Mixology: Straight Customers Mixing in Gay Space

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ABSTRACT

The gay population has become an increasingly in-demand consumer group in the United States. The rapidly growing awareness of the gay consumer evidences an understanding that the preferences and purchasing behavior of this group may provide significant benefits to organizations seeking to reach gay individuals. Major areas of advertising currently targeted toward gay consumers include real estate, entertainment, and travel; however, the largest category by far is *eat and drink*, which includes gay bars. There appears to be a weakness in the literature as it relates to the acceptance of mixed audiences (gay and straight) by gay consumers.

This study detailed a t-test procedure which demonstrated a statistically significant difference between gay males and gay females in their acceptance of a mixed audience. This study concluded that more research is needed in the area of mixed audience environments, and between gay and straight customers.

Keywords: mixed audience, gay space, gay bars

INTRODUCTION

A "straight" undercover cop walks into a gay bar and a riot breaks out. A "straight" tourist walks into a gay bar and a lawsuit is filed. While the preceding may sound like the beginnings of two great jokes, they are not; rather, they are actual occurrences that involved the invasion of "gay space" by straight people. In the former, on the night of June 28, 1969, undercover police officers entered a mafia-controlled gay bar located in Greenwich Village and began arresting gay men who were dancing with other gay men (Carter 2004). These arrests resulted in the now famous riots at the Stonewall Inn (Carter 2004). And while it should be noted that in 1969 homosexuality was illegal in all states except Illinois, these riots are widely credited with being the motivating force in the transformation of the gay political movement (Carter 2004). In the latter example, straight customers were frequenting a gay bar at Melbourne's Peel Hotel; and in 2007, a tribunal in Australia's southern Victoria state granted the bar an exemption to the equal rights laws by allowing the gay bar to turn away heterosexual customers (Van Atta 2007). The tribunal's deputy president stated, "allowing large numbers of straight men and women into the bar could 'undermine or destroy' the convivial atmosphere that the Peel Hotel sought to create for gay men" (Van Atta 2007). Recently gay bars have not only become more accepted in the mainstream, but have also become destinations for many members of the straight population (Moylan, 2012). While on the surface it may appear that an increase of customers would be beneficial to business, previous research has ignored the possible ramifications of gay bars and associated gay spaces being infiltrated with non-gay patrons.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

Previous research has established that gender shapes not only leisure experiences, but also space and place (Bell et al., 1994). Research has also explored how human status characteristics such as social class, race, sexuality, and disability have combined to create points of empowerment, especially in women's leisure experiences (Pritchard et al., 2002). The general consensus in previous research is that gay women have been marginalized in the physical and symbolic realm, including their leisure space (Bell et al., 1994). This does not always appear to be the case, as some recent studies suggest that the homosexual community is becoming more integrated with other groups in what used to be exclusively heterosexual leisure space (Visser, 2008). However, this ignores the fact that the so-called "homosexual community" is a heterogeneous, culturally diverse group of both men and women. Gay space is seen as identifying a gay lifestyle with a particular pattern of consumption, such as alcohol consumption, recreational pharmaceutical consumption, and casual sex (Hughes, 2003).

Gay space can, and does, create issues and tensions: "sexual coding of part of a city or beach destination as 'gay' transforms it into a zone of struggle and contradiction and oppositional social movements. A public space that is coded as sexual is counter to the widespread view that sexuality should be confined to private space and that most spaces are heteronormative" (Valentine and Skelton, 2003, p. 853).

Main Objective

The research question addressed the extent to which differences existed between gay males and gay females with regard to their openness to a mixed audience in the gay bar environment. The null hypothesis ($H_0 1$) was stated as: No statistically significant differences exist between gay males and gay females with regard to their openness to a mixed audience in the gay bar environment.

