Consequently, niche tourist pursuit is widely advocated in the sustainable tourism development literature (Buckley, 2002; Reimer and Walter, 2013).

However, such descriptions of niche groups may be contested as overly simplistic and misleading (Mykletun and Crotts, 2001; McKerchner and Du Cros, 2002). In the case of gay tourists, evidence suggests the gay market is not homogenous (Stuber, 2002). For example, expectations of gay tourist's affluence have been identified as flawed (Badgett, 2001; Casey, 2009). Age and other demographic variables fragment a large population, into further discreet sub-groups and sub-niches (Hughes and Deutsch, 2010). "*It is important to recognise that the gay market, like any other, contains a host of sub-segments defined by demographic, attitudinal and ideological factors*" (Pritchard *et al.*, 1999: 275). It appears attempts to describe gay tourism may be based on a particularly open type of gay tourist, not necessarily representative. As noted by Hughes (2004); such a process is in fact describing a sub-segment of the overall gay tourism market.

Additionally, substantial differences between gay and heterosexual tourists are contested. It has been noted that reasons for holiday taking, and holiday requirements of gay tourists, differ little from heterosexual tourists (Pritchard *et al.*, 1998; Clift and Forrest, 1999). For example, characteristics often attributed to gay tourists; hedonistic, self-indulgent,

devotees of conspicuous consumption, and with sexual encounters ranking disproportionately (Hughes and Deutsch, 2010), may perhaps be applied to tourist' escapism in general (Fodness, 1994). Clift and Forrest (1999) conclude that there is little to suggest that one of the great myths of gay lifestyles, the seeking of casual sex, is anything more than that. Hence: "It is simplistic and reductive to assume that sexual orientation would, by itself, be sufficient to identify a market segment" (Hughes, 2004: 65).

Studies have illustrated some gay tourists being keen to distinguish themselves from such myths and any notion of a gay scene (Pritchard *et al*, 1999; Hughes and Deutsch, 2010). Examples highlight gay tourists wishing to holiday with others who share lifestyle and values similarities; such as age related groups, rather than sexuality based ones (Pritchard and Morgan, 1998). Indeed, the gay element of a holiday varies from total to nil (Hughes and Deutsch, 2010). Marketing strategies aimed at gay tourists can side-line, stereotype, and render second class (Coon, 2012). Gay people may feel alienated from each other, wider society, and their own sexuality as a consequence (Badgett, 2001; Casey, 2009).

### **3.0 Materials and Methods**

Depth interviews were used in light of the approaches' ability to delve into, uncover and provide rich descriptions, in own words, the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, of participants (Riley and Love, 2000). Use of the approach is also established in what is an under-researched and sensitive subject area (Pritchard *et al*, 2000; Casey, 2009; Hughes *et al*, 2010). Interviews were conducted during June-August 2014, with 24 individuals. A targeted random sample contacted through online gay travel forums. Research also relied upon elements of network and snowball sampling. Whilst it is accepted that this approach will have limitations in terms of its representativeness, for exploratory research, such an approach remains valid, and pragmatic advantages were felt to outweigh (as per Casey, 2009).

Twelve interviews were conducted face to face, and eleven through emails exchange, telephone, or video-link. Interviews lasted for between 20-60 minutes, with an average length of 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author using NVIVO software and more traditional colour coding – copy pasting techniques. This assisted immersion in the data and identification of patterns. Due to the exploratory nature of the project, limited past precedent, and the desire to uncover the attitudes and descriptions of participants, research was an inductive process based upon pragmatic use of principles of social constructivism; to explain how data is created, and grounded theory; to frame the interpretation of data (see Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

### **4.0 Research Findings**

Asked to describe gay tourism; this was something seen as hedonistic; associated with partying, sociability, and relaxation, and also promiscuity and pursuit of sexual encounters. Sun, sea and sand resorts were most frequently associated with gay tourism. As such, participants' descriptions matched those in the literature. Yet no respondents considered themselves such types of tourist; at least not principally. A clear distinction between descriptions of gay tourism, and the reality of tourism conducted by gay people, emerged.

