

## IDENTITY AND SEX: CONCURRENT ASPECTS OF GAY TOURISM

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*The present article aims to contribute to the recognition of two relevant aspects in gay travel; identity and sex. The paper explores the existing published work related to the relationships between tourism, gay men and identity. It concludes that the issue of identity commonly plays a crucial role as a travel reason in gay tourism. Also, it analyses the research evidence to suggest that sex is a frequently-present phenomenon in gay travel. By critically analysing the available research, the paper presents evidence to suggest that both aspects are relevant in the gay tourism spectrum.*

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**Keywords:** *gay tourism, identity, sex*

### INTRODUCTION

The relationships between tourism and gay men have been considerably neglected. Although various aspects lack academic attention, some studies have attempted to uncover the wide variety of dimensions of gay tourism. Efforts have been concentrated on exploring issues of the economic importance (Holcomb and Luongo, 1996) and aspects of market segments of gay tourism (Pritchard *et al.*, 1998). Additionally, some scholars have focused on the analysis of gay tourist destination choice (Hughes, 2002) while others have studied the sexual behaviour of gay men when on holiday (Clift *et al.*, 2002; Monterrubio *et al.*, 2007).

From a detailed literature review, it is apparent that what gay men look for in selecting a tourism destination is little different from that of mainstream tourism. Issues such as relaxation, escape and self-fulfilment appear to apply equally for both gay and mainstream tourism (Hughes, 2006). However, studies have concluded that the 'gayness' aspect of a destination is of relevance for holiday decision-making. Particularly, the gay-friendliness and sometimes the existence of a gay tourism industry



are frequently significant factors for the destination choice. The existence of 'gayness' in the destination has been identified as a crucial factor for the enhancement of a gay identity. Tourism, due to its *liminal* role, provides gay men with the opportunity to be themselves; tourism and *the* gay sexual identity are inextricably linked (Hughes, 1997).

Furthermore, there is some empirical evidence that in addition to identity issues there is one more aspect commonly related to the dimensions between tourism and gay men. Although no much work has been conducted on the issue, sex appears to be a relevant factor in the gay travel. To date, there are frequent discrepancies in the idea that sex is indeed a relevant aspect of gay tourism. While it has not been totally proved that sex is an important issue, the investigation available reveals that sex, at least within the communities studied, is a significant aspect of gay tourism.

Bearing this in mind, the present paper aims to contribute to the analysis of two quite frequently discussed (yet still neglected) aspects of gay tourism: identity and sex. The paper does not intent to postulate that identity and sex issues are ever-present factors in gay travel. Instead, the text attempts to recognise that both issues are important aspects of the gay tourism phenomenon. While the present discussion is not directly based on a particular case study, the arguments for this paper are those identified in the existing academic literature.

## **GAY MEN AND REASONS FOR TRAVELLING**

The few existing studies on gay men, lesbians and holidays suggest that the reasons for going on holiday are generally similar to those of non-gays; namely need for relaxation, escape and self-fulfilment (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Hughes, 2006). In Waitt and Markwell's (2006) words; "for many gay men, the travel motivations are similar to those of many young, single, heterosexual men" (249). However, some studies have concluded that there is a particular need to be with other gay people and have access to gay space and gay-friendly places (Hughes, 2002).

The work conducted by Clift and Forrest (1999) on gay men's holiday motivations is one of the first in reporting the significance of the dimensions of gayness in the holiday choice. In their study, they found that comfort, rest and relaxation as well as guaranteed sunshine were very important to gay men when planning a holiday. For approximately a third of their sample, social dimensions of a holiday, and particularly the gay character of a holiday were also found important. Although the survey

demonstrated that a majority of men in the sample were not strongly motivated by opportunities for sexual activity on holiday, the authors claimed that it is self-evident that men who visit a destination with a gay reputation will be motivated by opportunities to socialise with other gay men and perhaps to be sexually active with new partners. Such an investigation, which was based on a sample of 562 gay men resident in southern England, provides an idea of gay men's holiday motivations and concurs with other studies (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless, it must be noted that the findings, as the authors recognised, may reflect the fact that many of the men that participated lived near or in Brighton, which has a large gay community. Therefore, the sample cannot be regarded as representative of the gay men population in general, but it does constitute a broad cross-section of gay men.