Study Significance

Service quality and customer satisfaction are considered to be the most important outcomes of all marketing activities in a market-oriented firm (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000). The obvious need for satisfying the firm's customer is to expand the business, gain a higher market share, and acquire repeat and referral business, all of which lead to improved profitability (Barsky, 1992). Customer satisfaction is a fundamental indicator of a firm's performance due to its links to behavioral and economic consequences beneficial to the firm (Anderson et al., 1997).

As globalization has spread and "expectations" examined in a cross-cultural context, research has found that tourists from the Asia Pacific region have significantly higher "expectations" of service quality compared to tourists from Europe and America (Armstrong et al., 1997). However, to the researcher's best knowledge, the idea has been ignored that similar types of differences in service quality expectations may exist within the gay community.

This study is both timely and beneficial to the *eat and drink* industry as the homosexual market grows and social acceptance of homosexuals increases. Although this research was limited to a hospitality industry, marketers of all products aimed at the homosexual segment of the population could benefit from additional empirical studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Research

"If you don't like gay marriage, blame straight people. They're the ones who keep having gay babies" (Ledden, 2013). The majority of young people are born into, and grow up within, heterosexual (straight) families where the expectation is that they, too, will be heterosexual (straight). Because of this expectation, gay adolescents lack any direct contact with gay men and lesbians; they have little knowledge of or experience with alternative sexualities and what it means to live a gay or lesbian lifestyle (Valentine and Skelton, 2003). "This ignorance and uncertainty is often compounded by the lack of acknowledgement of lesbian and gay sexual identities and lifestyles within schools, especially in relation to sex education" (Valentine and Skelton, 2003, p. 852). This inability to interact with other gay adolescents and mature gays at home or school helped develop the idea of "the scene" or gay space (Weston, 1995).

Gay Space

Bristow (1989) defines gay space as a concentration of bars, clubs, cafes, shops, residences and public spaces that cater to or are geared toward homosexuals. Much of the existing literature relating to gay space involves gay tourism and the gay tourist, or the existence of "gayborhoods" or "gay ghettos".

Gay space evolved out of necessity, a place to interact with others who are similar, and a place to feel safe. A gay male explained "it's about fear, it's about being frightened, I certainly don't feel frightened by straight women, but I do feel frightened, threatened by straight men, even in a gay bar" (Moran et al., 2003, p. 180). However, in recent years, the invisible sign saying "gay space, gays only" has been blurred as straights (heterosexuals) have started infiltrating gay bars and gay space. In 2012, Brian Moylan of *The Vice* wrote an article titled "An Etiquette Guide for Straight People in Gay Bars" to help combat some of the issues that have arisen with straights entering gay space.

Gay identities are directly tied to gender and reflect the significant differences between gay men and gay women. Most current work suggests that a homogeneous "gay community" and "gay space" exist, while obscuring the gay males' oppression of gay females which has led to the "norm" within

the gay community (Pritchard et al., 2002). The lack of a permanent, regular, defined, and recognized gay women's space in many locations has suggested that many gay women organize leisure among friends and acquaintances in their own homes (Bell et al., 1994). While gay women would choose to have a "public space" of their own, they are comfortable using their own domiciles and thus less likely to feel a strong connection to a particular "public space" such as a gay bar (Pritchard et al., 2002). With the influx of straight patrons into a gay bar, gay individuals may feel as if they have lost their "safe space" and may feel that they once again must conform to the heterosexual societal norms.

"Gayborhoods"

As gay tourism has grown, many cities have embraced the economic "boom" and attempted to become the gay tourist "Mecca". Many larger cities in North America and Europe have established visible commercial gay districts or "gayborhoods" since the mid 1900's. These "gayborhoods" typically feature gay or gay-friendly cafes, restaurants, nightclubs, and bathhouses. In St. Louis, Missouri, for example, The Grove features Manchester Avenue, home of leather bars and the LGBT center; and the Soulard "gayborhood" home of Clementine's, the oldest gay bar west of the Mississippi River (Breen, 2013). Atlanta, Georgia, features Ansley Park and Grant Park "gayborhoods" (Breen, 2013). And even the hub for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Salt Lake City, has a gay-friendly neighborhood called Sugar House (Breen, 2013). "Gayborhoods" are not unique to the United States, as Toronto, Canada is home to the "Gay Village" located in the Church and Wellesley area that features bustling bars and bistros as well as LGBT-owned restaurants and shops (Gayest International Getaways, 2011). In the Netherlands, Amsterdam features its own "gayborhood" – the Reguliersdwarsstraat which is commonly known as the Rue des Vaseline (Gayest International Getaways, 2011). And Valencia in Spain is home to the "gayborhood" commonly called Barrio del Carmen, a cultural powerhouse and the center of the city's gay nightlife (Gayest International Getaways, 2011).

