

LOYALTY RUNS DEEPER THAN THREAD COUNT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF GAY GUEST PREFERENCES AND HOTELIER PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT. Alongside many global businesses, hotels have recently shared in the movement to serve the gay market. If the perception of being gay-friendly is not the same for hoteliers and their gay guests, a marketing discrepancy may exist and loyalty of the gay segment could be at risk. To address this issue, a sample of 188 gay guests and 48 hoteliers was explored. Differences tests were conducted to evaluate the hotel attribute importance ratings of gay guests versus hoteliers when considering that segment. After conducting a factor analysis, a regression determined the impact of each factor on gay guest loyalty, with the social environment component having the greatest impact. Most importantly, hotels should support the gay community beyond simply offering a room, an intangible yet important display of social responsibility. This study augments previous hospitality research on the gay guest segment and provides avenues for future qualitative and quantitative studies.

KEYWORDS. Gay-friendly, hotels, loyalty, gay segment, hotel attribute

INTRODUCTION

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) tourism market was estimated as a US\$165 billion global market in 2012, with US\$65 billion specifically in the United States (US) (Community Marketing, Inc, 2010). For example, in New York, the state's Senate Independent Democratic Conference estimated that they would earn nearly US\$400 million by

2014 (mostly from tourism) from gay and lesbian couples getting married because of same sex marriage laws that were passed in the state (Szabo, 2011). Due to the economic clout of this market, the past decade has seen a surge in the efforts of hoteliers to chase the pink dollar (i.e., the disposable income of the gay market). Recent research suggests that gay tourism, in particular that of gay men, requires careful and targeted niche marketing (Hughes &

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Deutsch, 2010), which indicates that the gay hotel guests may have unique needs and expectations. However, such studies are scant, especially those related to the development of loyalty for gay guests (e.g. Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, & Araña, 2011).

As part of the tourism industry, hotels serve a heterogeneous mix of people from throughout the world; their challenge, then, is to attract a wide market beyond the normative heterosexual consumers (Frohlick & Johnston, 2011; Waitt, Markwell, & Gorman-Murray, 2008). Hoteliers' issues span beyond simply marketing to these non-normative individuals, since the industry is hypercompetitive and dominated by Internet-savvy consumers (Miller, 2004). To engender long-term relationships with travelers, hotels must customize their loyalty offerings for key niche markets (Tanford, Raab, & Kim, 2011).

The needs and expectations of gay guests may be quite different from those of other segments, such as traditional families, solo female travellers, and other minority groups, especially in relation to service (Ro, Choi, & Olson, 2013). Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan, and Jenkins (2000) found that sexuality does indeed influence tourism choices for gays. Gay hotel guests express a need for safety and to feel comfortable with like-minded people, and want to escape heterosexism. Poria (2006) indicates that social disapproval, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by gays can result in a negative effect on their hotel consumption experience. In fact, this social disapproval results in the service industry providing differential treatment for heterosexual and gay consumers (Jones, 1996; Walters & Curran, 1996). Furthermore, Mya Lake Reyes, former Director of Diversity Marketing with the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, states that "all minorities (including the gay community) need a little customization, and a bit of hand-holding because of what they have been through" (Community Marketing, Inc, 2010, p. 15). Research finds that advertising, human resource policies, support of LGBT events and charities, and interpersonal referrals impact the perceived gay-friendliness of a brand (Gudelunas, 2011). Although it is recognized that the gay community is certainly not

monolithic (Meezan & Martin, 2003; Oakenfull, 2013), both academic literature and industry findings suggest that gay guests have different needs, concerns, and expectations (Blichfeldt, Chor, & Milan, 2013).

However, the question remains as to what it actually takes to become a truly gay-friendly hotel, and whether hotels know how to effectively target this market by offering features that are gay-friendly. If the perception of being gay-friendly is not the same for both hoteliers and gay guests, then a marketing discrepancy may exist. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to compare the perceptions of hoteliers with those of gay hotel guests in order to determine how well hoteliers understand this potentially lucrative niche market, as well as to better understand what leads to gay guest loyalty. Both perspectives should be considered to avoid potential misinterpretation and inaccurate decision-making (Schofield & Breen, 2006).

Furthermore, the results will reveal how hotel attributes previously deemed important to gay guests will impact hotel selection. This study will add to the dearth of academic research in this area, and offer avenues for future research as well (Guaracino, 2007; Hughes, 2006; Johnston, 2005; Puar, 2002; Waitt & Markwell, 2006). Given that scant research explores hotel preferences of gay guests, this study offers an exploratory inquiry guided by a theoretical framework. Next, the study will turn to a review of the literature in this area, followed by a brief discussion of the methodology employed to collect and analyze the data.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BUILDING HOTEL LOYALTY FOR GAY GUESTS

