

June 2023

Mind the Service Gap: LGBT+ Customers' Hospitality Experience

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Recommended Citation

Ro, Heejung (Cheyenne) (2023) "Mind the Service Gap: LGBT+ Customers' Hospitality Experience," *Rosen Research Review*. Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rosen-research-review/vol4/iss1/11>



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Rosen Research Focus | Heejung Ro

MIND THE SERVICE GAP

LGBT+ customers' hospitality experience

Hospitality managers could be missing out by not paying enough attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) guests. New research by Associate Professor Heejung Ro, UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, looks at this growing and valuable customer segment, and studies how sexual minority guests perceive they are welcomed by hospitality staff. In one of the first studies of its kind, Dr. Ro finds that delivering the right service experience is about more than just flying the rainbow flag.

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) travel and tourism market is worth \$63 billion a year in the United States, and \$218 billion globally, according to figures presented at the World Travel Market in 2018. With greater cultural acceptance of people who are open about their gender and sexuality, as well as their not insignificant spending power, the importance of this customer segment is set to grow rapidly.

Hospitality and tourism is a diverse and welcoming industry, and much has been done to market services and destinations to LGBT+ customers. However, academic research has so far focused on topics such as travel motivation and destination choice, and little attention has been paid to the hospitality service preferences of non-heterosexual customers. In an important addition to the literature, new research by UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management's Associate Professor Heejung Ro looks at

lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) customers' perceptions of service encounters with frontline hospitality staff.

Published in the prestigious *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management*, the study is based on a survey of delegates who attended a LGBT+ event held in the United States. The survey asked participants about the importance, or otherwise, of hospitality staff recognizing and acknowledging guests' sexual orientation identity.

PASSING OR REVEALING

Psychologists confirm that sexual orientation is fundamental to an individual's sense of self and wellbeing. It affects how people perceive themselves, as well as influencing their interactions with others. Yet despite the welcome change in attitudes towards people who identify differently from heterosexual

norms, in some societies and situations there is still a stigma attached to homosexuality. This can make some people wary of revealing their sexual orientation identity.

Sexual orientation is not easily identified by physical appearance. When meeting someone new, some LGBT+ individuals may feel able to reveal their identity, but others may prefer to remain silent. This may be through fear of not being accepted and/or prejudicial attitudes, or even fear for their personal safety. As a result, they may adopt various behavioral strategies to keep their identity private, including

followed by 14% Hispanic, 10% Black African, 3% Asian, and 5% other. The majority had a college education, and more than half had an annual income between \$40,000 and \$79,000.

The survey asked participants to rate the importance of a series of statements according to a seven-point scale which varied from 'not at all important' to 'extremely important'. Respondents were first asked how important it is that hospitality service employees acknowledge them as LGB. The survey went on to probe to what extent they believe staff could identify their sexual orientation, and how they

react when staff mistakenly identify them as heterosexual. Last, the study asked participants how their perceptions of staff behavior related to how open they are about their sexual orientation identity.

OPENNESS AND SELF-ESTEEM

The survey results confirm that there are significant differences in LGB customers' perceptions of service encounters, according to whether or not they reveal their sexual orientation identity.

Those who were open about their sexual orientation attached a higher importance to hospitality staff acknowledging them as LGB. They were also more likely to believe that service employees were aware of their sexual orientation, and were more likely to disclose their sexual orientation if employees wrongly identified them as heterosexual. Those who were less open about their sexual orientation were less likely to believe that service employees were aware of their sexual

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'passing' or feigning a heterosexual identity. This problem can be all the greater in service encounters, such as hospitality situations, when engaging with strangers in a public space for a relatively short period of time.

Hospitality staff may also feel unsure about how to behave. Even if an employee senses that a customer identifies as LGBT+, they may be afraid of saying the wrong thing, and therefore give a more cautious, less friendly greeting. They may also commit service errors, such as addressing a welcome note to a same-sex couple as 'Mr. and Mrs.', or assigning them a twin-bedded room, both of which can offend and make people feel unwelcome. Such errors can seriously affect customers' evaluations of their hospitality experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND PERCEPTION

The survey designed by Dr. Ro to investigate sexual orientation issues in service encounters was bespoke, and conducted at an annual LGBT+ event held in Florida that regularly attracts around 150,000 visitors.

