February 2020

LGBT Events: Sense of Belonging for LGBT Travelers

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A successful event or festival can be a huge draw to a tourist destination. As lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) travelers are increasingly recognized as a growing market for tourism, events aimed at this demographic are expanding in number and scale. It is therefore useful to understand what factors influence attendance.

In a study designed to do just this, Dr. Jeeyeon Hahm and Dr. Heejung Ro from the Rosen College of Hospitality Management looked at psychological variables related to social identity to examine what influences attendance from a psychological perspective. In this context, it refers to the connection with other attendees at an LGBT event. The idea that this emotional connection might influence satisfaction and behavioral intention is supported by previous work on brand loyalty, support by previous work on brand loyalty, and collective self-esteem.

The researchers identified a large, week-long, annual LGBT event consisting of multiple functions including dances and parties, as a suitable place to sample participants from the target population. After heterosexual attendees were recruited to complete a survey assessing the psychological motivations of LGBT individuals for travel and event attendance.

Drawing from social identity theory, research by Hahm and Ro sought to investigate whether sense of belonging influences event satisfaction, and behavioral intention i.e., the likelihood of attending the event again in the future. In order to explore the construct of sense of belonging thoroughly, it was broken down into two levels: affective bond and collective self-esteem.

Social identity refers to an individual’s self-evaluation of their place within the wider LGBT community. Given the history of persecution and marginalization of sexual minorities, involvement in a community provides many benefits including information, resources, and identity affirmation. Although limited, previous work has shown that collective self-esteem influences behavioral intention.

The economic contribution of the LGBT market to tourism has been growing over the last two decades and is estimated to be worth over US$ 75 billion per year in the United States. LGBT events have become key motivators for travel for the LGBT community. They serve as venues for self-expression, celebration of identity, and where social constraints and intolerance are avoided. Perhaps the most well-known LGBT events are Pride festivals which occur in cities globally. Although they started as political demonstrations, they have evolved into more commercial and celebratory events.

Research in this area is lacking, both specifically in terms of the LGBT community, but also generally in terms of what motivates event attendance from a psychological perspective. The research conducted at Rosen College aims to make contributions to both academic knowledge, as well as tourism and destination marketing. Psychological findings can be applied to help improve wellbeing, and from a tourism perspective it is useful to understand the motivations of LGBT individuals for travel and event attendance.

Social identity theory

Social identity refers to an individual’s self-concept in relation to a relevant social group. In the case of the LGBT community, it stems from the idea that belonging to a group (be it social, family, sports team, etc.) greatly affects our self-esteem and perception of self-worth. The theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and is often used in psychology to explain and predict behavior amongst social groups.

The sense of belonging is thought to have a positive impact on the psychological wellbeing of LGBT attendees.
Five key findings emerged from the data. As one might expect, the findings showed that satisfaction with the event directly impacted intention to re-attend. In line with predictions, affective bond strongly influenced both satisfaction with the event and intention to attend again in the future. Collective self-esteem also affected intention to re-attend. Interestingly, the researchers found that of the two levels of sense of belonging, affective bond had a stronger influence on intention to re-attend than collective self-esteem. This suggests that while feeling part of the wider community is important, the emotional connection and shared experience between individual event attendees has more of an impact. These findings are in line with social identity theory and confirm that the individual event attendees has more of a connection and shared experience between the wider community is important, the emotional bond had a stronger influence on intention to re-attend than collective self-esteem. This suggests that while feeling part of the wider community is important, the emotional connection and shared experience associated with attending an event contribute to an individual’s sense of belonging. Of further interest is the demographic information of the sample used in Hahm and Ro’s research. The majority were white males who identified as gay, were highly educated, were from high income households, and were extremely well traveled i.e., they had both the funds and motivation to travel. This makes them an extremely important target for destination marketing and event planning. Of course, whether or not the sample demographics in this research properly represent the wider LGBTQ community is debatable, and the researchers note this as a potential limitation of the work. Further to this, there was no representation of the transgender community, and future research would need to address this in order to provide more inclusive data. However, as the focus of the study was specifically on LGBTQ travelers and event attendees, the sampling method was appropriate, and the conclusions drawn were most likely applicable to other destinations holding LGBTQ events.

The researchers also acknowledge that there may be other motivational factors influencing event attendance and satisfaction that are overlooked in their work. In terms of future work, the researchers suggest it may be useful to increase the number of event locations, and to look at other event-specific motivations for attending.

IMPLICATIONS
As intended, the findings present a multitude of implications for academia, as well as practical applications for the travel and tourism industry. For academia, the findings contribute to the growing LGBTQ literature in psychology and our knowledge of LGBTQ social identity relevant to event attendance. But what this research really highlights is the importance of the LGBTQ market in travel and tourism. Practically, this means event managers and organizers can use the findings to shape event design and marketing (with the potential of increasing revenue), as well as to enhance the emotional experience of LGBTQ attendees. For example, the researchers suggest the use of social media and event specific apps to facilitate networking and connection between attendees even before the event has started. They also suggest creating pre-events to facilitate bonding before the major event and special programs for first-time attendees so it’s easier for them to meet and bond with other first-timers. Post-event, it is suggested that organizers could engage with attendees for the purpose of evaluation, which would enhance their sense of ownership, and give them an opportunity to influence future events.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
Dr. Hahm and Dr. Ro have examined how sense of belonging at LGBTQ events can encourage repeat attendance.

REFERENCES
Key paper

Other background sources


PERSONAL RESPONSE
Given the psychological element of the work, beyond the implications for tourism, do you think there could be any other practical applications of your findings for the LGBT community?

"Individuals of this study shared a tight emotional bond with others in the wider LGBTQ community by attending the event. Basically, the event served as a powerful platform for attendees to connect with others on a more personal level. The LGBTQ community can highlight the personal and emotional bonding experience of LGBTQ events. Also, host destinations and venues (e.g., hotels) of LGBTQ events can consider sense of belonging in their branding/marketing strategy to attract LGBTQ travelers who are known to be extremely loyal towards LGBTQ-supporting organizations. Emotional connection with a destination and/or brand can create place attachment (sense of belonging) that may lead to loyalty.

CO-AUTHOR
Dr. Hahm is an Assistant Professor at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at University of Central Florida. Her research areas include destination image, destination marketing, mega events and destination image, consumer behavior in tourism and events, and film-induced tourism.

Dr. Ro is an Associate Professor at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at University of Central Florida. Her research interests include service encounters with a focus on customer complaining behavior, service recovery, consumption emotions, and gay/lesbian customers’ service evaluations.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A copy of this work has been archived and placed on the Library of Congress site for preservation, access, and education.

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