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Perspective on the LGBTQ segment: The view of tourism accommodation establishments of the city of Porto

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Perspective on the LGBTQ segment: The view of tourism accommodation establishments of the city of Porto

The municipality of Porto, located in the north of Portugal, has experienced a big tourism expansion in a short period of time, exceeding 7 million tourists in 2017, a figure expected only in 2020 (Moreira, 2018). The growth of tourism in the municipality and the increasing acceptance of alternative lifestyles, as well as the recent law that supports non-discrimination, allowed a favourable conjuncture for the expansion of the LGBTQ tourist segment, which represents a global share of 12% (IGLTA, 2012). Despite this favourable situation, the municipality of Porto is still regarded as conservative.

This work aims to identify the openness of the municipality of Porto towards the LGBTQ segment, by perceiving if there is a response and treatment similar to those offered to heterosexual tourists, or if there are signs of prejudice based on the sexual orientation of the tourist. An analysis of the practices, behaviours, actions and strategies of the professionals of a random sample of accommodation establishments located in Porto was conducted through a semi-structured interview to 16 employees of these establishments, who were knowledgeable enough to answer the questions (ranging from directors and managers to receptionists). The interviews were mostly conducted face to face, with only one by e-mail and two by telephone. All of them were transcribed for further analysis, being structured in main four groups (the LGBTQ segment, the hotel towards this segment, Porto as a LGBTQ destination, and sociodemographic profile of respondents).

Results indicate that hotel professionals do not show any kind of homophobic behaviour or embarrassment in customer service towards any type of client. In part, they feel comfortable with the LGBTQ community because many of the interviewees have co-workers or friends that are part of this community, and because they are part of a young generation more open and advocate of equal rights. Results also show that there is a positive attitude towards the LGBTQ community that allows LGBTQ tourists to choose and return to the destination, as well as this community feels comfortable being in their “own skin”, that is, not feeling oppressed or threatened by expressing their sexuality in public.

This research contributed to more information on the LGBTQ community in Portugal, and specifically in the municipality of Porto, using a holistic perspective and not being only focused on the homosexual market. It also contributes to a greater knowledge on the tourism supply for the LGBTQ community and the importance that this community has for a tourism destination.

Keywords: LGBTQ-friendly, accommodation, tourist supply, market discrimination, sexual prejudice

Introduction

The LGBTQ community, when leaving its area of residence, work and socializing, seeks to meet other people who validate their sexual identity and corroborate their way of being and acting, sharing the same values or even being in spaces where they feel that they will not be harassed, arrested or targeted for stigma (Hughes, 1997; Monterrubio & Barrios, 2016; Sharpley, 1994). Since the attitude of the local community towards this segment limits its perspective of destination experience, it becomes relevant to analyze its receptivity towards LGBTQ tourists.

The “Second Global Report on LGBT Tourism” (World Tourism Organization, 2017) informs on the economic importance of tourism in recent decades, especially in relation to the LGBTQ segment, highlighting its contribution to economic development, as well as the image of tolerance and respect that destinations receiving the LGBTQ community transmit. Considering the relevance of this market segment and the need for research in this area, this work aims to determine the extent to which the destination of Porto has or not openness to this niche market, namely in tourist accommodation establishments, and to verify if a self-proclaimed LGBTQ-friendly or gay-friendly establishment in fact is, and how it differs from others.

Being LGTBQ traveler in Porto

Porto, located in the north of Portugal, is the second largest city of the country, being elected recently “Best European Destination” three times, which contributed to an enormous international notoriety and tourism growth. Portugal is a country with a liberal society, fulfilling 69% of the human rights for the gay community (ILGA Europe, 2017): it combines the acceptance of an alternative lifestyle and incorporates and supports it in the legislative norms – for instance, same-sex marriage has been legal since 2010 (LGBT, 2018), bringing tangible and intangible benefits to Porto (Jordan & Traveller, 2018).