After visiting as tourists, many gays decided to relocate and permanently reside in these areas. As these "gayborhoods" continued to grow and flourish more permanent residents, the areas were able to offer more to the tourists (Waitt and Markwell, 2006). The residents of these "gayborhoods" began to travel to other locations and countries and gay travel became a significant element in the modern gay lifestyle.

Gay Bars

As that famous American philosopher Homer Simpson said, "I like my beer cold, my TV loud, and my homosexuals flaming." (Groening, 1997); drinking and the gay community seem to go hand-in-hand. The gay bar is one of the most visible and accessible gay male leisure sites (Israelstam and Lambert, 1984). Since before the Stonewall riots in 1969, the gay bar has served as a pivotal place for gay male social life by providing a cultural environment where release and enjoyment can occur away from the "heterosexualized" locations of everyday life (Skeggs, 1999). And the gay bar has often risen to the status of a social institution (Achilles, 1967). As observed, "the bar is the primary and necessary loci for the male homosexual community" (Achilles, 1967, p. 69). In addition to providing a physical space for its patrons to gather and socialize, gay bars have also provisioned for the fulfillment of those social needs that are a prerequisite for such an aggregate of people to come together and thus form a subculture that is then replicated (Achilles, 1967).

Social Institution

Several studies have established the gay bar as a social institution. Most of these studies are at least three decades old and lack any modern documentation as to the clientele and service offerings of a modern gay bar. Some examples of these previous studies are: *The Development of the Homosexual Bar as an Institution* by Nancy Achilles (1967); *The Homosexual Community* by Evelyn Hooker (1967); *Other Voices: The Style of a Male Homosexual Tavern* by K. E. Read (1980), and *Liquor License: An Ethnography of Bar Behavior* by Sherri Cavan (1966). One of the underlying themes in all of these works is how the gay bar has helped what was perceived as a deviant behavior morph into a recognized social category.

Various Themes

It is important to note that just as various types of "straight" bars exist, so do various types of gay bars. Straight bars may range from strip clubs to sports bars, jazz clubs to dance clubs, country and western bars to biker bars. Gay bars may range from drag bars to leather bars, lesbian bars to piano

bars, as well as sports bars. While both listings are partial and not all-inclusive, vast differences within the "theme" of a bar, both gay and straight, exist.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

Quality of Service

If prostitution is the world's oldest profession (Robinson, 1929), then service quality has been around just as long (Gogue, 2016). Unlike a tangible good, a service is "manufactured" by the firm and then "consumed" by the customer on each encounter (Gogue, 2016). Tangible goods have measures of quality such as durability and number of defects or returns. However, service quality is intangible and is specific to each encounter with the service firm. Because of this, service quality is a key tool for a firm to achieve a competitive advantage and create customer loyalty. For decades, service quality has gained a significant amount of attention in the academic literature as well as within the service industries

Customers evaluate service quality by comparing what they expect with what they receive. Thus, service quality can be defined as the difference between customer expectation of service and the actual performance of service. Research shows that customers assess service quality along five dimensions: Assurance, Empathy, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Tangibles.

Research Setting

The gay population has become an increasingly in-demand consumer group in the United States (Iwata, 2006). Major areas of advertising currently targeted toward gay consumers include real estate, entertainment, and travel; however, the largest category by far is *eat and drink*, which includes gay bars (Rivendell Media, 2014).

