GAY AND LESBIAN TOURISM: THE CONSTRUCTION OF GAY IDENTITY

Elia-Nikoleta APOSTOLOPOULOU [1], Paris TSARTAS [2]

[1] University of the Aegean, School of Business, Department of Business Administration, 8 Michalon str. 821 00, Greece
[2] University of the Aegean, School of Business, Department of Business Administration, 8 Michalon str. 821 00, Greece

n.apostolopoulou@ba.aegean.gr, ptsar@aegean.gr

Abstract

The paper aspires to shed light to the role of tourism in the construction and validation of gay and lesbian identity. Treating gay tourism solely in terms of estimated tourism revenues tends to reproduce an obsolete stereotype that projects gays as young, white, wealthy, and handsome and disregards women, older men and ethnic minorities. Far from this, it is argued here that tourism offers for some gay men and women the only opportunity to practise their sexual identity and validate it through contact with other gays and lesbians in an accepting environment.

Introduction

Jonathan Rutherford argues that "identity marks the conjuncture of the past with the social, cultural and economic relations we live within" (Rutherford, 1990, as cited by Rose, 1995). For the purpose of this article identity is regarded as a constructivism concept; namely, identity is considered to be the outcome of social interactions and not inherently predetermined (see among others Epstein, 1987). Altman (2001) suggest that identity is "a socially constructed myth about shared characteristics, culture and history which comes to have real meaning for those who espouse it". The concept of identity is determined in reference to the outside world: the sense of being different from some people and simultaneously of belonging to a particular group of people with shared characteristics (Hughes, 2006).

In modern societies which are now highly complex, people belong to many and different groups simultaneously, all of which contribute in varying degrees to their individuality (Simmel, as cited in Wearing & Wearing, 1992). Occupation has always been considered to influence identity, but Wearing & Wearing hold that consumption and leisure activities play an equally important role and emphasize on the symbolic meaning of the product or the service provided. However, it is not merely the act of consumption that transmits this symbolic meaning, as this has to become apparent to others. The various groups, which the individual belongs to have a strong impact on leisure activities, while his/her behavior and stance may also

restrict the available leisure choices. The society's dominant view determine the individual's participation in leisure activities. Indicative is the stereotype according to which gender and age may exclude people from some leisure activities (Wearing & Wearing, 1992).

Sexual identity is not only a matter of private sphere, but pertains to the use of public space. Social, family and work interactions take place on a daily basis between people with different sexual identities (Burrell & Hearn, 1989, as cited by Valentine, 1993). Sexuality is intrinsically linked to the power relations that develop within the public space and reflect the outcome of power dynamics thus regenerating the patriarchal model and heteronormativity in modern societies. Lesbians are forced to use strategies that may limit their independence and adopt submissive roles in relation to men in order to conceal their sexual identity. On the other hand, gays who adopt a heterosexual role take advantage of their privileges within a patriarchic society (Valentine, 1993).

The Gay Identity Concept

It has to be noted that gay identity is different from gender identity. Gender identity reflects the way the individual perceives of himself/herself as masculine or feminine or as neither (Wilchins, 2002, as cited by Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Gay identity is a term used both for homosexual men and women. Sexual identity is not biologically predetermined, but a social construction linked with the industrialisation era. The division of labor and the strengthening of the capitalist system concurred with the distinction between male and female and homosexual and heterosexual. The capitalist system is held to have fostered the family as a factor for stability. Any aberrant lifestyle, such as homosexuality, was treated with suspicion. On an allegedly scientific base, homosexuals were discriminated from heterosexuals during the 19th century and the homosexual was profiled as a special human kind with a distinct identity (Hughes, 1997).

Sexuality can be described as a continuum, it is a fluid concept that can have different content depending on time, space and circumstances. Sexuality is one of many dimensions, all of which constitute the individual's identity and therefore there is no single gay identity (Hughes, 1997, 2006). Many gays and lesbians haven't disclosed their sexual identity in all contexts: family, friends and workplace. This forces them to manage a dual sexual identity and adopt the appropriate depending on the social environment (Valentine, 1993).