The qualitative, exploratory study conducted by Pritchard *et al.* (2000) confirmed the idea that the travel reasons of gay men (and lesbians) were similar to those of non-gays. By investigating the travel motivations of gay and lesbian tourists, however, they concluded that sexuality did influence choices of accommodation, booking methods (see also Poria and Taylor, 2001), destinations and packages for many of those interviewed. They also concluded that the need for safety, to feel comfortable with like-minded people, and to escape from heterosexism emerged as key influences on their choice of holiday. According to Pritchard *et al.* (2000), the need to escape from the pressures of being gay was perceived as the most important motivating factor for taking a holiday.

Although Pritchard *et al.*'s (2000) study offered an emic approach, one of its possible limitations is the fact that the sample was integrated by a mixture of respondents. Such a sample included both respondents who had 'come out' and respondents who had not, who might differ in terms of their perception of the heteronormative world and possibly in terms of their holiday motivations. One of the most valuable contributions of the study, however, is that its findings, particularly those related to the gayness influence on holiday decision, concur with those of other studies (Clift and Forrest, 1999).

By examining further reasons underlying destination choice - with special reference to risk and avoidance of destinations - , Hughes (2002) extended the analyses of Clift and Forrest (1999) and Pritchard *et al.* (2000). Based on 40 interviews with gay men in Manchester, Hughes (2002) concluded that the 'types' of holiday that gay men go on are identical to those of the rest of society. According to the author, gay men choose holidays that are focused on sun, scenery, culture, heritage, sport,

entertainment, to name some. Motivations such as social interaction, regeneration, self-realisation, freedom, ego-enhancement, evaluation of self, prestige and escape apply equally to gay men and others. In a previous work, Hughes (1997) suggested that the consumption of a holiday itself is one aspect of the process of forming and consolidating identity, which might be considered to be one of the reasons why gay men seek holidays. Additionally, Hughes (2002) reported that there was little support for the view that gay men travel in order to be more open about their sexuality or to have more sexual encounters, but that sexuality has a significant influence on destination discard and choice. Although Hughes' (2002) work extended and -to certain extent- reinforced previous analyses, he recognised that because his study sample was both opportunistic and convenient, it was unlikely to represent the gay men's population.

Considering the discussion above, the reasons for going on holiday and the type of holiday chosen by gay men appear to be similar to those of the rest of the population. However, in most cases there is also a particular need to socialise with other gay men and have access to gay space or, at least, to avoid homophobia (Hughes, 2006). For some gay travellers, toleration and acceptance of homosexuality may be sufficient, but for others the existence of a gay infrastructure and a gay setting may be necessary. At this point, the aspects of toleration and acceptance of homosexuality in certain tourism destinations must be questioned. Although some destinations have become popular among gay travellers (e.g. Amsterdam, Ibiza, Manchester), the issue of acceptance in some societies such as those of Mexican culture in which homosexuality is generally disapproved (Carrier, 1995), remains questionable.

As can be noted, the existing evidence suggests that the reasons of gay tourism are similar to those of mainstream tourism. However, there are two specific factors that seem to be relevant in gay travel. On the one hand, the issue of affirming a gay identity has been regarded as an important aspect quite frequently present in tourism by gay men. As the following section reveals, there is a strong relationship between travel and the gay identity. On the other hand, there exists some empirical evidence to believe that sex is also frequently a relevant aspect of gay travel. Although some scholars have claimed that "the opportunity to have sex on holiday does not appear to be a particularly significant factor for gay men's holiday" (Hughes 2006: 69), others have claimed differently. In the words of Clift *et al.* (2002), "it is reasonable to expect that men who visit 'gay' destinations for a holiday are likely to be seeking social and sexual contact with other gay men" (246). The postulation that sex is a relevant

factor for gay travel still lacks sufficient empirical evidence. The forthcoming sections, therefore, attempt to analyse the existing studies on the relationships between identity, sex and gay tourism. By so doing, it is aimed to recognise the importance of both aspects in gay travel.

## **HOLIDAYS AND GAY IDENTITY**

It has been claimed that holidays offer gay men the chance to be oneself and to enjoy the possibilities that offer gay social settings (Holcomb and Luongo, 1996). Because most of the time gay men live in areas dominated by heterosexism, leisure activities and holidays have a particular significance for gay men as they provide the most significant opportunity for constructing, confirming and/or changing their sexual identity (Hughes, 1997; Cox, 2001).