Customer Loyalty

Loyalty has been defined as "the likelihood of a customer's returning to a hotel and that person's willingness to behave as a partner to the organization" (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999, p. 349). Oliver (1999, p. 34) presents what is perhaps the most widely cited and comprehensive description of customer loyalty: "a deeply

held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand or same brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior.” Similarly, other researchers describe loyalty as a customer’s repeat visit or repeat purchase behavior, while including the emotional commitment or expression of a favorable attitude toward the service provider (McAlexander, Kim, & Roberts, 2003). Existing patrons (as opposed to new patrons) tend to visit the specific hotel property more frequently, with their spending increasing as the number of visits increases. Repeat customers also recruit new customers through positive word-of-mouth and referrals, which offer the ability to save significant marketing resources that would have otherwise been used for advertising (McAlexander et al., 2003; Rundle-Thiele & Mackay, 2001). Although there is no consensus regarding the factors that actually determine loyalty (Agustin & Singh, 2005), some of the more frequently examined loyalty determinants in the hospitality literature include service quality, switching costs, value, satisfaction, commitment, communication, and trust (Wilkins, Merrilees, & Herington, 2009). Shoemaker’s Loyalty Circle (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999), posits that maintaining loyalty requires an equal and continuous balance of three components: process, value, and communication. The goal of marketers is to increase value and reduce perceived costs in both current and future transactions. Aspects of value include: financial, temporal, functional, emotional/psychological, experiential, and social. Numerous hotel studies have investigated the importance of hotel attributes in the customer selection process. A review of 21 studies found that service, image, price/value, hotel, room, food and beverage, and marketing were the most frequently reviewed attributes (Dolnicar & Otter, 2003). A later study revealed that technology, security, extra amenities, and room comfort were also important to guests (Cobanoglu, Corbaci, Moreo, & Ekinci, 2003). More recently, environmentally related attributes such as a hotel’s sustainability practices emerged in the literature (Millar & Baloglu,

2011; Tanford, Raab, & Kim, 2012). However, limited research has evaluated the relationship of these attributes to guest loyalty. Specific hotel attributes which increase guest loyalty include upgrades, flexible check-in, check-out, and customized marketing (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003). Choi and Chu (2001) found that staff service quality, room quality, and value were the most influential factors in determining guest likelihood to return to a property. Wilkins et al. (2009) found physical product, food and beverage, and service experience to be vital parts of service quality and therefore impact loyalty. Although value for money is considered a top loyalty driver, customer service, room quality and food quality can have a negative impact on loyalty if not sufficiently delivered (Ramanathan & Ramanathan, 2011). In the analysis of the few studies performed on hotel attributes considered important to gay guests, a total of 53 attributes resulted (see Appendix A), many of which were not discussed in previous research. However, none of these studies evaluated their impact on loyalty. Thus, our study aims to evaluate which factors are most salient with regard to gay guest loyalty.

Targeting the Gay Guest

For more than a decade, major brands have in some way attempted to attract the gay market. However, in order to be successful with this endeavor, Tom Roth (President of Community Marketing) warns that hoteliers have to do more than waive a rainbow flag in demonstration of their gay-friendliness (Guaracino, 2007). In fact, Alan Baer, Vice President of Human Resources for Kimpton Hotels (one of the world’s leading gay-friendly hotel companies) warns that authenticity is vital to capture this market. Without it, hotels may be accused of “pink washing”, or just promoting a gay-friendly face without actually having confronted internal issues that are necessary to satisfy this market (Edward, 2008). To avoid being accused of this practice, even prior to their advertising and promotional efforts, hotels need to be prepared to meet the needs of this unique market by providing

diversity training, getting the buy-in of all stakeholders involved, and ensuring that guests have a satisfying experience during their stay. However, in order to achieve this objective, hotels first need to become more aware of factors that impact travel purchase decisions and lifestyle issues, preferences, and expectations of this market (Guaracino, 2007). Companies wanting to attract this market need to be sensitive, conduct the appropriate research, and customize their offerings for this segment. Thus, businesses must ascertain the components of gay-friendliness for their gay guests.

Gay-Friendliness

More than one quarter of gay men and lesbians say that gay-friendliness is either extremely or very important as a consideration in travel planning (US Travel Association, 2006). Hoping to attract this market, hotels deem themselves to be gay friendly for a variety of reasons, with no set industry standard. According to the *Travel Industry Dictionary* (2013), gay-friendly is loosely defined as “catering to or welcoming of gay and lesbian travelers.” Guaracino (2007, pp. 108) suggests that the definition of gay-friendly is very subjective and that it “is not solely scientific ... but an experience and an environment that someone just feels”.

Thus, even gay-friendly hotels may find it challenging to define the specifics of what they should offer their gay guests. Despite this apparent lack of objectivity, both gay customers and the hotel industry are relying on the promises made by certification agencies. Companies such as TAG-approved and Fabugo.com deem properties to be gay-friendly based on certain criteria, or the hotels just merely deem themselves to be gay-friendly. Nevertheless, it is still an open question as to what it means to be designed for the gay traveler. A division of Community Marketing, Inc., TAG-approved (www.tagapproved.com), is an organization that certifies hotels as gay-friendly by claiming that they have approved hotels for meeting gay guests' standards. Hotels are qualified as

“TAG-approved gay friendly” if they: (1) enforce non-discriminatory policies including sexual orientation; (2) treat heterosexual and domestic partners equally in personnel policies; (3) provide LGBT diversity and sensitivity training for employees; (4) empower customers and employees to be watchdogs of its gay and lesbian business practices; (5) give back to their community; and (6) employ staff who reflect the diversity of their community.

Motivating Factors for Gay Guests when Selecting Hotels

There is a relative paucity of academic research regarding the interests of gay guests when choosing a hotel. Poria (2006) found that staff behavior, hotel attributes, and atmosphere/locality were the most important motivating factors for gay guests. Another study (Pritchard et al., 2000) showed that the motivations for gay and lesbian travel were primarily summarized as: (1) to seek out gay-oriented places; (2) the need for safety; (3) the need to feel comfortable with like-minded people; and (4) to escape from heterosexism. Although Clift and Forrest (1999) identified three dimensions through open-ended interviews (i.e., gay social life and sex, culture and sights, and comfort and relaxation) many of the factors included are similar to those in the previously mentioned studies. Community Marketing Inc. (2010) research also emphasized the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which involves non-discriminatory policies in terms of guests and employees, and environmental responsibility. Guaracino (2007) mentions that because most gay consumers assume that all hotels cater to them due to branding in the gay media, key motivators are mainly practical attributes such as internet access, location, and on-site restaurants and gyms. This research also stresses the importance of communicating gay-friendliness as rated by certification schemes or membership.