Acceptance of gay identity presupposes contact with other gays and lesbians. As all communities, so is the gay community an imaginary construction including people with shared characteristics and behavior. The individual may belong to the community and although he/she may have never met other members, there is a widespread belief of belonging to the community, where the members have common features. Although sexual identity is supposedly a personal matter, it needs

to be validated by "others", homosexuals and heterosexuals. Acceptance of the gay identity involves a certain lifestyle including way of dressing, leisure activities and spaces frequented. It is much more than solely a matter of sexual orientation. The gay identity has been held to reflect the young, middle-class, white, wealthy gay, constituting the gay stereotype (Hughes, 1997, 2006). Harris (1997) argues that dressing and behavior are only artificial means of expression and embodiment of the gay identity, because the characteristics of this minority -their missing physical features- do not allow for their visibility. There is, however, a strong need for the gays to fit to the gay scene, which creates a great pressure to conform to the dominant gay identity in terms of dressing and behavior. Under this light, many young gays, mainly men, are forced to conform and finally suffer from low self-esteem. It has been argued that "the very notion of community tends to privilege the ideal of unity over difference". The dominant gay identity overshadows all other multiple identities and the sexuality prevails on all other dimension of the individual's identity (Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

The disclosure of the sexual identity is primarily a process of search of the gay identity. The latter's constituent elements include the experience of concealing the individual's sexual identity, social isolation and a constant negotiation for social inclusion. This narrative shapes a continuum, at the one end of which homosexuality is fully integrated in the person's everyday life and at the other end it is completely concealed. The concept of the closet and living a double life has weakened in America during the last years, as many people have managed to integrate their sexual identity into their routine (Seidman, Meeks & Traschen, 1999).

D'Augelli has proposed a "life span" model of sexual orientation development and argues that the following six identity processes operate:
1.   Exiting heterosexuality: realisation of gay, lesbian and bisexual feelings and revealing them to close ones.
2.   Developing a personal LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) identity: challenging of internalized myths regarding the concept of gay identity.
3.   Developing an LGB social identity: creating a support network of people who know and accept one's sexual orientation.
4.   Becoming an LGB offspring: disclosing one's identity to parents and redefining one's relationship after such disclosure.
5.   Developing an LGB intimacy status: the invisibility of lesbian and gay couples makes this process more complex than in the case of heterosexuals.
6.   Entering an LGB community: making varying degrees of commitment to social and political action. Many never take this step, as it entails a high personal risk mostly at a professional level (D'Augelli, 1994).

The journey from gay sexual orientation to gay identity is long and entails many steps until the individual accepts the gay label and forms an identity consistent with this orientation. There is no single ending. The individual may realize his/her homosexual

desire, adopt an openly gay behavior and accept the gay identity. In other cases, the sexual desire may not entail an openly gay behavior, but the individual may still develop an identity congruous with the sexual desire. However, there are even people that are forced to suppress their homosexual desires to that extent, that they develop a heterosexual behavior and identity (Reiter, 1989).

Women's Gay Identity

Since the early 1990s the concept and the role of the lesbian feminist community has broadened and includes now different expressions of the lesbian identity, while the pressure to conform and reproduce a certain and mostly unnatural homogeneity has decreased. The political organisation of the lesbian communities constantly loosens (Valentine, 1995). The emergence of the women movements has induced a shift to the role and the identity of lesbians. Radical lesbian feminism has introduced a separating line to identity: rejection of forms of dress and behavior, such as make-up and haircut, which was held as a means to reproduce women's oppression through their attempt to become attractive to men. Since the late 1980s, however, when the feminist movement started to weaken, new lesbian identities emerged. Among these, the "designer dykes" or "lipstick lesbians", well-dressed, wealthy professional women (Valentine, 1993).