Concentrating on LGB minorities, 177 participants were recruited after speaking to researchers. Of these, 77% identified as gay, 15% as lesbian, and 8% as bisexual. For gender, 78% reported being male and 21% as female. Around 67% of participants were white,

The study explored how sexual minority guests perceive they are welcomed by hospitality staff.



The study highlights that training is needed to ensure that employees welcome LGB visitors appropriately.



HOSPITALITY COMPANIES SHOULD PROVIDE SERVICE EXPERIENCES THAT WELCOME SEXUAL MINORITY GUESTS WITHOUT JUDGMENT AND MAKE THEM FEEL COMFORTABLE BY APPROPRIATELY PREPARING SERVICE EMPLOYEES.

orientation, and less likely to disclose their sexual orientation if employees wrongly identified them as heterosexual.

Dr. Ro finds that, given that psychological research suggests that people who are open about their sexual orientation have higher self-esteem, travelers who reveal their sexual orientation identity want to be recognized and respected as valued customers. In addition, those who think that they can be easily identified as LGB have higher expectations that staff will recognize their particular needs and do their best to meet them. Conversely, customers who are less open about their sexual orientation will seek to avoid discussing their requirements with staff, and may adopt behaviors which allow them to pass as heterosexual.

The results confirm that how sexual minority customers perceive their sexual orientation identity directly influences their perceptions and behaviors in hospitality service encounters.

TRAINING AND COMMUNICATION

The challenge for hospitality businesses is therefore how to identify LGB customers' sexual orientation, so that they can respond appropriately to their needs. The research confirms that LGB guests want to be treated as equal to heterosexual customers, but not as heterosexuals. Dr. Ro highlights four action points for managers and employees, from receptionists to porters, and from room service and housekeeping teams to restaurant and bar staff.



Those who were open about their sexual orientation attached a higher importance to hospitality staff acknowledging them as LGB.

The most important takeaway from the study is that training is needed to make sure that employees welcome LGB visitors appropriately and do not commit service errors. More than focusing on compliance with anti-discrimination laws, training needs to be directed towards understanding LGBT+ guests' expectations, and what they need to do to avoid giving negative experiences.

Communication—both verbal and non-verbal body language—matters too. This is also about much more than producing marketing literature which presents a venue or service as LGBT+ friendly. Staff need to be equipped with the communication skills to engage with sexual minority guests, and to feel comfortable in discussing their preferences and requirements. This includes things as basic as asking a guest how they would like to be addressed.

Hospitality organizations should also raise employees' wider awareness of LGBT+ issues, including encouraging employees to

respect diversity, and if necessary address their own prejudices and homophobia. While this is in order to be more sensitive to the needs of LGBT+ customers, Dr. Ro warns that managers should also be sensitive to employees whose religious beliefs may be less tolerant of homosexuality.

The final learning point is that managers should consider benchmarking LGBT+ friendly companies and brands that are already popular with LGBT+ travelers. Such businesses can provide insights and help them to improve their practices too, not least by creating an authentic culture of inclusivity and care that is demonstrated in practice as well as promoted in their marketing.

As Dr. Ro finds, 'Hospitality companies should provide service experiences that welcome sexual minority guests without judgment and make them feel comfortable by appropriately preparing service employees.'

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Heejung Ro investigates sexual orientation issues in service encounters from the perspective of lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual (LGB) customers.

REFERENCES

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

This was a fascinating study in an important new area for the academic literature. Where would you like the research to go next?

Future research should examine how well-prepared hospitality employees are to provide appropriate services to LGBT+ customers. For example, service employees' attitudes and training in relation to their role clarity and job confidence in the LGBTQ+ customer service encounter context.

Dr. Heejung Ro



Dr. Heejung (Cheyenne) Ro, is Associate Professor at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Her research focuses on the evaluation of service encounters that involve customer behaviors and frontline employee interactions with customers. Her specific research interests include customer complaining behaviors, service recovery, emotions, and LGBTQ+ customers' perceptions of hospitality services.

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