Hughes (1997) noted that although the choice of a gay identity may be particularly painful due to society's reaction to homosexuality, the acceptance of a gay identity is seen by many as quite fundamental. The acceptance of a gay identity may imply following certain leisure activities in a spatial concentration of pubs, clubs, cafés, shops, residences and public space, which permit the validation of a gay identity through relationships with others. Herrera and Scott (2005), who examined the use and significance of leisure travel by gay men, showed that gay men felt forced to travel to spaces where they could freely express their sexual identity. They found that leisure travel to larger cities where bars, clubs, bath houses, coffee shops and other gay spaces were available was a common strategy to escape the constraining heteronormative culture.

In addition to getting involved in identity-reinforcement leisure activities, gay men might choose to travel in search of an anonymous environment in which to be gay. Due to their liminal role (McKercher and Bauer, 2003), holidays represent an alternative choice for gay men. Sometimes gay travellers may regard holidays as a chance to extend their home leisure activities; other times they will seek opportunities to do different things (Hughes, 1997); as Cox (2002) claims; "holidaymaking enables gay people to encounter other gay people, permitting new identifications to be made in the spaces travelled" (165).

Due to the social constraints in home environments, the acceptance of a homosexual identity is often dependent upon the act of being 'a tourist', and therefore many gay men will choose to travel in search of an anonymous or safe environment in which to be gay. In fact, it has been argued that the search for gay identity is itself conceptually a form of

tourism (Hughes, 1997). According to Hughes (1997), “given that society has discouraged openness about being gay the holiday provides the perfect chance to come out, if only temporarily. The gay identity can be adopted and confirmed ‘in secret’... the holiday provides an extended chance to confirm identity. During the holiday the gay man can be gay all day and every day, a prospect which is unlikely at home. The gay man can be himself” (6).

Similarly, others have argued that the reinforcement of a gay identity is not only an opportunity that holidays can provide, but it can actually be a form of tourism, namely *identity tourism* (see Howe, 2001; Herrera and Scott, 2005). As Herrera and Scott (2005) claim, “... a vast majority of leisure travel or tourism by gay men can be described as identity tourism. Travel to gay spaces makes it possible for gay men to express themselves freely and to experiment with gay identities that are circumscribed at home... The gay identity, thus, fuels gay men’s need to travel and the act of travelling provides them new insights about themselves and paves the way for perhaps a new and certainly more positive conception of self” (260).

Assuming that gay identities are a matter of spaces and places that have an influence on identity construction, Cox (2001) argues that holidaymaking plays a significant role in providing important opportunities to explore gay cultures. Within a context of global and local flows of gay culture, Cox (2002) argues that holidaymaking plays a significant part in constructing fluid ever-changing individual and collective gay identities. “The desire and ability of gay people to be able to reinvent themselves on holiday raises questions about the formation of a person’s identity, suggesting that identity can be formed and then reformed, thereby supporting notions that sexual identity is fluid and ever-changing” (Cox, 2002: 164).

From Cox’s (2001) perspective, holidaymaking may challenge and change the identities and sexual cultures of gay men before sending them back to their ordinary lives. He recognises the importance of holidays as opportunities for learning experience providing gay men with the skills to manage their sexual identity and cope with the issues associated with homophobia. In Cox’s (2002) own words, “‘gay holidaymaking’ can be seen as a process of exploring gay identities, in that it is about how male-to-male sexually inclined men learn to participate in particular gay sexual cultures through the spatialised practices of holidaymaking, which may provide the emotional distance from home that facilitates identity change” (134).

As can be seen, it is suggested that tourism and being gay are inextricably linked. Holidays can provide gay men with an opportunity to enjoy other leisure activities in different settings. At the same time, however, holidays also offer gay men the extended opportunity to confirm and modify their identity away from the current social constraints at home. Holidays, in other words, are likely to contribute (although in limited time and space) to the partial creation and temporary validation and change of identity for gay men.

## **HOLIDAYS AND GAY MEN'S SEX**

In addition to the 'need' for the creation and/or reinforcement of a gay identity, the need for relaxation, escape and self-fulfillment are regarded as influential reasons for the choice of holidays of gay men. While these and other reasons (e.g. ego-enhancement, prestige) might be relevant for the decision to travel, sex seems to be an important motivation for some gay men on holiday too (Clift and Forrest, 1999: 616), as it may be for some heterosexual travellers as well (Oppermann 1999). As Waitt and Markwell (2006) argue: "Undoubtedly, transitory sexual relationships are an important travel motivation for many gay men. Gay sex as travel motivation is particularly important for the sexually adventurous and for single gay men who choose to visit destinations with a gay reputation..." (249). Such statements nevertheless need further academic examination for confirmation.

