

# Gay Tourism in Budapest: An Exploratory Study on Gay Tourists' Motivational Patterns for Traveling to Budapest

Thomas Köllen\*, Szabolcs Lazar

Department Management, Gender and Diversity Management Group, Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU), Vienna, 1090, Austria

**Abstract** In contrast to East European cities, West European cities have increasingly targeted gay and lesbian travelers as part of their tourism campaigns. In order to exemplarily analyze the potential of international gay tourism for Budapest, nineteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews with non-Hungarian gay travelers, about their motivation to come and their experiences, were conducted in different gay establishments in the city. One result of the study is that their motivations for travel did not differ from “mainstream tourists”; while their expectations about gay life in the city were negative, their experiences were mixed. Implications for Budapest’s city-marketing are discussed.

**Keywords** Gay Tourism, City-Marketing, Homosexuality, Budapest, Eastern-Europe, Gay Marketing

## 1. Introduction

Gay and lesbian tourism is an expanding niche market segment gaining in importance today, especially in western societies[1-4]. For instance in 2009, TUI, Europe’s leading travel and tourism company, launched the travel brochure “Gay and Travel” and in 2012 Dertour, a subsidiary of the REWE group, launched the “Gay Travel” catalogue. Furthermore there are numerous smaller companies that focus on the gay tourist, partially organized in the “International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association”, the IGLTA[5]. The travel destinations offered are mainly beaches and western cities[6-7], and the offers are often related to special events like gay pride parades or gay sports events[8-9]. The continuing growth of this niche gay market segment is, and was, supported by social attitude changes towards gays and lesbians over the past years and decades in the western countries[3]. On the other hand this development can also be interpreted as an ongoing separation of heterosexual and homosexual travel destinations that is due to non-accepting and non-inclusive climates for homosexual travelers in many tourist destinations[10]. Furthermore the emergence of “gay places” does not necessarily mean that the host community approves of the gay tourists[11]. Even though for lesbian and gay tourists it is important to feel welcome and accepted, when their hosts know about their sexual orientation[12] one reason for welcoming them is merely

their assumed purchasing power[13]. The gay market is often characterized as a “dream market” of DINKs (“double-income-no-kids” consumers) that spend large amounts of “pink money” and thus this market is often seen as being a profitable niche segment[2, 14-16]. Although on average equally qualified gays, and to a minor degree lesbians, earn less than heterosexual employees[17-19] gays and lesbians seem to have more disposable income and a greater propensity for travelling[4, 20-21]. Gay men especially tend to travel more often than heterosexual men, and tend to favor more luxurious and gay-oriented places[3, 20, 22]. The focus of the study, and the area on which this article is based, therefore, is gay men. While research on gay tourism mainly analyzes western cities or beach holidays as travel destinations this paper concentrates for the first time on an Eastern European city. To estimate the potential that gay tourism could have for Eastern-European cities, the example of Budapest is chosen. For this purpose, the motivational pattern of gay tourists travelling to Budapest is theoretically framed by a five-category model that is proposed below. Its applicability is analyzed by interpreting the data taken from qualitative interviews that were conducted with gay tourists in the city.

## 2. Travel Motivations of Gay Tourists

Beside motivational factors for travelling that do not differ from “mainstream tourists”, like getting to know new places and people, sightseeing and relaxation[23-24], several gay-specific motivational push and pull factors[25] can be identified. The push factors are 1. escapism and anonymity, 2. gay identity, and, 3. looking for sex. The pull factors are 1. gay friendliness and 2. gay events. These factors are derived

\* Corresponding author:

thomas.koellen@wu.ac.at (Thomas Köllen)

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from literature in the following and will serve as the theoretical framework for analyzing the motivational pattern for male gay tourists coming to Budapest, as an example of a Eastern European capital.

*Escapism and anonymity:* Because of hetero-normative societal expectations many gay men must control themselves in everyday life situations so that they do not appear outwardly to be gay. Vacations offer them the opportunity to be themselves and feel free. Because they are anonymous at the destination, they do not have to be afraid of being recognized by or revealed to people they know[22, 26]. According to Pritchard et al.[24], escaping from the everyday stress and tension of being gay is one of the most important motivating factors in going on holiday.