Lesbian identity, unlike men's gay identity, is not associated with occasional sex and consumerism, while lesbians are less likely to frequent gay space (Hughes, 2006). Gill Valentine's research shows that for lesbians the concept of gay community is largely fluid. Celebrities who are open about their sexuality have come to play a decisive role, as they contribute to the construction of an imaginary identity among their fans. Furthermore, they project a positive image of gay sexuality, such as Martina Navratilova. Comparable is the role of pride festivals, where a feeling of shared identity, intimacy and unity arises (Valentine, 1995).

Gay Identity and Space

Gay space is the "physical manifestation of gay community" (Hindle, 1994 as cited by Hughes, 1997) and comprises restaurants, coffee shops, bars, shops and residences. Identity is itself intrinsically linked to space. Many people feel that they have found the place, where they belong, only when they have left home. Other way around, the feeling of not belonging to a certain place is decisive for the development of the individual's identity (Rose, 1995).

Gay space enables the formation and validation of gay identity through interpersonal relationships. Contact with other gay and lesbians offers an opportunity for self-expression and reinforce the sense of difference from others, but simultaneously promotes conformation to the dominant gay lifestyle. Many gays deliberately avoid gay space and choose a lifestyle resembles more heterosexual identity. According to

Bell sexuality influences the "social character of space" and vice versa public space influences itself sexual identities (Hughes, 1997).

Many young gays and lesbians have experienced great difficulties and even rejection when disclosing their sexual identity to their family. Under this light, gay space offers an alternative support network, where sexual identity is co-formed and validated. The gay community functions as supportive space for the individual's coming of age and his/her transition from the heterosexual to the homosexual world, offering information, support and opportunities for socialisation. For many gays and lesbians, who have long suffered from the feeling of being different from friends and family, gay space offers a sense of belonging. Away from a place that forces them to marginalisation, gay space allows them to express themselves free, practice and reinforce their sexual identity (Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

The role of the gay community gradually changes, as western societies witness an increasing acceptance and integration of gay and lesbians. Thus, participation to the gay culture originates more from the individual's necessity to validate his/her identity and develop a social life, than from the need to escape from social disapproval and oppression (Richardson and Seidman, 2002).

Gay Identity and Tourism

Gay and lesbian tourism has been principally explored in terms of revenue, as it has been appreciated during the last years that tourism expenditure of gay and lesbian tourists is by far higher than mainstream tourism. The so-called "pink pound" or "pink dollar" has attracted the interest of tourism marketeers in an effort to improve the quality of services provided and thereby increase revenues. From a social-psychological perspective, however, tourism plays a decisive role to the construction of identity both for local and tourists.

Based on the view that traveling contributes not only to the validation of gay identity, but to identity formation itself Hughes holds that the search for gay identity is essentially a form of tourism. In the first place, as it has been already discussed, the construction and validation of gay identity presupposes visiting gay space and acknowledging difference from others. However, gay space is almost exclusively a feature of urban environments, if not metropolitan cities, as the usually conservative rural environment does not encourage its development. Therefore, the pursuit of the gay identity often entails travelling. Holidays may be the only opportunity the gay/lesbian has to validate his/her sexual identity and live according to this for an extended period of time –as opposed to simply visiting gay space– without the fear of being marginalized or attacked. Additionally, many gays seed to visit gay space only away from home, in order to ensure their safety and anonymity. For some people it is only during holidays that they can be openly gay and behave in consistency with their sexual identity. However, it is questionable whether the

individual can fully develop his/her identity in such an artificial environment and for such a short period (Hughes, 1997).

Furthermore, the trip is ultimately the search for homeland. Gays have always traveled to find themselves in a world that is dominated by heteronormativity. The significance of vacation grows bigger for gays who have not disclosed their sexual identity. Characters from the film "The Wizard of Oz" (based on the novel "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz") have served as a metonymy for gays, which are frequently called friends of Dorothy. The Land of Oz becomes a gay homeland, but Dorothy will always have the desire to return hoping that home will have also changed and become accepting. In the USA many gay travel agencies use names inspired from the characters of "The Wizard of Oz" (Waitt & Markwell, 2006, pp 1-37).

