

## LESBIANS AS TOURISTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TOURIST MOTIVATIONS IN MEXICO

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*This paper is an exploratory research of the tourist motivations of lesbians in a context different from those previously studied. Evidence from Western countries suggests that sexuality plays a quite important role in tourism by homosexuals, at least for gay men. By recognising that males and females experience tourism differently, this study aims to contribute to an expanded and more specific understanding of lesbians as tourists in the context of Mexico. Based on qualitative interviews – unlike previous findings based on empirical evidence – this study suggests that sexuality is not as important for determining lesbians' tourism experiences as has been commonly argued. In this study, other aspects, particularly cultural experiences, seem to dominate in lesbians' tourism motivations. While this study does not, by any means, discard the importance of sexuality in lesbian tourism motivations, it does postulate that other factors are as important as sexuality in shaping the tourism experiences of lesbians, at least in a non-Western context.*

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**Keywords:** lesbians; tourist motivation; gay tourism; Mexico; qualitative research



## INTRODUCTION

Within a number of studies on tourism and homosexuality, it has been suggested that homosexuals have travel motivations similar to those of mainstream tourists. Relaxation, rest and socialisation, to mention but a few, are holiday motivations that apply to both heterosexuals and homosexuals. However, according to existing evidence, sexuality plays a particularly important role in homosexuals' travel experiences, choices and identities (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000). Tourism provides homosexuals with the opportunity to get away from the social constraints of everyday life and, thus, to be open about their sexual orientation (Hughes, 1997).

However, the evidence on which these assertions have been made has come largely from studies in the context of quite specific Western countries and from the reported holiday experiences of white male homosexuals. Thus, what is known today regarding homosexuals' tourist experiences and motivations represents, at the most, the experiences of extremely specific groups of gay men. Therefore, the experiences of lesbians – and especially those from developing countries – have been significantly neglected. Bearing in mind that 'there is no such thing as a 'typical homosexual' (Hughes, 2002, p. 23), more studies on specific social and cultural contexts need to be done on issues of tourism and lesbians.

In this vein, almost a decade ago, Hughes (2007), an internationally quoted scholar, observed that there is extremely little published research on lesbians and tourism. In his paper entitled 'Lesbians as tourists: Poor relations of a poor relation', the author stated that the study of tourism and lesbians is significant because of wider implications for lesbians' holidays and holiday marketing.

Bearing in mind that sexual orientation and societal marginalisation can influence consumer behaviour, tourism has relevant implications for various aspects of lesbian life, some of which are positive and others arguably less so. The study of tourism and lesbians – particularly from the perspective of different socioeconomic and cultural contexts – can thus contribute to a further understanding of diversity in societies based on issues of sexual orientation, gender and homosexuality.

This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to a further understanding of lesbians as tourists through a study of their travel motivations in a Mexican context. First, the paper provides a review of some of the main propositions about tourism and homosexuality, lesbians as tourists and lesbian travel motivations. Then, it briefly describes the research setting, Mexico, as a gay tourism destination and existing cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in this country. Next, details of the study's methodological procedure are given. Findings are then presented and discussed in the context of previous findings on lesbian tourism motivations in the West. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW *TOURISM AND HOMOSEXUALITY***

Gay men and lesbians have been commonly regarded as a profitable market group (Pritchard and Morgan, 1997; Russell, 2001; Stuber, 2002). Their perceived economic power, discretionary leisure time and the specific interests that represent a preference to be high-spenders have led to this perception. Although not all gay people are able to get involved in tourism (Casey, 2009), market reports, such as that of Community Marketing, have found that gay men and lesbians have the largest amount of disposable income of any niche market, making up five per cent or more of the USA consumer market ([www.communitymarketinginc.com](http://www.communitymarketinginc.com), 18/06/2015). The potential profitability of the homosexual community is further evidenced when companies such as American Airlines, American Express, Ford, Avis and Virgin have paid to gay and lesbian themes in their marketing (Hughes, 2006). The fact that tour operators, cruise companies, travel agents, accommodation providers, airlines and destinations have become interested in the gay and lesbian holiday market (Peñaloza, 1996) have also recognised the profitability of the homosexual community as a travel group. All these issues have led to a relatively recent interest by academicians.

The relationships between tourism and homosexuality have been discussed and researched in the English-speaking world since the late 1990s. This research has focused on the alleged economic power of gay men and primarily suggested that the gay tourism market is growing rapidly in the United States (Holcomb & Luongo, 1996) and

other parts of the world (Russell, 2001). The significance of holidays for gay men's construction of homosexual identity has also been a pioneering research interest in sexuality studies of tourism (Hughes, 1997). The sexual behaviour of gay men in tourist spaces (Forrest & Clift, 1998) and tourist destinations, as well as holiday motivations of gay men in England (Clift & Forrest, 1999), and the spatial distribution of gay tourism and recreation establishments around the world (Ivy, 2001) have also been incorporated into research agendas on tourism and homosexuality. Furthermore, the social processes that shape gay leisure spaces and the experiences of lesbians in the United Kingdom (Pritchard, Morgan & Sedgley, 2002), as well as the impact of tourism on emerging gay enclaves (Visser, 2003), have also been included in expanding discussions of tourism and sexuality. More recently, the requirements and current holiday profiles of older white British gay men (Hughes & Deutsch, 2010) and European destinations' competitiveness in the male gay tourist segment (Melián-González, Moreno-Gil & Araña, 2011) have also become the subjects of tourism research.

