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LGBT Tourism in Northern Portugal: Perception and Attitude of the Hotel Industry and Local Community

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Abstract

In tourism, the achievement of acceptance, freedom of expression, equal rights and respect in various destinations and public spaces has stimulated growing interest from companies and destinations, reinforced by the strong purchasing power and the availability for more frequent trips by LGBT community (Baxter, 2010; WTO, 2017). For a destination that aims to attract and build a strong relationship with the LGBT market it is vital, regardless of their motivation, to offer a safe and welcoming environment, interacting with understanding and respect. This study analyses the North of Portugal stakeholders' attitudes and perceptions, particularly the hotel industry and the local community, towards the LGBT tourism/market. By conducting two separate studies that complement each other, it was concluded that the region has the right conditions to put it on LGBT tourism and captivate this market segment, but that there are still slight prejudices that must be corrected.

Keywords: Discrimination, Hospitality, LGBT tourism, Northern Portugal, Stakeholders

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1. INTRODUCTION

Similar to what happens at national and international level, there is a before and after Covid 19 in the tourism performance of Northern Portugal. Until then, this region showed a highly competitive behaviour, with above-average growth in Portugal (+7.9%), overnight stays reaching 10.8 million in 2019 (Turismo de Portugal, 2021). In the 2nd and 3rd quarters of 2020, a sharp drop in tourism performance is observed in the order of 89.1% and 49.7%, respectively, compared to the same period (CCDR-N, 2020).

Regardless of the current pandemic situation, it is common knowledge that tourism is vital to the economic growth of various countries and regions, and it is expected that, with the gradual generalization of the vaccine for COVID-19, consumer confidence will be re-established, travel restrictions will decrease, and travel and tourism will normalize during the next year (WTO, 2021). In this context, the destination Porto e Norte de Portugal (PNP) must "prepare the ground" to receive tourists with the hospitality as usual.

For the tourist segment targeted by this study - the LGBT tourist - in clear growth but very susceptible to the social character of the destination, some relevant questions urgently need to be answered. Does the hospitality of people from the North also apply to LGBT tourists? Can and should the destination Porto e Norte de Portugal invest in LGBT tourism?

LGBT tourism is a niche tourism aimed at developing and marketing products and services attractive to the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) market that has evolved considerably in both demand and supply. The LGBT tourist is an experienced traveller and demonstrates an above-average aptitude for consumption. With an estimated purchasing power of more than €3 trillion per year and a population of 371 million individuals globally (+15 years old) (LGBT Capital, 2020a), the LGBT community makes, on average, four trips and stays eleven nights in a tourist accommodation unit (CMI, 2019), with spending over €100 billion in incoming tourism alone. In Portugal, the revenues exceed 2 billion in 2019 (LGBT Capital, 2020b; Variations, 2020).

These data leave no doubt about the potential of LGBT tourism and, in a differentiating and captivating perspective of this segment, countries and regions make a point of promoting themselves as LGBT-friendly destinations. According to the available literature, this market segment is still underdeveloped, so it is pertinent to analyse the opportunities and requirements of this market to satisfy its expectations and build its loyalty and understand the performance of stakeholders in the North region towards this market. To understand, through e-mail (request for the availability of accommodation) and an online survey, the reactions and attitudes of front office professionals and the local Northern community towards the market - hospitality, acceptance or prejudice/discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity are key issues to be clarified in this study.

2. LGBT TOURISM

The tourism industry is in constant mutation. The emergence of new technologies and tenacious changes of behaviours and desires of tourists leads to the appearance of different tourism products through the creation of new resources and attractions and the development of those already on the market. This mutability requires the adaptation in a persistent way of tourism activity to the real desires of consumers (Medaglia, Maynard & Silveira, 2013).