Given the disparity in the existing literature and the current practices among hoteliers, there is some disagreement as to what would constitute a gay-friendly hotel. Moreover, both gay

consumers and the hotel industry are relying on promises made by gay-friendly certification agencies, such as TAG-approved and Fabugo.com. Furthermore, online booking agencies, such as expedia.com, have now included “gay-friendly” in their search parameters based on these standards. The present study will seek to provide some insight with a view to clarifying some of the disagreement that exists in this area.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the related extant literature, the following research questions formed the foundation of this inquiry:

1. Do hoteliers know what is important to gay guests when selecting a hotel; i.e. property attributes, hotel reputation in the gay community, and corporate social responsibility initiatives? (Group comparison analysis)
2. With regards to gay guests, which factors have the most significant impact on loyalty behavior? (Multiple regression analysis) The methodology used to investigate these two research questions follows.

EMPIRICAL METHODOLOGY

Overview and Measures

The online survey used in this study was constructed from attributes found in the aforementioned research (Community Marketing, Inc., 2009; Poria, 2006; Pritchard et al., 2000; Tanford et al., 2011). Furthermore, to ensure the list of attributes from the literature review was comprehensive, open-ended interviews were immediately conducted with industry experts through purposeful sampling. The following questions were posed to hoteliers from fifteen of the largest properties at a popular vacation destination on the West coast to allow for potentially new emerging variables: (1) What is your definition of gay friendly?; (2) What requirements should be met for a hotel to be deemed gay friendly?; and (3) What specific attributes

do you feel motivate gay guests when selecting a hotel? The interview responses were largely consistent with the literature, with no newly emerging variables. However, numerous items from the literature did not emerge from the interviews, including many gay-oriented attributes such as: gay concierge, “gay” music in public areas, gay adult movies and other items as indicated in [Appendix A](#). The resulting survey instrument, launched directly after the interview responses, included a list of 53 attributes describing the key features related to a hotel stay (see [Appendix A](#)), along with a set of demographic questions. Hoteliers were asked to rank the features on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), based on how important each feature was in motivating a gay guest to choose their hotel. In addition, the survey asked gay travelers to rank the same hotel features on a 7-point Likert scale based on how important each feature was in motivating them to select a hotel. This study focused on the behavioral aspect of loyalty, which includes both returning to the location as well as spreading the word to other potential consumers (Tanford et al., 2011). Overall loyalty was therefore measured as a two-item combined construct of intention to return and intention to recommend to a friend.

Subjects and Procedure

Literature shows that participants are more willing to self-report themselves as gay when they feel that their responses are completely anonymous and social risk is minimized (Poria & Taylor, 2001). Due to the potentially sensitive nature of identifying oneself as being gay, data collection was completed entirely online. A snowball sampling technique was used to reduce perceived social risk and more effectively target members of the population (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2010). Researchers first invited participants via social media and an online web forum for gay travelers. Personal online contacts with gay travelers initiated snowball sampling on the social media platform of Facebook and the LGBT section of flyertalk.com, one of the world’s

most popular frequent-traveler forums. Participants were then asked to share the study's online link with other gay travelers who may be interested and willing to participate. Previous research cites the appropriateness of utilizing this data collection technique, in particular when research attempts to penetrate a random but difficult to access population (such as homosexual males); for example, snowball samples are utilized by Tung and Ritchie (2011) to understand traveling seniors and by Dunn, Annaraut, and Schrock (2009) to study Russian gamblers. Additionally, traditional methods of data collection, in particular for the homosexual population, often result in small, non-representative samples due to non-response problems and social desirability bias (Morhart, Henkel, & Herzog, 2008). The anonymity of an online survey may also reduce a potential social desirability bias from respondents in the hotel group. In the context of hotel preferences, the composition of the final sample can be considered suitable for purposes of this study. Existing research identifies gender (not necessarily sexuality) as a socially constructed marketing mechanism (Bui, Krishen, & Latour, 2012; Oudshoorn, 1995); given the potential confound of gender with our interest in homosexuality, we chose to sample only homosexual males.

The final sample, collected in the winter of 2012, consisted of 236 respondents, which is considered an appropriate sample size for factor analysis and regression analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Demographics of our combined sample consisted of two groups: (1) 48 hoteliers from 4- and 5-diamond properties; and, (2) 188 self-described homosexual males who stay in hotels mainly for leisure travel. The hoteliers' survey yielded a response rate of 65.7%, while the homosexual males survey generated a response rate of 65.9%. The final sample of hoteliers had the following demographic composition: (1) approximately half of the hotelier respondents were heterosexual females, and half were homosexual males.; (2) about 76% of the hoteliers thought their properties were gay-friendly, and 24% were not sure.; (3) approximately 71.3% had a higher education; (4) regarding their age, 28.8% were between 21 and 30 years-of-age, 46.2% were between

31 and 40, and 17.3% were between 41 and 50. The final sample of homosexual males had the following demographic composition: (1) about 84.4% of the gay guests resided in the US or Canada.; (2) approximately 78.0% had a higher education; (3) regarding their age, 18.0% were between 21 and 30 years-of-age, 32.2% were between 31 and 40, 22.9% were between 41 and 50, and 20.5% were between 51 and 60. Most respondents were from the US or Canada, and had at least some college education. The results also revealed that 75% of gay guest respondents lived in cities with a population of more than one million.