Discussing their own holidaymaking habits, most interviewees, though typically stating a preference, described significant holidaymaking variety in terms of places visited, travelling companions, activities pursued, and roles acted out. These tended to differ depending on the particular holiday, or even, day within a holiday. Indeed as one noted: "*Variety is the spice of life and surely that's the whole point of tourism right?*" As such, interviewees identified themselves as various types of tourist, at different times. Traveller, or

culture tourist, were the labels most frequently adopted. Identification was sometimes exclusively, including, or not at all, as a gay tourist.

Hence a range of tourist identities were readily associated with by participants. Interviews illustrated gay tourist might be one of these, or it might not. For several interviewees, being a gay tourist was seen as implicit; something closely associated with their overall identity. *“Can you be gay and not be a gay tourist?”* For others however, sexual identity was not seen as something of importance to determining tourist identity. *“Do you have oral sex tourists? No... so why gay?”* Substantial differences between gay and straight tourists were contested. *“Aren’t all tourists like the same? They’re all like on holiday to see the world and such... it doesn’t matter if you’re straight or gay.”* Interestingly, a number of participants highlighted how they believed heterosexual tourists often pursued gay tourism actively; in search of hedonistic and sexual experiences, including experimental same sex relationships. *“I’d say you don’t even have to be gay to be a gay tourist... I have relatives who love all that... They seek out all that camp stuff, and trying to have sex; like way more than me.”*

For all interviewees, characterisations of gay tourism were widely believed to be unrepresentative of the diverse tourist behaviour actually pursued by gay people. Again this was objectionable to many; that most niche tourists are determined regardless of sexuality, instead reflecting broader interests, but not gay tourists. *“You never hear cultural tourists described as (gay).”*

Instead, depictions of gay tourism were viewed as reserved for a particular form of tourism pursued by gay people: effectively highly stereotyped, and centred upon the hedonism identified. Stereotypes were thought to result both from narrow external expectations of gay behaviour: *“People will say to me; ‘oh you don’t seem like a lesbian’. Well I am, so this is what a lesbian is like: now f\*\*\* off.”* And also from the prominence of highly visible gay subgroups: *“As always the gays who are most visible are those over the top camp stereotypes... who actually are what I’d say only a small minority.”*

Such stereotypes were viewed as offensive and unrepresentative. Gay tourism marketing was criticised by several interviewees as repeating stereotypes. *“Gay just means gay sex... It’s implicit from all advertising to gay people, like that is all they think about.”* Comparisons were drawn with other vulnerable groups, and whether it would be acceptable, or relevant, to identify them; based on ethnicity for instance. Others evaluated marketing gay tourism as trying to create a trendy image, and to attract tourists in general. Such marketing was largely seen as cynical and not actually for gay tourists. *“I think they use gay as shorthand for ‘we have lots of bars and nightclubs in our town’.”* Indeed, several interviewees noted how gay culture has been appropriated by heterosexuals keen to explore their own identity, associate with ‘something edgy’, or identify destinations with certain attributes such as tolerant atmospheres. *“Being gay friendly infers that you are not going to be shitty to women or (ethnic) minorities either. You can probably say it will be an ok place to visit.”*

Lastly, findings also illustrated that gay tourists may face additional complications when holidaying. Participants described being influenced by external factors. These factors could promote expression of, or inhibit, certain behaviours; particularly in relation to expressing sexuality publically. Participants explained that they might in some situations try to cover up their sexuality; for fear of disapproval from travelling companions, or third parties. All interviewees described occasions where they had felt uncomfortable displaying a relationship in public. And all interviewees discussed instances where they had been targets of negative comments. *“Sometimes you just want to hold each other’s hand, but you don’t feel comfortable doing it.”*

## **5.0 Analysis and Discussion**

Research findings concurred with much of the extant literature. Noted was how external influences may have the effect of either stifling or liberating gay tourists' behaviours when on holiday. Prior literature has captured how external influences might affect choice of holiday destination, or indeed willingness to identify as gay tourists in the first place (Pritchard *et al*, 2000; Hughes, 2004). It is widely reported that gay tourists, who may disproportionately face verbal and physical abuse (Brunt and Brophy, 2006), as was the case for many interviewees, particularly seek aspects relating to safety when choosing a holiday destination. This may be referring to a tolerant and liberal atmosphere, availability of gay friendly services and infrastructure, and the presence of a high proportion of fellow gay tourists (Hughes and Deutsch, 2010).