For this purpose, it is essential to analyse and knowledge of tourists' characteristics, needs, motivations, and consumption habits, and, simultaneously, the resources and products that the destination has to offer to adapt the tourism activity to the real desires of consumers and the destination capacity. Tourists differ in their motivations, needs, desires, and other characteristics, so that ignoring these differences and creating an undifferentiated destination marketing will lead to the satisfaction of a residual number of people (Dolnicar, Lazarevski & Yanamandram, 2013) and, consequently, to the failure of the sector.

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Currently, new niche markets are the target of study, being one of them the LGBT market. This research process has been facilitated by the growing number of LGBT individuals willing to identify themselves. However, there are still over 70 countries where homosexuality is illegal, making it impossible to quantify the actual size of the LGBT community (WTO, 2017).

Nevertheless, policymakers and businesses recognise the importance of these growing minority subcultures in size, increased purchasing power, and greater political and cultural awareness and pride alongside the need to respond to consumer differences with strategies to differentiate and capture these markets. The visibility, acceptance, and legal recognition of the equal rights of people in the LGBT community in many countries has fostered the confidence of destinations and tourism businesses to target LGBT consumers. The tourism sector was one of the economic sectors that led the way in targeting the LGBT market not simply because of the "purchasing power" factor but because tourism is a sector associated with openness, diversity, acceptance, and the celebration of differences among people around the world (Jordan & Traveller, 2018).

The phenomenon of niche tourism targeting the market of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people encompass several concepts and specificities that provide the creation of several subgroups and terminologies subject to change and in permanent evolution over time - gay tourism, gay and lesbian tourism, queer tourism, pink tourism, LGS tourism, LGBT tourism, LGBT(I) tourism, LGBT+, LGBTQ, and LGBTQ+. According to Community Marketing & Insights (2019), the LGBT terminology is preferred by the whole community (particularly by older generations) and is considered by organisations to be the 'safest'.

LGBT tourism comprises those activities undertaken and marketed to attract the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) market, or those that by nature and/or design appeal to and are pursued by the LGBT market. The interaction between suppliers, managers, facilitators, and consumers of the LGBT tourism product and service and their subsequent relationship is integral to the concept (Southall and Fallon, 2011; WTO, 2012).

According to several authors (Hughes, 2002; 2005; Paradela, Gonzalez & Vila, 2014; Jordan & Traveller, 2018; Kyriakaki & Abanoudis, 2016; Paradela, Gonzalez & Vila, 2014; Poria, 2006; Sanches, Mancini & Nascimento, 2011; Ram, Kama, Mizrahi & Hall, 2019; Weeden, Lester & Jarvis, 2016; WTO, 2012; 2017) this market represents a relevant contingent, with an above-average cultural level, high probability of taking holidays, frequent holidays and with high income and spending, therefore, an important consumer segment. For many, frequent travelling represents a valuable opportunity for personal enrichment and socialisation and to live more freely when this is not possible in their place of residence (Jordan & Traveller, 2018).

However, the LGBT segment is not homogenous; quite the contrary, it is a highly diverse segment (Jordan & Traveller, 2018). The experience of the LGBT tourist, like travellers in general, can vary according to gender, race, income, social class, age, among other criteria (WTO, 2017). Community Marketing Inc., a consultancy company, recognised worldwide for its LGTB relevance, in the studies conducted on LGBT tourism and hospitality, carries out the delimitation of the community by sub-niches, subdividing them not only according to gender "Gay & Bi Men" and "Lesbian & Bi Woman" "Gender Expansive", but also in generational terms "Millennials+", "Generation X" and the "Boomers".

CMI (2011; 2018; 2019) reports that gay and bisexual men travel around 3.9 times a year and are more likely to go to urban, LGBT hotspots (experience with the local LGBT community, events, and nightlife) and warm-weather destinations, whereas gay and bisexual women travel 3.3 times a year and preferentially seek LGBT friendly, beach and nature destinations. In generational terms, "Millennials+" are the most likely to consider themselves "urban travellers", and LGBT hotspots and friendly destinations (CMI, 2018).