### **Gay travel and sexual behaviour**

With regard to gay men travel and sexual behaviour, there is limited research in other aspects of gay tourism, generalisations are therefore difficult to be made as the settings, samples and methodologies used have greatly varied from study to study. In general terms, previous research has concentrated on the extent of sexual activity and the degree of risk of sexual infections of travellers (Clift and Forrest, 1999).

Although one of the perceptions towards the gay community is that a considerable number of gays are seeking casual sex, it has been argued that there is no reason to believe that casual sex exists more in the gay community than in the heterosexual one (Ryan and Hall, 2001). Whether this suggestion is true still needs to be confirmed since evidence about homosexual behaviour is less available than that about the heterosexual population, and therefore, comparisons are limited.

Although existing evidence is limited, sex has been identified as an important factor for gay travel, at least within the context of some empirical studies. One of the first academic works conducted in the field of gay tourism and sexual behaviour is that of Wilke and Kleiber who in 1992 (see Clift and Wilkins, 1995) investigated homosexual men visiting Thailand. In their study, they attempted to: a) identify which men visited Thailand as 'sex tourists'; b) why homosexual men engaged in sex on holiday; c) what activities they practised and; d) how often condoms were used. By interviewing ninety-four German male tourists who had had sex with Thai men/boys, they concluded that many of them visited the country frequently for the purpose of having sex, and that a wide range of sexual practices were apparent including fellatio, oral-anal contact and anal intercourse. Although their findings revealed a significant aspect of some of the men's behaviour, Wilke and Kleiber acknowledged that their sample was probably unrepresentative of homosexual travellers as it was derived only from gay men who paid for sex. Drawing general conclusions, therefore, would be inappropriate.

Later on, Clift and Forrest (1999) presented findings from a questionnaire survey of 562 gay men resident in southern England. The study focused on gay men's sexual behaviour when on holiday. The authors found that approximately half of the men interviewed were sexually active with a new partner(s). Men reporting sex on holiday were more likely to be alone or with friends and to have taken condoms with them. In addition, they were also more likely to have a general expectation of being sexually active on holiday and to be motivated by gay social life and sex. According to Clift and Forrest (1999), the estimates presented are considerably higher than recent estimates for heterosexual men on holiday without a sexual partner. Furthermore, from their study it is clear that while gay men are considerably more likely than heterosexuals to have sex with new partners, they are also far less likely to engage in unprotected penetrative sex while on holiday. Although the authors concluded that the most worrying finding to emerge was the association between being uncertain about HIV status or being probably/definitely positive, and engaging in unprotected sex on holiday, they suggested that some findings should be regarded with caution given the small number of gay men reporting unprotected sex.

By discussing the way in which gay male travellers access sex while in New York City, Luongo (2000) broadened the existing research literature on gay tourism and sexual behaviour. His research was based on interviews with five male escorts and three sex club managers as well as observations of some public sex environments. Luongo (2000) indicated

that tourists represented a significant and visible component of the commercial sexual infrastructure of New York City. He reported that the majority of the clients of the escorts interviewed were out-of-town businessmen, who were often alone and have a location for a sexual encounter (usually a hotel room). He also stated that the geographical concentration of gay tourism in the United States created not only opportunities but also problems for HIV prevention initiatives.

More recent studies have provided evidence to suggest that sex is – though not necessarily a relevant travel motivation – a frequent phenomenon in certain tourism destination. The ethnographic work undertaken by Monterrubio *et al.* (2007) sets a clear example. Through their study, the authors aimed to identify the sexual behaviour by gay tourists on a beach located on the Pacific coast of Mexico. By adopting observation and in-depth interviewing, they found that male tourists engage in overtly same-sex activity during daylight particularly in places commonly known as the beach ‘gay’ spots. According to the study, many of the men travelling alone were looking for casual sex with other males, and same-sex sexual activity ranged from voyeurism to masturbation (lone and mutual). Although the researchers’ work provide factual evidence of the existence of sexual activity among gay travellers, it must me acknowledged that their results should not be extrapolated to the whole gay community, nor to other tourism destinations. The fact that the selected holiday destination does not openly rank highly in the list of destinations popular with gay men may explain the presence and nature of the gay visitor’s sexual behaviour.