*Gay Identity:* Gay identity-formation often includes travelling as “identity tourism”[27]. Gay men living in hetero-normative societies often visit gay destinations to nurture their gay identities. Leisure time activities and vacations provide a chance to construct, confirm and change one’s sexual identity by socializing with other gay people and to escape social constraints and intolerance[28]. Tourism and being gay therefore are “inextricably linked” because of the social disapproval of homosexuality that forces many gay men to find a “gay space”[22].

*Looking for sex:* Gay men have greater expectations of having sex on holiday than heterosexual men, and they are also more likely to get involved in sexual encounters[1, 21, 29-30]. Gay men especially, who are less open at home about their sexuality, tend to travel to find opportunities of having anonymous sex[31]. While for some gay tourists the main reason for travel might be sex alone, for other tourists this remains only a possibility. Sexual relationships might happen between tourists or between tourists and local people. This activity sometimes involves payment, and sometimes happens out of free will, free of charge[32].

*Gay Friendliness:* While at home gays might be part of a minority, when travelling to ‘gay-friendly’ places, they are given an opportunity to be part of a majority of gay tourists. Thus for many gay men the dimension of “gayness” is crucial for choosing the holiday destination[1]. According to Pritchard et al. (2000), gay friendliness refers to such places where homosexuality is accepted and where gays and lesbians can be open about their sexuality. This insinuates that gays and lesbians find themselves having to travel to gay resorts and gay hotels, since holidays at predominantly straight tourism destinations might not provide the opportunity to escape hetero-normative environments. Hughes[33] points out the fact that in many countries, where homosexuality is still not as accepted as in Western societies, openly gay tourists might face discrimination and prejudice. There is a risk of being assaulted or feeling uncomfortable because of other people’s reactions towards their homosexuality, and this is a risk factor that some gay men take into account when choosing a holiday destination. This might be an important factor for choosing, or even not choosing, Budapest as travel destination.

*Gay Events:* Nearly every larger European city annually hosts a Gay Pride Parade with surrounding events and

festivals. Furthermore, every four years, one city hosts the global sports events Gay Games that in 2010 took place in Cologne, and Outgames, that in 2009 took place in Copenhagen. In intervening years, the European international games, the Eurogames takes place, which is hosted by Budapest in 2012[34-37]. By visiting gay events, gays can be part of a community; they can be among people who do not judge them based on their sexualities, and this could represent a getaway from the “heterosexist world”. They have the opportunity to celebrate their sexualities in public, and show their “true identity” in the case of closeted gays; therefore this not only supports in creating one’s own individual gay identity, but there is also a community-building function, fostering collective gay identity and belongingness[26]. Gay events create a sense of community and cohesion, offering participants a feeling of safety and an opportunity to be proud to show affection towards their partners in public. Furthermore gay events create visibility and awareness about the situation of lesbian and gay people[38].

### 3. The Actual Situation in Budapest

To estimate the potential that gay tourism could have for Eastern-European cities, the case of Budapest was chosen, the city of the next international gay event: the Eurogames. Since 2009, Hungary has recognized gay and lesbian civil unions and registered partnerships (Complex, 2009). However, to impede the legalization of same-sex marriages by other political constellations in the future, the Hungarian Parliament in April 2011, approved of the new constitution that defined the notion of family as a “voluntary companionship between man and woman” (Office of Parliament of Hungary, 2011). Takacs et al.[39] show that most of the Hungarian gays and lesbians feel discriminated against in different areas of life, especially by the Hungarian media, the legal system in general and by political organizations. The last Budapest gay prides were accompanied by massive resistance by conservative forces within Hungarian society. The Hungarian “gay scene” has developed slowly and steadily in the last decade. Almost all gay establishments are concentrated in the capital, Budapest: 13 gay or gay-friendly bars, 2 gay saunas, 5 gay clubs or discos, 1 gay travel agency and 6 monthly or bimonthly gay-themed parties (Confetti Party, Liberty, Juicy, Bad Taste, Brutko Diszko, Szkafander) at different venues. Moreover, Budapest has an annual gay book festival and a gay film festival (Company, 2011). Taking into account that gays and lesbians often try to avoid places that are not gay friendly, or that are notoriously homophobic[24], Budapest may not attract as many gay visitors as other European cities. Thus, it can be hypothesized that gay travelers coming to Budapest choose the destination not for reasons related to their homosexuality. For the proper analysis of this hypothesis, nineteen interviews with gay travelers in Budapest were conducted.