In terms of purchasing power, many LGBT tourists consider themselves "moderately priced travellers with a bit of luxury" regardless of their high level of purchasing power. With a slight tendency more towards luxury stand out the Gay and Bi men, the Generation X" and the "Boomers", on the opposite side, with a tenuous propensity for more modest spending, the Gay and Bisexual women, the "Gender Expansive" and the "Millennials+" generation (CMI, 2018; 2019). Paradela, González & Vila 2014, highlight that young people

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(aged 19-25) spend the least, while the highest tourist expenditure per day (+150€) occurs mainly in the over 36 age group. Although the LGBT segment (particularly gay) is often associated with tourists with high purchasing power and luxury travel, most LGBT tourists come from different socio-economic backgrounds and seek experiences at various prices (Jordan & Traveller, 2018).

At the destination choice level, tourists travel for many needs and motivations, and LGBT consumers are no exception. Tourists are seeking social interaction in LGBT circles (freedom, affirmation of their identity and social interaction with LGBT community, events, nightlife) and tourists seeking comfort, relaxation, and cultural offer, but recognising the feeling of safety and respect for LGBT status as key factors in destination choice (Berezan et al., 2015; CMI, 2018, 2019; Hughes, 2002; Hughes and Deutsch, 2010, Paradela et al., 2014).

Several authors are stating the importance of safety, an open-minded and forward-thinking culture, hospitality, a history of acceptance, and equal rights for people from the LGBT community as key elements when choosing a destination (e.g., CMI, 2019; Hodes et al., 2007; Hughes and Deutsch, 2010; Jordan & Traveller, 2018; Monterrubio, 2008; Monterrubio, Madera & Pérez, 2020; Paradela et al., 2014; Pritchard et al., 2000; Sanches, Mancini, & Nascimento, 2011; WTO, 2017; Ram et al.; 2020; Usai, Cai & Wassler, 2020). As tourism represents the opportunity to "get away from it all", the desire to escape from the pressure of being gay in the predominantly heterosexual world is undoubtedly one of the main motivations in choosing a destination. LGBT friendly spaces, a term used to describe places, destinations, businesses open to welcome and receive with hospitality the LGBT community (Hughes, 2002; CMI, 2017), are for many considered "havens" because they provide a sense of safety, affirmation of identity, therefore are preferable destinations for LGBT tourists (Monterrubio, 2008; Pritchard et al. 2000, Weeden, Lester & Jarvis 2016).

The majority opt for four and 5-star hotels or villas and flats in gated communities regarding the selection of tourist accommodation. Gay and bisexual men opt more for urban hotels (luxury hotels, design hotels, and boutique hotels), and lesbian and bisexual women tend to be more varied in accommodation options, more apologists for Airbnb and outdoor options. As for brand, tourists still consider it essential to stay in a branded hotel with a positive LGBT reputation, with Hilton and Marriott hotel chains being the most popular in this regard (CMI, 2018, 2019). The main motivations when choosing an accommodation beyond the requirements traditionally requested by heterosexuals (quiet rooms, comfortable beds, value for money, late-breakfast, internet, location), LGBT tourists value above all an environment of respect, acceptance, and non-discrimination (CMI, 2011, 2018, 2019; Paradela et al., 2014; Poria, 2006).

For a group that has suffered and continues to suffer repression in many parts of the world, elements such as non-discrimination in relation to gender is important when choosing destinations and their tourism products and services.

In this sense, all those who wish to attract this market must recognise the importance of social acceptance and recognition for all, based on modern, non-discriminatory legislation, with equal rights for all, including same-sex couples (WTO, 2012). Engagement and attraction towards the LGBT market, regardless of their motivation, should have a central focus on creating a safe and welcoming environment for LGBT travellers, interacting with understanding and respect (Jordan & Traveller, 2018). Destinations and businesses should be aware of the need for destination development as a systemic, participatory, sustainable, and persistent process, within which tourism interests, those of the LGBT market, and the interests of destinations both territorially and in terms of their residents should be balanced. It will be useless to offer LGBT-friendly hotel services if the surroundings, such as security, complementary services, access, the population's sense of hospitality, show signs of exclusion and non-acceptance towards the LGBT market. An LGBT-friendly culture should be transversal to all tourism product components and destinations since the LGBT tourist experience is lived in its entirety (Kastenholz, 2005, 2006).