An exploratory factor analysis was then performed to reduce the 53 tested attributes into constructs based on the sample of homosexual male respondents. The factor analysis was conducted by using principle component extraction with a varimax rotation method that identified underlying dimensions (factors). Finally, a linear regression was performed to determine the impact of each resulting factor on overall loyalty. The results of the study are discussed next.

RESULTS

Group Comparison Analysis

A reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was performed to test the reliability and internal consistency of each construct measured. According to Nunnally (1978), a minimum value of 0.5 is an indication of reliability. The Cronbach's reliability coefficients of the pilot test were greater than 0.7, therefore establishing acceptable reliability for the items in the questionnaire. Before data analysis, the data were examined for coding errors, normality, skewness and kurtosis by applying descriptive analyses.

Several variables were found with significant differences ($p < .05$) between the two groups (i.e. hotelier compared to gay guest). Differences between guest expectations and hotelier perceptions of these factors would be symptomatic of a marketing discrepancy for that factor. Table 1 shows the mean ratings (and standard deviations) as well as the

TABLE 1. Analysis of Variance Results on Gay Guest Preferences and Hotelier Perceptions of Attributes that Impact Gay Guest Hotel Selection

Variable	Hotel mean (standard deviation)	Guest mean (standard deviation)	Difference score
<i>RQ1: Do hoteliers know what is important to gay guests when selecting a hotel?</i>			
<i>Property attributes</i>			
Anonymity when checking in	4.70 (1.20)	3.50 (0.90)	1.20
Availability of hotelgym	5.30 (1.65)	3.70 (1.91)	1.60
In-hotel dining	5.30 (1.29)	3.80 (1.68)	1.50
In-hotel bars	5.30 (1.38)	3.70 (1.86)	1.60
Laundry service	4.60 (1.63)	3.40 (1.71)	1.20
Quiet/Soundproofed rooms	5.00 (1.58)	5.70 (1.15)	-0.70
Value for money	5.60 (1.51)	6.30 (0.85)	-0.70
Customer loyalty program	4.80 (1.59)	3.90 (1.78)	0.90
Decor	5.60 (1.40)	4.80 (1.46)	0.80
Proximity to tourist attractions	5.83 (1.15)	5.00 (1.02)	0.83
"Gay" music in public areas	3.20 (1.80)	2.40 (1.53)	0.80
Staff sensitivity in salutations	5.80 (1.15)	5.00 (1.02)	0.80
<i>Hotel reputation in the gay community</i>			
Hotel advertisements in gay print or internet media	5.20 (1.36)	4.20 (1.53)	1.00
Positive referrals from friends	6.20 (0.97)	5.70 (1.20)	0.50
Hotel's support of the gay community	5.30 (1.43)	4.60 (1.66)	0.70
Hotel's affiliation with gay travel Organizations (IGLTA, TAG-approved)	5.00 (1.40)	4.10 (1.78)	0.90
Hotel's affiliation with gay civil rights organizations (HRC)	4.60 (1.44)	3.90 (1.77)	0.70
Hotel attracts a younger crowd	4.30 (1.40)	3.40 (1.69)	0.90
Hotel attracts gay and heterosexual crowd	4.90 (1.51)	4.30 (1.26)	0.60
<i>Corporate social responsibility</i>			
Hotel's employee rights record	5.10 (1.54)	4.10 (1.65)	1.00
Hotel business with gay-owned service providers	4.80 (1.39)	4.00 (1.66)	0.80
Hotel's environmental record	5.10 (1.48)	4.10 (1.59)	1.00

Note. * All listed variable differences are significant at $p < .05$ (two-tailed); IGLTA: International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association; HRC: Human Rights Campaign.

differences in importance ratings of variables between hoteliers and gay guests, but only for those features that had significantly different importance ratings between the two groups. It is noteworthy that, of the 53 hotel features that were rated, significant differences were only found in 22 of the items (consequently, for 31 of the items, no significant differences were found).

The results from this study show that, although hoteliers target the gay market, they do not have the same overall perceptions as their gay guests when it comes to the factors that make this market segment choose one hotel over another. Referring to Table 1, certain features displayed the largest perceptual differences. For example, hoteliers perceive that

"anonymity when checking in" is an important attribute that, if not ensured, could drive guests away. Gay guests apparently did not feel that this is an important factor when choosing a hotel. In addition, hoteliers believe the availability of a gym, in-hotel dining, and in-hotel bars are important attributes when choosing a hotel if you are a gay traveler. However, gay guests apparently do not choose a hotel primarily because the property offers a fitness center, in-hotel dining, and a bar. Gay guests do not feel that the presence of these attributes will make them choose a particular hotel over another. On the other hand, quiet/sound-proofed rooms and value for money are rated significantly higher by gay guests than by hoteliers. Although hoteliers believe that decoration is an

important variable to gay guests in choosing a hotel, gay guests are neutral to this attribute. A hotel's customer loyalty program is perceived to be significantly more important by hoteliers than by gay guests. Furthermore, gay music in public areas is considered irrelevant by both groups in hotel selection. Lastly, hoteliers apparently have misperceptions about what gay guests expect regarding the employee behavior of the hotels where they choose to stay, as represented by staff sensitivity/awareness in salutations or greetings. In view of these discrepancies, hoteliers may have misperceptions of what gay guests expect regarding many of the attributes of the hotels where they choose to stay.