In line with previous research, findings suggested gay space might allow greater expression of gay tourist behaviour, just as fear of censorship may suppress it (Pritchard *et al*, 1999). Interviewees thus adopted different tourist roles; influenced to varying extents by coercion. However, adopting variety was something also done voluntarily, often with enthusiasm, and perceived as an important aspect of the tourist experience. Diverse and changeable tourist roles, activities, and experiences, were the norm. Gay tourist could be seen as just one of many potential tourist roles an individual may adopt; as noted. For some this may be a role more important, and more readily expressed, than others (see Hughes, 2006). Sexuality, which might nonetheless be important in terms of seeking locations where they might feel more anonymous, accepted, and safe (Hughes and Deutsch, 2010), was rarely, if ever, described as a primary motivator for tourism (as per Clift and Forrest, 1999; Pritchard *et al*, 2000). Research therefore highlights the diversity and multiplicity of tourism by gay individuals.

Hence attention is called to the potential fallacy of narrowly defining into discreet niches tourists who are in fact highly changeable and multiple; indeed a criticism of current niche focuses (Urry, 2002; Smith, 2003). The large majority of interviewees did not consider themselves as 'stereotypical' gay tourists, and many actively disassociated from (Hughes, 2004; Hughes and Deutsch, 2010). The gay population is large and diverse; hence impossible to neatly describe (Pritchard *et al*, 1999). Depictions may thus be narrowly representative, and risk propagating problematic stereotypes of gay people generally (Hughes, 1997, 2004); as many interviewees believed.

To the limited extent a definition exists, findings suggest that gay tourism may be specifically distinguished as that motivated by pursuit of hedonism and sexual expression, perhaps denied elsewhere. Yet this may be the case for heterosexual tourists also. Several participants argued that sexuality is a continuum, and that heterosexual tourists might pursue 'camp' culture and same sex experiences on holiday. Sexuality based distinction was thus challenged by participants. Findings were in line with those of Hughes and Deutsch, (2010), who highlight informants who wish to holiday without any special identification, consideration, and for sexuality to be a matter of no concern in the holiday market. Also Clift and Forrest (1999), who reject the ability to distinguish based upon sexuality alone.

The current failure of tourism marketing to accurately or meaningfully distinguish gay tourists, creates space for inaccurate myths and stereotypes to emerge: as unhelpful to practitioners as they might be insulting to gay individuals. Current gay tourism marketing and gay tourist descriptions were criticised by many as reductive, unrepresentative, or insulting (Hughes, 2004; Coon, 2012). The voyeurism of heterosexual people towards homosexuals, and use of this for general marketing purposes, was similarly disliked (Pritchard *et al*, 1999; 2000).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this paper draws attention to the marketing and ethical problems inherent in the identification of gay tourists. Clearly gay tourist is a term problematic to define and contentious to apply. Findings were of unease at sexuality being a basis for tourist segmentation. Sexuality was not found to be a primary motivator for tourism. Albeit may be a secondary motivator, and a hygiene factor; in the sense that safety and anonymity are sought in a holiday destination; respondents identified relatively little as gay tourists. Questioned moreover, was whether meaningful differences between hetero and homosexual tourists existed. Attempts to identify and describe such differences, risk being inaccurate, and potentially insulting.

Current descriptions of gay tourists appear to be at risk of over-emphasising sexuality, and becoming unrepresentative, often negatively perceived stereotypes. These do not capture the true diversity and multiplicity of tourism by gay people. They may be those which many gay people would see as only of secondary importance, or may not wish to be linked to at all. They potentially reinforce myths about gay people with implications for their wider standing (Badgett, 2001; Coon, 2012). They may serve to alienate gay people from each other, wider society, and their own sexuality (Hughes, 2004). And they potentially 'ghettoise' gay tourists (Pritchard *et al*, 2000). As such, gay tourist may be a basis for tourism market identification and segmentation, as inutile, as it is ethically troubling.

The desire for equality; symbolised by becoming ordinary, unnoticed, and thus feeling comfortable and safe, is actively undermined by singling out and labelling gay tourists. In the words of Hughes (2004: 66): "*In the unlikely event (at least in the near future) of gays and lesbians becoming fully accepted by societies, then the market could disappear.*" This paper makes a contribution in trying to make such a distinction disappear. This is by drawing a clearer definition of gay tourism, by distinguishing between such gay tourism, and general tourism pursued by gay people, and lastly by illustrating that one does not necessarily have to be gay to pursue gay tourism.

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