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3. METHODOLOGY

This research combines qualitative and quantitative techniques and methods. For the analysis of the perception and attitude of the professionals of accommodation units towards the LGBT market, it was decided based on the works of Howerton et al. (2012) and Rodrigues, Moniz, and Tiago (2017), to use email to request information and availability of accommodation, using mystery customers (LGBT couple and another heterosexual couple), in order to analyse whether the LGBT couple is treated differently compared to heterosexuals: rejection in the availability of accommodation, more negative attitudes, less friendly, affectionate, attentive and hospitable due to their sexual orientation. The study's universe was considered the hotel industry (hotels, flats, villas, and tourist complexes) from 4 to 5 stars.

As for the perception of the local Northern community towards LGBT tourism and market, in particular their reactions and attitudes towards the market - hospitality, acceptance or prejudice/discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity - and towards LGBT tourism - knowledge and impacts for the region, we opted for an online questionnaire survey. This methodology allowed a more exhaustive study and maintaining a perception of total anonymity to the respondents.

The questions were mainly closed-ended, simple choice, multiple-choice, and mostly measurement and scale (Likert of five propositions) to measure the behaviour and attitude of the local North community towards the LGBT market and the impacts of LGBT tourism. The target population consisted of the Northern region community, with the questionnaire applied to a random non-probability sample (Eusebio et al., 2003) consisting of 240 individuals.

The information collected through the application of the questionnaire was entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), and several statistical procedures were performed:

- univariate statistics
- factor analysis (KMO test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity applied to assess the adequacy of the factor analysis)
- comparative analysis (contingency tables, Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence, t-test, and the Kruskal-Wallis test) to identify differences between the sociodemographic variables, gender, age, and educational qualifications
- cluster analysis (non-hierarchical method using the k-means clustering algorithm) aimed at identifying groups of residents who are similar in terms of sociodemographic variables and opinions.

4. EMPIRICAL COMPONENT

Tourist accommodation units represent a fundamental pillar for a tourist destination; without them, the tourist activity becomes unfeasible, in the same way, that the hotel business cannot survive without tourists. For that very reason, when the North region was investing in LGBT tourism, it was considered essential to listen to the hotel units trying to understand if they were willing to receive people with different sexual orientations and gender identities with the same hospitality and quality of service.

According to the present study, the front office professionals of the hotel units that answered the emails did not show any prejudice and/or discrimination towards LGBT couples, despite the answers projecting poor quality, independently of sexual orientation. However, some discriminatory behaviours towards homosexuality were identified by some hotel units in the North of Portugal (with emphasis on 4-star units and located in Minho and Trás-os-Montes sub destinations), although expressed implicitly. Similar to the study by Howerton et al. (2012), these behaviours are marked by the denial of accommodation availability, to the extent that there was a considerable differential in responses. The results attest that 66% of the front office professionals in the hotel units who rejected the LGBT couple sent an affirmative email of accommodation availability to the HETERO couple.

Most of the professionals surveyed responded to the email within two days of receiving it, confirming availability in most of them. However, the non-response was still significant (35%), a high percentage which,

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as already mentioned, may be symptomatic of some lack of attention to the client (regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity) and professionalism, and this quality deficit will dictate the success or failure in an increasingly competitive market.

As for the local community, key players in the experience of the LGBT tourist who can be directly affected, positively or negatively, by the development of tourism or can affect, positively or negatively, the tourist experience (Pinto & Kastenholz, 2011) the matrix applied in the study allowed to establish a comprehensive methodology that enabled the collection of relevant data for a greater and more detailed knowledge of the perception and attitudes of the local Northern community about the LGBT market and tourism.