## 4. Methodology

To gain deeper insights and knowledge about the motivations of gay tourists in Budapest, nineteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data. In the summer of 2011, the tourists were approached at various gay places (bars, cafes or clubs) and were asked if they were willing to volunteer for an interview. The interview guidelines made sure that at least the individual relevance of the pre-mentioned push and pull factors for gay travelers were examined. The qualitative approach helped to analyze the subjects in their "natural settings"[40]. Even though researching individuals on holiday might not fully apply to the ideal notion of "natural setting", the interviewees were nevertheless found at places that they had voluntarily decided to visit. Two criteria were set as a precondition for the interviews: the person should be a self-identified gay man and he should be a non-Hungarian tourist in Budapest staying at least one night for leisure purposes (thus excluding business trips). The interviews usually started with a basic introduction, explaining the nature and the goal of the study to the interviewees. Then a general acquaintance phase followed where both parties became familiar with each other. Sometimes the interview strictly followed the structure of the interview guide, but sometimes it digressed, touching on different topics as well. The duration of the interview sessions lasted from 15-50 minutes. Altogether 19 interviews were conducted. The age span of the interviewees ranged from 23 to 50.

Interviewees of 11 different countries were asked of their experiences about Budapest and their motivation to come: 5 US-Americans, 3 Germans, 2 Canadians, 2 Czechs and one each of Spanish, Dutch, Polish, French, Slovakian, British and Australian. The occupations of the interviewees included, amongst others, teachers, advertisers, pharmacists, administrators, office workers and salespersons. The interviews were mostly conducted in English, and also in German in three instances.

## 5. Results

Two categories of gay travelers were identified according to the interviews: 6 interviewees out of the 19 travelled to Budapest to see friends or relatives as "visitors", and 13 interviewees out of the 19 were in Budapest on holiday as a "tourist". The main motivation for travel by interviewees in the "visitors" category were obviously the visit itself, therefore these will not be further analyzed in this instance. Interviewees in the "tourist" category did not indicate any special main motivational factors initially. The main reasons for the holiday were mostly exploration and getting to know to the city.

The interviewees were then asked to estimate the importance of the gay-specific travel motivational factors. Beside the narrative explication they were asked to rate their answers as high (3 points), medium (2 points) and low (1 point). Then from the answers, a mean average was

calculated. The calculated number denotes the mean importance of the factor on a scale from 1 to 3. (From 1 to 1.65 the results were considered as low, from 1.65-2.35 they were considered as medium and from 2.35 to 3 they were considered as high).

The motivation for travel, of escaping from home and to have the possibility of anonymity did not prove to be important. Almost half of the respondents (9) did not consider this factor as important or thought it was of low priority. The mean average point was 1.684 points, that is just at the bottom of the medium range, and reflects its low importance. Thus, it can be concluded that escapism and anonymity does have a minor influencing role in the travel motivation of gay men visiting Budapest, but it is not among the most important factors. The aspect of looking for one's gay identity was of low priority and not important at all for most of the interviewees in the sample (15). The mean average point was 1.211. However, this factor was found important among interviewees who were "closeted" at home; openly gay people reported the lack of need to get away from the constraints of home in order to express their "true" identities. Also interviewees coming from small cities with a small, or non-existent, gay scene found this factor important. The travel motivation of "looking for sex" was mentioned only by two respondents as the main purpose of the travel and 8 respondents mentioned it as one reason among others. The majority of the interviewees were not looking for the opportunity of sex purposefully, however they felt encouraged engaging in sexual encounters when the opportunity presented itself. The mean average point for this factor was 1.737, steadily in the middle range on the scale; thus, it can be concluded that this factor was of medium importance for the average of the whole sample. Gays travelling with their partners were less likely to look for sex as interviewees travelling alone or with a friend. The gay friendliness of the city was a motivational factor for only 3 of the travelers. Half of the respondents did not mention it at all. According to the ratings and the interviews, it is clearly not the main motivational factor for gay tourists. The mean average point was 1.684. The importance of gay events as reason to visit Budapest was negated by almost the whole sample. 16 out of 19 interviewees found this factor of no importance whatsoever. The mean average point (1.158) and the interviews also suggest that the majority of the interviewees from the sample were not attracted by any of the gay events in Budapest. Looking at the general gay attraction factor of Budapest, only 3 interviewees of the 19 said that they were attracted by any of the gay offerings of the city. Moreover, many interviewees pointed out that Budapest is not perceived as a city with many gay opportunities. When interviewees were asked if they had any impressions or thoughts about the gay life or the gay scene in Budapest prior to their visit, 9 out 19 respondents said that they had no impressions whatsoever. The other respondents had mostly negative preconceptions. Also, the points-of-view and opinions about the mentality of the people towards gays were negative in 10 cases and those interviewees