The setting for this research was a "drag bar" or a "show bar" located within a major Midwestern city within the United States. The bar is open seven days a week, 365 days a year from noon until 3:00 A.M. Drag shows are offered five nights a week.

Limitations

Every effort was made to plan this research study to minimize limitations; however, limitations still exist and caution must be exercised in attempting to explain and generalize the results.

One limitation was within the sample group itself. The sample was limited to the customers of a specific establishment during a ten-day period of time. This research does not address all mixed audience environments or even all gay bar patrons, only those who happened to patronize this establishment during the time frame of this research.

Another limitation was the survey itself. The survey was self-administered and was administered in a bar where alcohol was being served. Thus the survey carries the attendant issues and ramifications inherent in self-reporting survey instruments, such as subjectivity, potential confusion and misunderstanding, and the lack of expert administration to each participant. In addition, the survey included the satisfaction scale and extensive demographic questions. Considering that businesses are bombarding customers with performance/satisfaction surveys coupled with the length of this instrument, fatigue is certainly a point to consider in assessing both the percentage and the quality of the responses. Lastly, the issue of comparability must be acknowledged. The lack of empirical studies involving mixed audiences within gay bars limits comparisons of methods and results with other research.

Survey Method

The survey instrument was comprised of a pen and paper survey consisting of 46 items. A focus group was used to develop this survey and the survey was pilot tested and modified prior to administration. The survey included demographic questions, questions requested by the owner and management of the bar, 22 items based on the SERVQUAL scale dimensions, and a follow-up type question designed to measure the acceptance of straight patrons within the bar by gay patrons.

The anonymous surveys were distributed to the patrons of this establishment over a ten day period. Surveys were distributed randomly to visitors of the bar during the "cocktail" shift (noon to 8:00 P.M.) and during the "night" shift (8:00 P.M. to 3:00 A.M.) daily. All surveys were numbered consecutively, and a total of 2,100 surveys were distributed. Of those, 1,854 surveys were returned

and 1,364 were usable by the researcher. Based on the number of usable surveys, the response rate was 64.95%. All usable surveys were coded and entered into an IBM SPSS vs. 23 statistics spreadsheet.

Validity

Validity for this study was determined using content validity, construct validity, and face validity. Content validity was assessed through two methods, expert input from the owner and manager of the establishment. A pilot test was conducted on the 16 employees of the bar. Construct validity was assessed through the application of factor analysis in order to statistically determine the validity of the instrument. Face validity was established by three local residents who had patronized the establishment, and a research methodologist. The customers and methodologist did not participate in the pilot study or the focus group.

Research Participants

Descriptive statistics for research participant demographic information such as education level, gender, sexuality, age, and ethnicity were collected by the researcher. Results are reported in Table 1.

Table1. *Frequency and Percent of Responses for Respondent Demographic Data*

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	1054	77.3
Female	300	22.0
Sexuality		
Gay (Homosexual)	1020	74.8
Bisexual	201	14.9
Straight (Heterosexual)	128	9.4
Age		
20's	582	42.7
30's	427	31.3
40's	233	17.1
50's	90	6.6
60 and up	23	1.7
Education		
Some High School	52	3.8
High School Graduate	437	32.0
Associate Degree	395	29.0
College Degree	410	30.1
Post Baccalaureate Degree	61	4.5
Ethnicity		
African American	271	19.9
Asian	30	2.2
Hispanic	111	8.1
Native American	10	0.7
Caucasian	801	58.7
Bi-Racial	126	9.2

As shown in Table 1, severe and uneven splits in the number of participants were identified for all categories. Especially noteworthy were the uneven number of participants for the comparison variables such as number of males (1054) and females (300); number of individuals who reported their sexuality as gay (homosexual), bisexual, and straight (heterosexual) as 1020, 201 and 128 respectively; and the number within each age group (20's n = 582, 30's n = 427, 40's n = 233, 50's n = 90, and 60 plus n = 23).