At the same time, it must be noted that no significant differences were detected in ratings for the following variables: safety, entrance security, cleanliness, comfort, extended breakfast hours, free internet, price, gay concierge, hotel offers in-room adult movies with gay content, hotel offers "clothing optional" areas, and conveniences for a sexual lifestyle (such as sauna, dark rooms, and communal showers). These results shed some light on Research Question 1; it is clear that some agreement exists between hoteliers and gay guests on certain attributes. However, it is also quite apparent that for many other features, hoteliers do not have a good understanding of what their gay guests want at their properties. Hoteliers and gay guests place different levels of importance on the reputation of the hotel where gay guests choose to stay. The following variables are perceived by hoteliers to be factors that influence hotel selection of gay guests: hotel advertising in gay print or internet media, hotel's record of supporting the gay community, and affiliation with gay travel organizations. Gay guests, however, do not rate the importance of these variables as highly as hoteliers do. In fact, customer-created communication (personal referrals) trumps company efforts to support the gay community. Whereas both groups agree that positive referrals from friends affect the choice of a hotel, hoteliers' perceptions of the importance of this variable are higher than those of gay guests. A hotel's affiliation with gay civil rights organizations and the hotel's

ability to attract a younger crowd are both rated neutral by hoteliers. Conversely, gay guests do not agree that affiliation with gay organizations has an impact on their hotel choice. In the same way, gay guests do not agree that they will choose a hotel only because it attracts younger crowds. Lastly, both groups were neutral as to whether guests choose a hotel only because they attract a mixed gay and a heterosexual crowd.

In contrast to hoteliers, a hotel's employee rights record, and a hotel's environmental record were deemed less important by gay guests when choosing a hotel. Both groups are neutral with regard to hotels doing business with gay-owned service providers. However, there was no significant difference in ratings found for the following variables covered under Research Question 1: employees are knowledgeable of gay activities/events in the area, employee sensitivity/awareness in bed allocation, employee sensitivity/awareness in documentation, employee sensitivity/awareness that same gender guests can be partners, and employee sensitivity/awareness that same gender guests can be parents.

Research Question 2 was approached by first conducting a confirmatory factor analysis of the 53 initial variables with the sample of gay guests (see [Appendix A](#)). Due to the large number of variables tested in this study, exploratory factor analysis was employed. Underlying dimensions were identified which simplify the next portion of the study, which is to use the factors as independent variables in a regression analysis.

The exploratory factor analysis using principal component extraction was conducted with the tested variables that asked gay hotel guests about their perceptions of what motivates them to select a hotel ([Table 2](#)). The sample in this study consisted of the same 188 gay male respondents, which is considered an appropriate size for both factor analysis and regression analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The sample suitability for the analysis was assessed by examining the resulting correlation matrix, and using the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, with a score of 0.86,

TABLE 2. Dimensions of Motivating Variables for Gay Guests When Selecting a Hotel

Items	Factor loadings	Variance (Alpha)	Eigenvalue
<i>Factor 1: Gay-Specific</i>		40.48% (.923)	6.88
Gay travel network affiliation	.898		
Gay rights organization affiliation	.841		
Support LGBT community	.860		
LGBT advertisements	.760		
Use gay service providers	.721		
Gay-friendly brand	.747		
Staff knowledgeable about gay activities	.666		
<i>Factor 2: Social Environment</i>		11.99% (.912)	2.04
Environment values diversity	.864		
No prejudice due to sexuality	.853		
Environment values respect	.833		
Feel accepted for who I am	.808		
<i>Factor 3: Food and Beverage</i>		10.33% (.713)	1.76
Hotel dining	.900		
Hotel bars	.852		
Late breakfast	.534		
<i>Factor 4: Hotel Basics</i>		6.59% (.609)	1.12
Near tourist attractions	.765		
Reviews on internet	.735		
Quiet room	.611		

Note. * The Bartlett test of Sphericity = 2046.749 ($p < 0.000$); Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) = .858; LGBT: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

which falls into the meritorious category. The suitability for factor analysis was also evaluated, using Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which was significant at the 0.000 level (approximate chi-square = 2046.749).

The number of factors was determined according to each variable eigenvalue and the variable factor loading scores. Components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained as factors. Based on this, gay guests perceived motivating variables in hotel selection in terms of what resulted in the following four factors:

gay-specific, social environment, food and beverage, and hotel basics. The four factors explained 69.393% of overall variance, which is considered acceptable. The reliability of each factor was assessed by the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency test. It can be assumed that if the Cronbach's alpha is > 0.60 that the factor is reliable for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2006). As shown in Table 2, three of the four factors were reliable, with Cronbach's alpha scores greater than 0.77, with the hotel basics factor having the lowest reliability of 0.609.

The first factor, gay-specific, explains 40.48% of the variance. It consists of the variables involving the hotel's support and knowledge of the LGBT community, business affiliations, and marketing efforts: gay travel network affiliation, gay rights organization affiliation, support LGBT community, LGBT advertising, use gay service providers, gay-friendly brand, and staff knowledgeable about gay activities. Social environment, the second component that emerged from the factor analysis, explains 11.99% of the variance, and includes the following variables that support a social environment in the hotel that welcomes and respects guests of every orientation: environment values diversity, no prejudice due to sexuality, environment values respect, and feel accepted for who I am. The third factor, food and beverage, explains 10.33% of the variance and includes hotel dining, bars, and late breakfast being offered. Finally, hotel basics, the fourth component, explains 6.59% of the variance, and includes a hotel's proximity to tourist attractions, internet reviews of the hotel, and bed comfort.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Linear regression was utilized to answer Research Question 2. The regression reveals the impact of the resulting factors on overall loyalty. Table 3 provides the results for the multiple regression analysis for the gay-specific and social environment factors, and the food and beverage, and hotel basic factors. All factors significantly predicted overall