The answers gathered from the application of the questionnaire allowed us to ascertain that the respondents are predominantly female, aged between 36 and 50 years old, with higher education, and living primarily in the Minho sub-destination. It should be noted that the method used in this study - the online survey - may have been a conditioning factor for the absence/poor participation of older and less educated people.

The questions arising from the knowledge of LGBT tourism, LGBT-friendly destinations, and the potentialities of the Northern region for this tourism niche became useful and essential as an introductory part of the questionnaire. They made it possible to ascertain that the majority of the surveyed residents know the term and the priority characteristics for an LGBT friendly destination - "Presence of a tolerant and open population to sexual minorities", "LGBT friendly spaces," and "Safety" (opinions in agreement with several authors analysed in the literature review), identifying as the main LGBT friendly cities in the region, the cities of Porto and Braga and as attraction factors, hospitality, historical and cultural heritage, and nature and rural spaces.

Identifying the population's hospitality as a central element of attraction proves and reinforces the recognition of the northern people's friendliness and hospitality extended to all people regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. In their majority, the residents' opinions strongly agree on the acceptance and spirit of hospitality towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the region, being more relevant in female residents and those with higher education. This positive attitude of the local community towards the LGBT market is reinforced by recognizing the region's potential to attract this market and by the incentive to bet on LGBT tourism. For this purpose, it is fundamental to have an open, tolerant, and accepting mentality towards LGBT tourists and the recognition of their civil rights. These variables also received the agreement of most of the residents surveyed, demonstrating greater expressiveness by residents with higher literacy.

Even so, using the scale of hospitality and prejudice or discrimination against LGBT people, it is possible to perceive some incongruence in people's attitudes towards gender identity issues. Some resistance and even prejudiced attitudes towards this market stand out, particularly among male residents and those with basic education. The results indicate that the lower the level of schooling, the greater the prejudice and discrimination towards people from the LGBT community.

Admittedly, markedly homophobic attitudes are not observed in the present study. On the contrary, the local community surveyed, when confronted with homophobic statements, show, in general, feelings of repudiation. The majority did not agree at all with the repulsion towards homosexual behaviour, their eventual isolation, and their non-existence with the local community and other tourists. However, when confronted with the statements "tourists should repress their sexual orientation," and those who "cross-dress are not welcome in the North," the answers are not so strongly disagreed.

"People from the North" are by nature hospitable people; they have a genuine interest in meeting people, other cultures, in relating to each other. The hospitality of the local community is undoubtedly a competitive advantage for tourism in the region. The surveyed residents of the Northern region of Portugal provide these qualities. They show, in general, a spirit of hospitality and attitudes that reflect pro-diversity ideals and acceptance and valuation of citizenship and rights of LGBT people. However, there is still some prejudice and hesitations due to gender expressions or behaviours seen as non-standard, especially by males and those with lower levels of education. Therefore, there is still some preparatory work to be done, and all agents involved

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in the market and respective destination will have to make a concerted effort in order to make the slight resistance identified, basically linked to a lack of definition of opinion or interest, to the side of the "concordant".

As expressed by the local population in the analysis of their attitudes towards the LGBT market and the impacts of LGBT tourism in the region, there are many undecided people, especially with the positive impacts. Most indeed have a positive attitude defending that this activity contributes to the increase of diversity and leisure alternatives, and they recognize the benefits it can bring in the development of infrastructures and other facilities for the locals themselves. The negative impacts are not expressive. However, in specific themes, namely improving the quality of life, employment, public services, and heritage preservation, there is still some hesitation.