having been "satisfied" with the mentality towards gays, were those who came from small towns and villages.

The impressions about the gay life and the gay scene were quite negative, and found them too heavily sex-driven. Interviewees also pointed out the lack of cohesion of the community and the relatively large geographical distance between the gay establishments. Most of the interviewees would recommend Budapest as travel destination, but very few as a gay destination.

## 6. Conclusions and Outlook

This study was conceptualized as an exploratory study, and certain limitations arise from this about the transferability of the results to other Eastern European cities, and of generalizing based on its results. Nevertheless, clear findings were made about the motivations of day tourists coming to Budapest. Many of the interviewees still look at Hungary as a "typical" Eastern European country. They do not have high expectations about the gay-friendliness of the city, and they mostly have negative associations about the mindset and attitude of the society towards gays. Budapest does not seem to be considered as a place where gays can find their "gay identity", or where they can escape to from their hetero-normative surroundings at home. Thus gay tourists in Budapest do not seem to differ much from "mainstream tourists" in their main travel motivations. They all considered the main tourist activities important: exploring the city, getting to know to the locals, visiting the places of interests. It was obvious that gay travelers did not choose Budapest as a destination because of its gay life or gay scene, but mostly because of the beauty of the city, its history, architecture and scenery.

However, Budapest seemed to win over all interviewees, as without exception all of them would be willing to return. Most of them would even recommend the city to their friends, but not because of its gay aspects. Most of them did not identify Budapest as an "ideal gay destination". This means that there is considerable touristic potential that can be tapped by the city and those marketing it. Gays that decide to travel to a gay-friendly place have, until now, seemed to forgo Budapest. But in 2012 Budapest has the opportunity to correct that image in the gay press by hosting the gay Eurogames. It can be assumed that, because of the negative image of the city, less people will participate or watch than would do so in other cities, but the games will certainly take place, and will experience some news coverage.

The organizers of the event, and, at a higher level the politicians themselves, should thus make sure that the event receives a positive PR campaign, and that media coverage emphasizes the images of inclusion and acceptance by the city. Budapest would then possibly win over some travelers that otherwise would have opted for other East European capitals, or even Vienna, as destinations.

As this study focuses on gay tourists, future research on that topic could try to better understand the motivational

patterns of lesbian tourists. Other Eastern European cities could also be future objects of research, for instance Prague, Warsaw and Moscow. Maybe comparative studies could help to overcome the perceived divide between Eastern and Western cities within Europe. Conversely, it would also be very interesting to analyze the travel behavior and the motivational patterns of lesbian and gay tourists from the Eastern countries themselves.

Lesbians and gays often face various stereotypes and demotions in everyday life[41] that together with the tendency of silencing them[42] massively narrows their general scope, also in terms of travelling and finding travel destinations that are both attractive and tolerant. Stereotype-based mechanisms of exclusion can range from mere unfriendliness to physical aggression[43]. Against this background a general intensification of doing research on that issue is also due to moral considerations. Deepening the understanding of these mechanisms might contribute to help to overcome them in future.

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