Closer examination of the demographic variables revealed uneven distributions among the sexuality groups (homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual) and age groups for males and females. Such uneven distributions among the comparison variables would yield skewed outcomes and present serious problems in the interpretation of the results. In order to make fair comparisons of the unequal strata (e.g., demographic variables) in the population, the researcher selected a disproportionate allocation sampling for between-strata analysis (Daniel 2012). It was necessary to select a sufficient number of cases for each category of gender, 300 recommended (Daniel 2012), for good reliability when performing a factor analysis. It was also desirable to maximize the sample size for each stratum;

therefore, equal allocation (balanced allocation) was appropriate for this study. The researcher composed a sample from the population by using all the females in the population and randomly selecting 300 males from the population. For the purpose of analysis, the age group identified as "60 and up" was merged with the 50 – 59 year old age group to create the "50 and up" age demographic used for the remainder of this study. The sample used to analyze the data and answer the research question included 597 cases. Closer examination of the sample data showed that uneven numbers within each category still existed; however, the number of participants for the comparison variables were more evenly distributed for males (n = 298) and females (n = 299); age groups (20's n = 251, 30's n = 210, 40's n = 101, and 50's n = 33); and sexuality (gay n = 375, bisexual n = 111, and straight n = 107).

RESULTS

Data Analysis

RQ1 and $H_0 1$ were tested using the sample taken from all returned surveys. For RQ1 and $H_0 1$ an independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between gay males and gay females with regard to their openness to a mixed audience in the gay bar environment [$t_{9261)} = 7.780$, p <0.01]. For this comparison, gay females had a higher mean score than gay males; the mean scores were 4.356 with a standard deviation of 1.00 compared to a mean score of 3.244 with a standard deviation of 1.30, respectively.

Outcome

The results revealed that gay men were more open to the idea of a mixed audience environment than gay women. These results are not surprising, as straight women, knowing ahead of time that the majority of the customers are gay men, patronize a gay bar for the entertainment aspects and to gawk at the public displays of affection between those of the same sex, while assuming that they will be left alone and not "hit on" by the vast majority of the customers (Kavanaugh, 2013). For gay men, these straight women are just viewed as more of an annoyance and do not negatively impact the overall satisfaction of, or affect their views of the mixed audience environment. However, these straight women may appear to pose a threat to gay women and thus cause gay women to be less satisfied within the mixed audience environment. For the industry, openness by gay males towards the mixed audience is a positive note. The demographic data suggests that the primary customer within the gay bar is male, and the vast majority of survey respondents are male as well.

CONCLUSION

Future Research

The obvious first step in future research should be a re-administration of the survey within this establishment to confirm the results of this initial survey. Once confirmation is achieved, the next logical step would be to replicate the study in gay bars located in different geographical locations. The researcher initially attempted to do this, but access was severely limited, with some bar owners in various locations becoming somewhat hostile. An additional research area would be to expand this survey from gay bars to other "mixed-audience environments" such as Catholic bingo halls, with the Protestants being the minority demographic composition creating a mixed audience environment; or surveying smokers and nonsmokers in an establishment that does not ban smoking indoors; or even surveying customers within a strip club where the female customers are the heterosexual customers and the male customers are the homosexual customers (from the original survey).

Implications

Marketing researchers may use the results to change or strengthen the marketing message directed at the gay consumer; social scientists may use this research to evaluate and investigate other mixed audiences and the effect this "mixing variable" has on the satisfaction of individuals. Social scientists may also use this research to evaluate and investigate the concept of "space" or more specifically, "gay space".

While the number of gay bars has been declining and most likely will continue to decline; and since almost all industry segments have been challenged by the most recent recession, it is imperative that bar owners and management staff attempt to find a balance between the core gay customer and straight customer. Being ever mindful, potentially once gay equality issues are not a constant focal point in the media, the straight customers and younger gay customers may find another location in which to socialize, drink, and be entertained.

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