TABLE 3. Overall Loyalty: Dimensional Factors of Value and Functional Hotel Attributes

Dependent variable	Overall loyalty				
Independent variables	Factor1 (Gay-specific) Factor2 (Social-environment) Factor3 (Food and beverage) Factor4 (Hotel basics)				
R-squared	.333				
F	22.2				
N	188				
Significance	0.000				

Independent variable	B	Standard error	β	t-test	Significance
Constant	5.972	.059		101.22	.000
Factor1	.342	.060	.347	2.054	.000***
Factor2	.385	.060	.391	2.584	.000***
Factor3	.135	.059	.138	7.862	.000*
Factor4	.193	.059	.198	9.132	.000*

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

loyalty behavior at a hotel frequented by gay guests, $F_{(22.2;188)}$, $p < 0.000$. According to the individual t -tests, the social environment factor had the strongest statistical significant relationship with the loyalty behavior variable ($t = 6.46$, $p < 0.000$). The gay-specific factor showed the second strongest significant impact on overall satisfaction ($t = 5.74$, $p < 0.000$), followed by hotel basics ($t = 3.27$, $p < 0.001$), and food and beverage ($t = 2.28$, $p < 0.024$), respectively. The adjusted R^2 value of the model indicated that 33.3% of the variability in the overall loyalty factor can be explained by these four factors. The variables excluded by the factor analysis were also tested for their impact on overall loyalty, however, none of them displayed a statistically significant impact on overall loyalty.

The correlation coefficients were then used to indicate the strength of each factor on impacting overall loyalty. The social environment factor ($b = .385$, $p < .000$) had a stronger effect on overall loyalty than gay-specific ($b = .342$, $p < .000$), hotel basics ($b = .193$, $p < .001$), and food and beverage ($b = .135$, $p < .024$). Therefore, the multiple regression analysis for the overall loyalty construct estimate yielded the following model:

$$y = 5.67 + 0.342x_1 + 0.385x_2 + 0.135x_3 + 0.193x_4$$

where,

- y = overall loyalty
- x_1 = gay-specific (2)
- x_2 = social environment (1)
- x_3 = food and beverage (4)
- x_4 = hotel basics (3)

DISCUSSION

Given the findings of this study, gay hotel guests' and hoteliers' perceptions of appealing factors for gay guests are dissimilar in many respects, which is addressed by our first research question. First, hoteliers' perceptions of gay guests' motivations in choosing a hotel are inconsistent with expectations reported by this segment, suggesting that more marketing research needs to be done for gay travelers. Additionally, the findings regarding importance placed by gay guests on certain variables are inconsistent with the reported literature. For example, it was expected that hoteliers would have rated the majority of factors as having less importance than did the gay guests; however, only two attributes were rated higher in importance by gay guests: quiet/soundproofed rooms, and value for money. The higher-than-expected hotelier ratings may be due to their exposure to results of past studies, the efforts of gay-friendly certification organizations, or social desirability bias. Whatever the reason, these misperceptions could have a significant impact on both the operational and marketing efforts of hotels. Surprisingly, rather than focusing on many of the factors suggested by previous research, this study finds that hotels should put more marketing emphasis on two particular attributes – quiet/soundproofed rooms and value for money.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

When examining the factor analysis results, the gay-specific component (gay travel network affiliation, gay rights organization affiliation,

support LGBT community, LGBT advertising, use gay service providers, gay-friendly brand, and staff knowledgeable about gay activities) is the strongest factor, explaining 40.48% of the variance. The variables in this factor are readily achievable by the hotel at little to no cost – a fact that may have remained unknown without this study.

The social environment component (environment values diversity, no prejudice due to sexuality, environment values respect, and feel accepted for who I am) reflects a hotel that welcomes and respects guests of every orientation. In line with this, Poria (2006) indicates that without such an environment, there would be a negative effect on the hotel consumption experience. However, this component would be more challenging for a hotel to address as it does not merely involve taking steps – it involves attitudes. In agreement with Guaracino (2007) and Hughes (2006), a gay-friendly welcoming experience is subjective, as it involves each guest's perceptions. In contrast to the literature, the social environment component did not include the need to seek out gay-oriented places, gay social life and sex, or the escape from heterosexism (Clift & Forrest, 1999; Pritchard et al., 2000), which is an unusual finding revealed by this study. Furthermore, creating and maintaining a culture that values internal and external guests for who they are is necessary. This is an intricate and delicate process that involves attracting the right employees and training them to accept diversity, and nurturing a culture that celebrates this notion. In addition, appropriate marketing measures need to be applied to attract the right guests who will further embrace and thereby enhance this culture. Corporate social responsibility initiatives such as the enforcement of non-discriminatory personnel policies with respect to sexual orientation, and diversity and sensitivity training for employees, are vital. However, such initiatives are likely to be expected and should happen unbeknown to the gay guests, because the results of this study show that they care more about their experiences than they do about corporate social responsibility. Next, the food and beverage factor emerged and includes hotel dining, bars, and late breakfast being offered. In

contrast to the previous factor, this is perhaps the simplest of components for a hotel with the right financial situation to make a favorable impact. Thus, a greater understanding of what this market desires when frequenting bars and restaurants may be needed.

