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Is there a *gay gap* – are gay hotel guests getting what they want?

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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a surge in commercial efforts to attract the gay market, and this is evident in the hotel industry. The question remains, however, what does it take to become a truly gay friendly hotel? Do hoteliers know how to effectively target this market by offering features that are gay friendly? Is the perception of what is gay friendly the same for hotels and gay guests, or does a perception gap exist?

Are the expectations of gay guests any different from those of average guests, such as families or solo female travelers? Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan and Jenkins (2000) found that sexuality did indeed influence tourism choices for gays. Poria (2006) stated that social disapproval, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by gays could result in a negative effect on their hotel consumption experience. Furthermore, Mya Lake Reyes, Director of Diversity Marketing with the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Association, mentions: “all minorities need a little customization, a bit of handholding because of what they have been through” (CMI International Conference on Gay & Lesbian Tourism, 2010). Although it is recognized that the gay community is not monolithic (Meezan & Martin, 2003), both the literature and industry suggest that the gay guest has different needs, concerns and expectations. This study will compare the views of hotel employees and managers to those of gay hotel guests in order to determine if hotels understand this potentially lucrative market.

Shanmuganthan, Spinder, Stone and Foss (2003) addressed the *listening gap* when suggesting the existence of a communication gap between minority groups and industry. This study will determine if a *listening gap* exists between gay guests and hoteliers. It will attempt to bridge hoteliers’ perceptions of gay-friendliness with what gay guests actually want in a hotel.

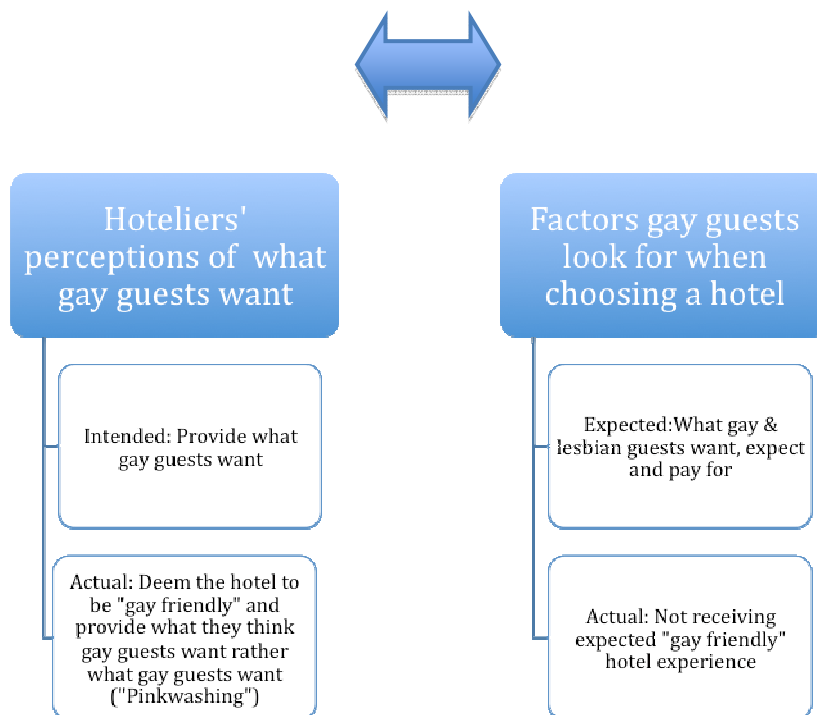
Gap Analysis

A great deal of research on perception gaps exists in the literature, which discusses that dissatisfaction results if a gap exists between what the customer expects and management’s perceptions of the customer’s expectations (Parasuraman, 1985; Candido & Morris, 2000; Schofield & Breen, 2006; Zouni & Kouremenos, 2008). Specifically, the *listening gap* is defined as the difference between what a customer expects and the service provider’s perceptions of those

expectations (Zeithami, Bitner, & Gremier, 2009). As yet, no gap study has investigated the gay market and hotels. A gap analysis could be vital to the success of hoteliers' in achieving customer satisfaction and attracting gay guests. Figure 1 demonstrates the potential gap that may exist between hotel managements' and gay guests' perceptions.

Figure 1

The Gay Gap. Potential perception gap between hoteliers and gay guests.



Motivating factors for gay guests when selecting hotels

There is a paucity of academic studies regarding the interests of gay guests when choosing a hotel. Poria (2006) found the most important attributes in hotel experiences of gay and lesbian guests are: 'staff behavior', 'hotel attributes', and 'environment/locality'. Clift and Forrest (2006) identified three dimensions: 'gay social life and sex', 'culture and sights' and 'comfort and relaxation'. Industry consultants, however, have come up with their own findings. Community Marketing, Inc. (2009) tested several pre-determined motivating factors in a survey, suggesting what constitutes a gay friendly hotel. Price rated as the top motivating factor, followed by hotel's location near tourist attractions, and reviews of the property on the Internet. An obvious gap exists

between these two studies as far as what factors constitute a gay friendly hotel. What is the definition of a gay friendly hotel, and how are hotels actually rated on their gay friendliness? Both gay customers and the hotel industry are relying on promises made by certification agencies such as TAG (a division of Community Marketing, Inc.) and Fabugo.com. Furthermore, online booking agencies, such as expedia.com, have now included gay friendly in their search parameters based on these standards. Do these companies really know the gay guests' wants and needs, or does a *gay gap* exist?

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES

To determine if a gay gap does exist, the following research question was determined:

How are gay hotel guests and hoteliers' views of what constitutes a gay-friendly hotel similar and dissimilar?

The following hypotheses were developed to investigate this question:

- 1) Hotels have misperceptions of what gay guests expect regarding the environment and locality of the hotels where they choose to stay.
- 2) Hotels have misperceptions of what gay guests expect regarding the employee behavior of the hotels where they choose to stay.
- 3) Hotels have misperceptions of what gay guests expect regarding the hotel attributes of the hotels where they choose to stay.
- 4) Hotels have misperceptions of what gay guests look for regarding the reputation of the hotels where they choose to stay.

METHODOLOGY

Results from open-ended management and employee interviews will be analyzed and used along with the results from both the Community Marketing's survey and Poria's study when designing the survey instrument. Sampling for the survey will incorporate both purposive and snowball techniques, using personal contacts, social media, as well as a popular frequent travel web forums for gay travelers. Finally, ANOVA will be used to analyze significant differences between gay guests' and hotel employees' perceptions of each of the tested attributes (including subgroups of the gay community).

APPLICATION TO THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA

This study will enable hotel managers and employees to understand better the expectations of their gay guests, thereby allowing them more effectively to utilize their marketing resources. In addition, this research will add to the existing literature, which mainly focuses on the customer's perceptions and ignores those of the service provider. Both perspectives should be considered to avoid a potential "gay gap", which could result in misinterpretation and inaccurate decision-making (Schofield & Breen, 2006).

Finally, the methodological approach in this study will add to the currently limited body of knowledge in this arena, which is mostly exploratory or descriptive, lacks consistency in methodology, and restricts the ability to build upon previous research (Sullivan & Losberg, 2003).

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