Taking this data into account, the first step was to understand how demographic variables may or may not be important concerning these factors. Thus, only in the residents' educational level was it found that the higher the level of education of the residents, the more positive they are about LGBT tourism and the less insecure they are about the negative impacts that could come from it. Secondly, and to aggregate the information collected, we tried to group residents according to their common perceptions regarding the impacts of LGBT tourism on the region. The result fell into three groups: Undecided, Enthusiasts, and Sceptics. The Indecisive, considered the youngest of the groups, with lower levels of education and where the male gender is more notable (regardless of the predominance of females in all groups), show the greatest share of indifference or lack of knowledge regarding LGBT tourism and the impacts that may arise, perhaps due to lack of knowledge of the area or indifference, resistance and/or prejudice towards the market. Enthusiasts, predominantly aged between 36 and 50, female and with higher education levels, are the most representative group and the most optimistic about LGBT tourism in the region. They are also the most hospitable and have the slightest fear of difference. On the contrary, they consider that LGBT tourism can benefit the region and agree that this niche market should be targeted. The Sceptics, the oldest group and the least apologist for LGBT tourism, although not agreeing with the negative impacts, reject the positive impacts attributed to LGBT tourism and the investment in this niche of tourism.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The success of the tourism bet is based on realistic, efficient, and transversal planning, ensuring the respect and integrity of the community, the tourists, and the destination itself. In this context, if Porto e Norte de Portugal intends to invest in the LGBT market, the conclusions drawn justify the need to adopt intelligent planning and policies that ensure the success of LGBT tourism in the region. In this assumption, as a diagnostic assessment for the planning of LGBT tourism in Northern Portugal, it was deemed pertinent to reflect upon and understand the behaviour and profile of the LGBT tourist followed by an empirical analysis of the hotelier's and local community's perceptions and attitudes towards the LGBT market.

The literature review contributes to understanding the market, its potential, and the socio-economic benefits for destinations that declare themselves as LGBT friendly. Fundamentally, we found that the LGBT tourist is a frequent traveller, with purchasing power, and when choosing a destination, they value safety, freedom, acceptance, and respect for LGBT status.

In Portugal, it is notorious the evolution in the acceptance of people from the LGBT community within the Portuguese society and the conquest of their civil rights (e.g., Law no. 9/2010 of 31 May; Law no. 2/2016 of 29 February). However, there are still some abusive situations towards the LGBT community that must be eradicated.

Through the studies applied to hotel front office professionals and to the local community in the North region, we were able to objectively identify their weaknesses regarding LGBT tourism, namely in terms of

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discrimination and prejudice towards the market. In the Northern region's hotels, discriminatory behaviours towards LGBT people, expressed by some front office professionals' denial of accommodation availability, were observed. However, it can be seen that in the answers, there was no correlation between the sexual orientation and gender identity of the customers, either regarding the time and quality of communication or the presence of less friendly, affectionate, attentive, and hospitable answers. As for the Local community surveyed, in general, they consider that the region has the necessary conditions to attract the LGBT market and that the advances achieved concerning the rights of people from the LGBT community improve the whole society and, in particular, Portugal's image in the world. They identify the hospitality of its population, its historical and cultural heritage, and nature and rural spaces as competitive advantages for tourism in the region and encourage investment in LGBT tourism. Recognizing their hospitality and attitudes towards diversity and acceptance of citizenship and LGBT rights, there is still some reluctance and discrimination concerning sexual orientation and gender identity, more expressive in male residents and basic education.

Following these assumptions, one can conclude that, yes, Porto e Norte de Portugal can and should invest in LGBT tourism, but this investment requires integrated and collaborative planning and management with all stakeholders.

This research presents some limitations, especially in terms of its scope. Firstly, the application of the empirical study delimited to the hotel industry and the local community circumscribes the results to the extent that it is not possible to perceive the attitudes and behaviours of all those involved in tourism. Secondly, there are some limitations concerning the sample regarding categories, gender, age, and educational attainment. Regarding possible future research lines, it is considered pertinent to consider an analysis of all the destination's stakeholders that would allow for the evaluation of the results of their perception in totality. It is also worth highlighting the need to extend the studies on this subject to the whole Portuguese territory, not only in terms of stakeholder perception and attitude analysis but also in conducting research on the LGBT tourist and on the perception of the local LGBT community. Finally, one of the research lines that assumes importance in future work is the analytical comparison of several case studies that determine the evolution of destinations.

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