Finally, the factor hotel basics includes variables such as a hotel's proximity to tourist attractions, bed comfort, and internet reviews of the hotel. Surprisingly, price, which was rated as the top motivating variable for gay guests by industry research (Community Marketing, Inc, 2009), did not appear in any factor, which shows that it did not impact hotel choice in this study. The findings regarding tourist attractions and bed comfort are in agreement with previous research which discovered that culture/sights and comfort/relaxation were important to the gay guest (Clift & Forrest, 1999). Bed comfort is the only variable in this factor that is easy to manage.

The regression revealed answers to Research Question 2, particularly that the social environment factor had the largest impact on overall loyalty. Hoteliers may note here that to change social characteristics of the hotel, hiring and training practices must be considered. In particular, the environmental experience can provide emotional, psychological, experiential, and social aspects of value that can impact their ability to compete and maintain a loyal customer base (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999). This is a largely intangible factor that involves complexities in both management and marketing.

Experiential value is provided through guest interactions with the hotel, and guests being active participants in the service process. Internal marketing is required to ensure that employees are supportive of maintaining the appropriate environment. On the other hand, social value can result from guests interacting with each other in the hotel. Due to the lack of control hoteliers have over their guests' behaviors, management must focus on external marketing in attracting the *right* clientele to create the appropriate social environment. This involves setting consistent expectations for all guests through marketing (advertising), word-of-mouth, and on-property cues. However, hoteliers' marketing efforts may backfire and result

in accusations of *pinkwashing* if they are not executed upon. This would ruin any sense of authenticity that is vital to attracting and retaining the gay guest market (Edward, 2008). As stated in the literature, “pinkwashing” may result when companies profess to be LGBT friendly yet they have little to no history of being so (Guaracino 2007; Edward, 2008).

The gay-specific component displayed the second largest impact on overall loyalty. This factor is composed of attributes that do not directly impact the tangible hotel experience for the guest. Rather, the gay-specific factor mainly involves intangible attributes that indicate the hotel’s commitment to and involvement with the LGBT community. The only attribute in this factor that is directly related to loyalty (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999) is “staff knowledgeable of gay activities”. This would impact the functional value of the experience for guests requesting information specific to gay activities in the area. The challenge for hoteliers in providing the items in the gay-specific construct is twofold: (1) historical evidence of the company’s involvement and support of the LGBT community is required to make an impact, thereby demanding a longer term commitment; and (2) marketing resources must be utilized to communicate such history. Again, authenticity is vital to attracting the gay hotel guest (Edward, 2008). Hoteliers can positively impact loyalty with little additional cost by focusing on many attributes of this factor such as incorporating LGBT cues in their mainstream advertising. Hotel firms can establish and promote their business relationships with LGBT service providers and organizations. Most importantly, the guests must know that such efforts are honest and genuine to avoid accusations of “pinkwashing” and thereafter refute such initiatives. Therefore, hoteliers must realize that authenticity is vital to attracting and maintaining this market niche. This factor potentially adds a new dimension to Shoemakers’s and Lewis (1999) concept of the loyalty circle – that of community involvement and support, which represents a formative extension of the loyalty literature. Future research may find that such a factor is significant in impacting the loyalty of other niche markets as well.

Functional value refers to the product or service doing what it is supposed to do, which can also impact loyalty (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999). Specific to this study, functional value can be provided through the hotel basics, and food and beverage factors. The attributes in these factors are not specific to gay guests and can provide functional value to all guests. Hotel basics is the third most influential factor impacting the loyalty of gay hotel guests. This factor may have less weight due to the expected availability of such attributes for the leisure market. Finally, food and beverage is the least-weighted factor in predicting the loyalty of gay hotel guests. Similar to hotel basics, the availability of onsite food and beverage options is likely to be expected in most hotels for this market. Although the least influential of all significant attributes, the option to have a late breakfast, is important to the gay guest segment.

CONTRIBUTION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND LIMITATIONS

The main contribution of this study is that it extends the scant research in this domain. Future studies can expand our findings with additional qualitative and quantitative research on this important segment. As previously mentioned, the factors hotel basics, and food and beverage are not necessarily specific to the demands of the gay guest. This study reveals that the attributes contributing to the tangible factors (hotel basics and food and beverage) impacting overall loyalty of the hotel guest experience are likely to be similar between the gay and non-gay guest segments. Furthermore, the study identifies the expectations of the gay guest that make up the more intangible parts of the hotel experience, specifically attributes in the gay-specific and social environment components.

The gay-specific component provides hoteliers with the opportunity to further bond with the gay guest by showing their connection with the gay community through solid affiliations, support, knowledge, and branding, which is consistent with the findings of both Oakenfull (2013) and Gudelunas (2011) in recent research

regarding gay consumers and their regard for corporations who support the gay community. However, it is important to consider that such connection to the community has a history of impacting consumer choice for other social and minority groups, where they support businesses that support their community. The factor social environment, although subjective, emphasizes a tolerant, welcoming, and non-discriminatory atmosphere. Ultimately, every individual wants to be welcomed and respected and this factor and many of its implications would probably also apply to all guests regardless of sexual orientation.