The high acceptance of the LGTBQ community contributes to Porto being one of the most popular tourism destinations in Europe for this market segment (TwoBadTourists, 2015). However, Porto, despite respecting the rights for this community, is still a conservative city, not promoting openly gay-oriented tourism supply through its official channels. For this reason and given the increasing interest of the gay community to visit Porto, a private company created a travel guide titled “Porto Gay Circuit” (Publituris, 2016), allowing Porto, in the year of the launching of this project, to be considered a “gay-friendly” destination (Queer Feed, 2016). The “Porto Gay Circuit” promotes some service orientated for the LGBTQ community, like bars, restaurants, accommodation, culture, shops, saunas, tours and other services of interest (Porto Gay Circuit, 2018).

In the opinion of Queer in the World (2018), a blog and online resource for gay and lesbian travelers, Porto is able to offer the LGBTQ community interesting nightlife, cultural events,

museums, art galleries, wine cellars, beaches, among others. The existent attractions, equipment and services allowed the development of this market segment in Porto, although it is still small when compared to others European cities, such as Amsterdam, Paris or Berlin. Even though the existing gay-oriented or gay-friendly supply is not much, tourists feel good and safe.

Sexual diversity, prejudice and discrimination

The more the homosexual community is exposed to stigmas, the more individuals feel excluded and believe to be of a lower social identity (Stenger & Roulet, 2018), leading them to be unable to express their sexuality or to meet secretly people with the same sexual orientation (Visser, 2003), since an identity, especially the sexual identity, needs to be validated by others.

Sexual identity influences the way individuals introduce themselves to the community which they are part of (Hughes, 1997). However, despite self-identity being the result of the environment where they are inserted, not always individuals relate with what the society is expecting from them. When they do not fit into the expectations, they may face situations of stigma and prejudice – created by sociodemographic, psychological or religious beliefs (Brown & Henriquez, 2008; Herek, 2002, 2015; Norton & Herek, 2013; Schope & Eliason, 2000; Stenger & Roulet, 2018; Walters & Moore, 2002; Worthen, Lingardi, & Caristo, 2017). Individuals can also be treated as minorities and discriminated against in the acquisition of services (Poria, 2006), which can lead to the decrease in the consumers' self-esteem and feeling of humiliation (Walsh, 2009). There is almost an imposition of abnormality when it comes to LGBTQ community because when it is said that homosexuals, bisexuals or queers and others, are 'normal' it seems that it is in question some sort of disability.

When gay consumers acquire services and are discriminated against, or denied access to, this leads to the inhibition of consumption practices (Poria, 2006), since they avoid going to places where they do not feel welcome (Gremmler, Bitner, & Evans, 1994). When negative word-of-mouth (WOM) is provided due to poor service delivery it implies poor publicity of the customer experience passed on to potential service customers – and today it spreads faster through the online community (eWOM). When gay consumers are exposed to discrimination, they may even file formal complaints to expose it to the whole community (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014), in order to reduce market share and create a negative public image (Walters & Moore, 2002).

Service experience greatly influences loyalty. Usually staff isn't trained to assimilate information when they react or change their behavior towards same-sex clients (Poria, 2006). In order not to feel discriminated against, gay tourists opt, for example, not to ask for a double bed at the check-in (Lucena, Jarvis, & Weeden, 2015). This, in particular, explains the need of accommodation

establishments to provide training to their staff in order to raise awareness and ensure a better service experience to their guests (Berezan, Raab, Krishen, & Love, 2015). It is not essential that the establishments call themselves “gay-friendly”, what is important is the existence of non-discriminatory policies for employees and guests, training on diversity and sensitivity, involvement with the gay community and partnerships with agencies working with gay people (IGLTA, 2012).

Methodology

In this study, which is qualitative in nature, it was chosen to conduct a semi-structured interview. This type of interview allows it to become more like a conversation, creating empathy with the interviewees. The interview was recorded with the authorization of the interviewees, guaranteeing their anonymity.

The interview aimed to understand what is the perception of hotel staff towards the LGBTQ community and what are their role in providing a positive experience to this market segment; and to understand the vision of the market that service providers professionals have about the city of Porto, and how they can be effectively welcomed.

The script of the interview contained 16 open-ended questions, divided in four sections: perception about the LGBTQ segment; the establishment towards the LGBT segment; Oporto as a LGBTQ destination; and sociodemographic profile of the respondent.