Facilitated by several gay tourist guides, some cities have become widely known as international gay capitals signaling the domination of urban gay culture. Among these, Amsterdam is held as Europe's gay capital. Martin Cox's research regarding the initial contact of gays and lesbians with gay space abroad, revealed that this caused surprise and often led to destibilisation of the preexisting identity. Gay holidays "teach" the holiday-maker how to behave consistent with his/her sexual identity, which is impossible in everyday straight world. As a result, the individual may face difficulties upon return to the usual heteronormative, homophobic environment. Besides, not all gays search for contact and interaction with other gays (Cox, 2002, pp 151-173).

In this process the role of the gay culture in metropolitan cities plays a decisive role. Some metropolitan cities have managed to project as gay Meccas mostly for gays who identify with the western stereotype, formed in the early 1970s with the emergence of the gay political movements. The most famous gay Meccas are San Francisco, New York, Amsterdam, Berlin and Sydney. In the gay imaginary, homeland reflects a shelter from homophobia, a place where their desires can be realised. Visiting these cities is part of the process of forming a sexual identity (Waitt & Markwell, 2006, pp 159-202). It is a kind of pilgrimage tourism. In a sense, the gay tourist via the visibility of the gay identity serves as a measure to evaluate the quality of democracy in a country, while in non-western democracies it a standard of progress (Murray, 2007).

Notwithstanding the shortcomings present in an artificial gay environment – regeneration of the obsolete gay stereotype and pressure to conform– gay tourism has an effective impact on the practice, construction and validation of gay identity.

References

1. Bilodeau L.B. & Renn A.K., 2005. Analysis of LGBT Identity Development Models and Implications for Practice. *New Directions for Student Services*, 111, pp. 25-39.

2. Cox M., 2002. The Long-haul out of the Closet: The Journey from Smalltown to Boystown. In: S. Clift, M. Luongo and C. Callister eds. 2002. *Gay Tourism: Culture, Identity and Sex.* London: Continuum. pp. 151-173.

3. D'Augell, A. R., 1994. Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development. In: E. J. Trickett, R. J. Watts, & D. Birman eds. 1994. Human diversity: Perspectives on people in context. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. pp. 312-333.

4. Epstein S., 1987. Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: the limits of social constructionism. *Social Rev.* 17: pp. 9-54.

5. Hughes, Howard, 1997. "Holidays and homosexual identity". Tourism Management, 18 (1): pp. 3-7.

6. Hughes, Howard, 2006. Pink Tourism: Holidays of Gay Men and Lesbians, Oxford: Cabi.

7. Murray D., 2007. The Civilized Homosexual: Travel Talk and the Project of Gay Identity. *Sexualities*. 10 (1): pp. 49-60.

8. Reiter L., 1989. Sexual Orientation, Sexual Identity, and the Question of Choice. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 17 (2): pp. 138-150.

9. Richardson D. & Seidman S., 2002. Introduction. In: Richardson D. & Seidman S., eds. 2002. *Handbook of Gay and Lesbian Studies*. London: Routledge. pp. 1-12.

10. Rose G., 1995. Place and Identity: a sense of place. In: Massey D. & Jess P. eds. *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*. Oxford: The Open University, pp. 88-132.

11. Seidman S, Meeks C. & Traschen F., 1999. Beyond the Closet? The Changing Social Meaning of Homosexuality in the United States. *Sexualities*. 9 (2): pp. 9-34.

12. Valentine Gill and Skelton Tracey, 2003. "Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself: The Lesbian and Gay `Scene' as a Paradoxical Space." International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 27 (4): pp. 849-866.

13. Valentine G., 1993. Negotiating and Managing Multiple Sexual Identities: Lesbian Time-Space Strategies. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series*. 18 (2): pp. 237-248.

14. Valentine, Gill, 1995. "Out and about: Geographies of Lesbian Landscapes." International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 19: pp. 96-111.

15. Waitt G. and Markwell K. 2006. Gay Tourism: Culture and Context, New York: The Haworth Hospitality Press.

16. Wearing, B. and Wearing, S.. 1992. "Identity and the commodification of leisure". Leisure Studies 11: pp. 3-18.