This study must be considered in light of several key limitations, including its small sample size, a lack of relevant literature in this area, the use of a non-probability sampling frame, and the existence of many subgroups within the “gay guests” segment. In order to alleviate potential confounds between gender and sexuality, this study examined responses from only gay males. These issues limit the ability to generalize any findings from this study to other groups, for instance, lesbians or transsexual individuals. Additional research should consider the behavioral and psychographic characteristics of survey respondents, in addition to their demographic characteristics. Further research can examine a broader structure for hotel loyalty, such as including cognitive, affective, and conative loyalty dimensions (Li & Petrick, 2008). Future studies should also study the particular features and amenities that make a gay guest loyal to a hotel property, or to a hotel brand. Inclusion of responses from all members of the LGBT community would certainly provide a more robust view of how this particular clientele makes lodging decisions. Given the recent influence of social media interactions on consumer word-of-mouth and the ensuing loyalty implications, future research should study the impact of social media behavior within the LGBT community (Senders, Govers, & Neuts, 2013). Finally, an international perspective on this research should be examined, as the LGBT community is growing throughout the world (Melián-González et al., 2011; Smith, Carmichael, & Batovsky, 2008).

The differences in perceptions discovered in this study suggest that hoteliers should put more emphasis on the factors that are important in motivating the gay guest to select a hotel. Although this would not seem to be an issue in terms of satisfying the gay guest, the fact that misperceptions exist is likely to be symptomatic of internal problems and could also reflect the wasting of scarce resources on marketing attributes deemed to be of less importance to the customer. Specifically, it may be indicative of communication deficiencies within hotels, such as between gay guests and line employees, or between line employees and managers. Understanding and bridging such a listening gap (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2009) is an important first step; however, hoteliers must also do more market research to understand the factors that are most important to gay guests. Hoteliers should then act upon this information in order to attract and retain these guests and ultimately avoid accusations of so-called “pinkwashing”.

Furthermore, because customer expectations and hotelier perceptions are dynamic in nature, the guest feedback must be continually monitored and managed through improved communication channels, including those between guests and line employees, line employees and management, and in the management’s direct contact with customers. Of these channels, it is essential that employees with direct customer contact must first understand the importance of listening to their customers and sharing this knowledge with management on an ongoing and timely basis.

In conclusion, the gay travel market represents an important and attractive niche segment for hoteliers who seek to improve their business volume by recognizing and serving these valuable guests. This study provides insights into this underresearched market and area in travel and tourism. It also provides hoteliers with specific recommendations for how to more effectively use their resources in attracting the gay market. The results basically indicate that most guests are looking for the same general attributes (such as location, comfort, and a welcoming environment) when selecting a hotel. Most

importantly, the research found that gay hotel guests want their hotel brand to have a history of active involvement with the LGBT society and foster a social environment that is creative, tolerant, welcoming, and non-discriminatory. By exploring the expectations gap between gay guests and hoteliers, our research augments previous hospitality research on the gay guest segment and provides avenues for future qualitative and quantitative studies.

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APPENDIX A

53 Attributes for Exploratory Study

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1. Safety (L, I)
 2. Security (L, I)
 3. Cleanliness (L, I)
 4. Overall comfort (L, I)
 5. Comfort of bed (L)
 6. Anonymity when checking in (L)
 7. Availability of hotel gym (L)
 8. In-hotel dining (L, I)
 9. In-hotel bars (L, I)
 10. Laundry service (L, I)
 11. Quiet/Soundproofed rooms (L, I)
 12. Extended breakfast hours (L)
 13. Free Internet (L, I)
 14. Price (L, I)
 15. Value for money (L, I)
 16. Hotel brand's customer loyalty program (for earning points) (L)
 17. Decor (L)
 18. Gay concierge (L)
 19. "Gay" music in public areas (L)
 20. In-room adult movies with gay/lesbian content (L)
 21. Hotel offers "clothing optional" areas (for open nudity) (L)
 22. Conveniences for sexual lifestyle (sauna, dark rooms, communal showers) (L)
 23. A free and tolerant environment that values respect (L, I)
 24. A free and tolerant environment that values diversity (L, I)
 25. Being welcomed without any prejudice regarding sexual orientation (L, I)
 26. Being accepted for who they are (L, I)
 27. Friendliness of environment in allowing for freedom of expression as a gay/lesbian (for example: holding hands) (L, I)
-
28. Proximity to gay or gay-friendly restaurants (L, I)
 29. Proximity to gay bars/clubs (L, I)
 30. Located within a gay-friendly community (L, I)
 31. Located in or near lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) neighborhood (L)
 32. Proximity to tourist attractions (L)
 33. Positive hotel reviews on the Internet (L, I)
 34. Hotel advertising in gay/lesbian print or Internet media (L, I)
 35. Hotel is gay-owned (L, I)
 36. Positive referrals from friends (L)
 37. Hotel brand's reputation as gay-/lesbian-friendly (L, I)
 38. Hotel's record of supporting the gay/lesbian community (L, I)
 39. Hotel's affiliation with gay travel organizations (such as IGLTA and TAG-approved) (L, I)
 40. Hotel's affiliation with gay civil rights organizations (such as HRC) (L)
 41. Hotel attracts a younger crowd (L)
 42. Hotel attracts an exclusively gay/lesbian crowd (L)
 43. Hotel attracts a mixed gay/lesbian and heterosexual crowd (L, I)
 44. Staff are knowledgeable about gay activities/events in the area (L, I)
 45. Staff sensitivity/awareness in bed allocation (L)
 46. Staff sensitivity/awareness in documentation (L)
 47. Staff sensitivity/awareness in salutations (L, I)
 48. Staff sensitivity/awareness that same gender guests can be partners and/or parents (L, I)
 49. Staff attentiveness/responsiveness (L, I)
 50. Staff friendliness (L)
 51. Hotel's employee rights record (L)
 52. Hotel does business with gay-owned service providers (L, I)
 53. Hotel's environmental record (L)
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Note. L = derived from literature; I = derived from interviews; HRC: Human Rights Campaign; IGLTA: International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association.