A total of 16 interviews were conducted to general managers or front desk / office managers, with an average age of 33 years old, mainly male and graduates in hotel management, living in the municipality of Porto.

Results

An openness to the good reception of the LGBTQ segment has been demonstrated, as respondents mentioned that they have friends and co-workers who belong to the LGBTQ community and, therefore, people who know LGBTQ people have less prejudices and relate more easily to the situation (Howerton, Meltzer, & Olson, 2012): “*I have friends who are gay and are people I would never tell if they did not tell me otherwise*” (E7).

The people who work in the accommodation establishments under analysis are mostly dynamic young people and their beliefs in the community are positive - as predicted by Lewis et al. (2017), resulting in an endorsement of sexual choices (as Stenger and Roulet (2018) review in their study). They are pleased to be able to be at ease with public demonstrations of affection, which are a

guarantee that LGBTQ people are being accepted and safe in the municipality - as observed in the study of Hughes (1997) and Köllen and Lazar (2012).

On the other hand, male respondents, for reasons of masculinity, as revealed by the study of Eagly, Wood and Joahannesen-Schmidt (2004), emphasized that they are heterosexual. It is denoted the focus is on their acceptance for sexual orientation and forgetting that the LGBTQ community is not only evident by homosexuals, but represents their opinions focused only on homosexuals. And finally, the imposition of abnormality, since there is a need to define the LGBTQ community as "being normal".

Respondents mentioned several times that the establishment where they work does not have the ability to select the clients they receive, and so people do not need to have labels that identify their gender or sexual orientation. In that way, there is an equal treatment that guarantees that they never have discrimination problems, except for the fact that they do not have training to know how to behave with the LGBTQ community, especially in check-in situations (Poria, 2006), since some interviewees admitted that they had already identified discomfort on the part of the client and employees at the time of check-in.

It is noticeable the fact that most hotels do not want to be advertised as LGBTQ-friendly because they do not want to differentiate customers and they believe that announcing themselves as LGBTQ-friendly would diminish the number of heterosexual clients. Only one hotel is promoted as LGBTQ-friendly and use it as a marketing technique, promoting respect and kindness towards the community and participating in several activities.

The interviewees perceive the growth of the LGBTQ tourism market as being associated with the development of the rights towards this community (Clift and Wilkins, 1995, quoted by Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). They also view it as a market of great importance since it has pertinent sociodemographic characteristics: *"They are in my opinion clients that have a high economic power"* (E1), being the market associated with DINK and "pink-money" (Badgett, 2001; Hughes, 2005; Hughes, Monterrubio, & Miller, 2010; Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan, & Jenkins, 2000; Visser, 2003; Walters & Moore, 2002).

Conclusion

This study shows that the tourism supply, namely accommodation, has the openness to receive the LGBTQ community, thus contributing for it to be at ease with demonstrations of affection and feel accepted and safe in the municipality of Porto. It also allows us to conclude that there is no type of stigma or prejudice to receive a customer from this community, on the contrary, some of the interviewees even mention that they want to get more customers from this community, for

the benefits they bring to their hotel, like any other customer that pays for the benefits to enjoy from this service.

Respondents do not demonstrate any type of homophobic behaviour and demonstrate a willingness to receive any type of client. In part, it is perceived as comfortable with the LGBTQ community, since many of the interviewees have colleagues or friends who are part of the community and as well, interact and are part of a young team that has a higher receptivity and support for equal rights, which can be enjoyed in the municipality under study. It is known that these positive attitudes that are transmitted allow the tourists of the LGBTQ community to return to the destination.

However, it is necessary to take into account that despite the effort that they demonstrate to show that they treat all clients equally, since a hotel should not differentiate the type of client that it receives, but they refer to being afraid to advertise as friends of the community since they fear losing heterosexual clients. In addition, the lack of perspective to train employees to deal with the LGBTQ community has led to some hotels having problems at check-in.

However, from the personal point of view, more empirical evidence is needed to verify the truth of what is presented in this research, since there are other elements to be taken into account in order to effectively verify that a destination can be said to be LGBTQ-friendly and that the offer tourism is more than the tourist accommodation units.

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