### **The gay press, gay travel and sex**

In addition to the research findings presented above, the gay press sometimes suggests that sex is indeed an important motivation for some gay travellers, as it might be for non-gay ones too. Books and guides such as *Spartacus International Gay Guide* (Bedford, 2007), shows images and advertisements that are sexually explicit, and openly promote and recommend places around the globe where both casual and commercial sexual encounters can be found. Similarly, the *Damron Men’s Travel Guide*, which is a guidebook that provides accommodation, food and entertainment information for gay travellers, lists sex clubs and public sex environments in several cities in the US. Other guidebooks such as *The Black Book* and *Out and About* list sex and fetish venues in the US for all travellers, including gay ones.

In addition to gay guidebooks, the internet has contributed to promote locations where gay men can encounter casual and commercial sex. Websites such as *cruisingforsex.com*, which contains information of more than a hundred countries around the world, details places where gay men can have public and commercial sex with other men (Luongo, 2000). By considering the sexual angle of certain destinations, some magazine and newspaper articles about holiday destinations have also contributed to reinforcing their reputation as places where casual sex is possible. Resort holidays in places such as Gran Canaria, Ibiza, Sardinia, Sicily and Fire Island have been journalistically described as holidays where gay sexual activity is widely possible (see Hughes, 2006). The brochure images of some companies, it has been reported, tend to be suggestive of the sexual potential of their tourism products by including models who have also worked as porn stars (Cox, 2001: 13).

Although the gay tourism press and the research discussed above present facts, overviews, and perceptions, it is of academic value to recognise that no broad conclusion should be made about gay tourism and sexual behaviour on the basis of the existing research. Given the nature of the specific studies and the wide variation with regard to sampling and methodology, times and specific settings, variables included, specific purpose of each study, and even the possible bias of the researcher, it would be inappropriate to conclude that sex is indeed a dominant travel motivation of gay men in general. It would not be appropriate either, however, to claim otherwise until further research on gay male travellers' sexual behaviour is conducted.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to contribute to the recognition of *identity* and *sex* as important issues in gay tourism. As the preceding discussion revealed, the liminal aspect of tourism provides gay men with the opportunity to reinforce their sexual identity and access sexual possibilities.

Regarding the relationship between tourism and *the* gay identity, there is a constant agreement that tourism provides gay men with ample opportunities to escape from the heteronormative social constraints and be themselves. Tourism and *the* gay sexual identity are inextricably linked. Although this seems to be commonly the case, it must be acknowledged that the social constraints experienced at home are one of the main reasons enhancing the need of reinforcing the identity within the

tourism arena. Having said this, it should be questioned how meaningful holidays will be to the construction, reinforcement and change of a gay identity of current young and future generations. It has been suggested that as young gay people become increasingly visible to themselves and others in home environments, the desire to name their same-sex sexuality is decreasing (Savin-Williams, 2005). Therefore, the need of holiday liminal spaces to be 'gay' will not probably have the same significance for future generations. Although a significant number of same-sex attracted young people do identify as gay, nowadays the need to adopt a gay identity seems to be rejected by some others (Savin-Williams, 2005). Unquestionably, however, tourism has been regarded and utilised as a platform for affirming *the* contemporaneous gay sexual identity.

As far as the sexual aspect of gay tourism is concerned, it was noted that there is a common discrepancy whether sex is an important motivating factor. However, the evidence examined above suggests that sex is in reality a relevant and frequent aspect in gay travel. Although sex cannot certainly be categorised as an ever-present phenomenon in gay tourism, it appears that sexual possibilities are a relevant dimension of some gay travellers, at least of those studied in previous investigations.

As could be noted, the dimensions between tourism and gay men are still academically uncovered. This is repeatedly reflected in the number and nature of existing resources. Although identity and sex are aspects needing further academic examination, there are other various factors that deserve attention. Within the issues discussed in this paper, the relevance of same-sex sexual activity in contributing to the determination of the gay identity is one of such factors. Additionally, special attention is needed to explore how relevant the public manifestation of a gay identity in tourism destinations is in determining gay identities of local populations. Furthermore, additional research efforts should concentrate on analysing the possible health implications of sexual activity while on holiday within the host communities. Only by exploring the wide spectrum of the relationships between tourism and gay men will the theoretical and practical value of gay tourism be acknowledged.

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