Interest in tourism and homosexuality has grown considerably, revealing issues that are frequently echoed in the literature. In these studies, it is claimed that homosexuality has an influence on holiday patterns in terms of the personal significance of tourists' sexual identity. As Hughes (1997) notes:

Because of social disapproval of homosexuality, many gay men are forced to find gay space... gay space is limited, and gays find it necessary to travel in order to enter that space... The holiday itself can provide for the gay man an opportunity to confirm his identity... Given that society has discouraged openness about being gay, the holiday provides the perfect chance to come out, if only temporarily. The gay identity can be adopted and confirmed 'in secret'. (p. 6)

In addition to the alleged significance that tourism has for the gay community, there appears to be wide agreement regarding the gay and lesbian community as a lucrative market. Based on market surveys, it has been claimed that the gay and lesbian community has more disposable income and a distinct propensity for travel (Holcomb & Luongo, 1996), and this community is expected to increase as a consequence of growing acceptance of sexual and gender minorities (Guaracino, 2007). According to a 2014 survey by Community Marketing, Inc. (CMI) (2014) – an organisation with

wide experience in gay and lesbian market research – 29% of gay and lesbian consumers are frequent leisure travellers, taking five or more trips with 10 or more hotel room nights per year. In terms of hotel branding, Marriot and Hilton hotels are found at the top of gay and lesbian-preferred brands, and, in hotel selection, location and price value are the two most important factors. In addition, CMI reports, homosexual tourists prefer to travel to destinations where they feel safe and do not have laws that discriminate against them. These findings suggest that the gay and lesbian community – or at least specific subgroups of the homosexual population – is indeed a lucrative niche market. What is important to note, though, is that the figures on which the alleged economic significance of the gay market depends largely represent privileged gay men and not the entire population (Puar, 2002).

In the same vein, the currently common assumptions derived from both academic and market research on tourism and homosexuality must be treated with particular caution. First, it must be borne in mind that the available findings derive largely from selected groups that are by no means representative of the entire homosexual population. It can be noted that these figures come from samples commonly made up of white male gays who are open about their sexual orientation or identity and who come from countries identified as developed. For example, the sample in Clift and Forrest's (1999) study on destinations and holiday motivations – one of the most frequently quoted studies on the topic – was composed of gay men residing in southern England. Another study by Hughes and Deutsch (2010) was based on 23 white British men who self-identified as gay. Similarly, in their study of resources required for a sun and beach destination, Melián-González, Moreno-Gil and Araña (2011) surveyed 346 gay tourists (mainly British and German) who stayed in gay-exclusive resorts in Gran Canaria, Spain. The most recent findings on the market by CMI (2014) were obtained from 3,503 self-identified gay and lesbian consumers in the United States who read lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) publications, visit LGBT websites and attend LGBT events. Other related studies have been carried out in the United States, Britain and other parts of Europe (see Table 1) and reveal, further, how figures and findings on tourism and homosexuality have been obtained, for the most part, from cases in quite specific cities in developed

countries and from informants holding quite particular characteristics.

**Table 1** Empirical research on tourism and homosexuals: Profiles, motivations and experiences (selected list)

Study	Issue of study	City and country	Informants	Research method	Sample size	Sample procedure
Casey (2009)	The pursuit and/or experience of sex and the intersection of travel, sex and social class in reinforcing binaries of exclusion/inclusion within male gay travel	Melbourne and Sidney, Australia	Sexually active gay men	Semi-structured interviews	21	Snowball
Clift and Forrest (1999)	Tourist destinations and holiday motivations of gay men	Brighton (primarily), United Kingdom	British gay men	Survey	562	Bars/clubs in the main gay venues and issues of a local lesbian and gay magazine
CMI (2014)	LGBT tourism demographic profile	United States	Self-identified members of the	Survey	3,503	Gay and lesbian consumers

			LGBT commu nity in the United States			who read  LGBT publications,  visit LGBT websites  and attend LGBT events
Herrera and Scott (2005)	The use and significance of leisure travel for gay men	'Soledad', United States	Gay men	In-depth interviews and participant observation	9	Snowball and purposive
Hughes (2002)	The choice and rejection of holiday destinations	Manchester, United Kingdom	Gay men	Structured interviews	40	Opportunistic and convenient
Hughes and Deutch (2010)	Requirements and current holiday profiles of older gay men	London and Manchester, United Kingdom	British men self-identified as gay	Semi-structured interviews	23	Purposive and snowball
Melián-González <i>et al.</i>	Destinations' competitiveness in the gay tourist segment	Gran Canaria, Spain	British and German gay tourists, primarily	Survey	346	Seven exclusive gay accommodation

(2011)			y			resorts
Poria and Taylor (2001)	Tourist experiences	Near London, United Kingdom and Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Israel	Lesbian and gay men from United Kingdom and Israel	Semi-structured interviews	78 (39 lesbians and 39 gay men)	Snowball
Pritchard <i>et al.</i> (2000)	Sexuality and holiday choices	Wales and the Netherlands	Lesbian and gay residents	Focus groups and interviews	26 (12 lesbians and 14 males) and 2 specialist gay tour operators	Snowball
Pritchard <i>et al.</i> (2002)	The social processes that shape gay and lesbian leisure spaces and experiences of lesbians	Manchester, United Kingdom	White lesbians	Informal in-depth interviews	10	Snowball

Second, more specifically, most of what is known so far about tourism and homosexuality largely comes from self-identified male homosexuals. To some extent, they share leisure and tourism patterns that may be different from those experienced by other homosexual communities in the world.

As Hughes (2004, p. 70) stated, 'The surveys are inevitably biased towards those gays who are "out", who are willing to identify as gay and who read particular magazines, use particular websites or attend particular events.' Thus, studies have often portrayed only the voices of men, and the majority of what is known today about tourism and homosexuality has been drawn from the experiences of men. Therefore, existing knowledge on this topic is, at the most, time and place specific, and it does not represent the experiences and subjectivities of all homosexual communities, including those of lesbians in the context of developing countries.

Third, existing studies have also been for the most part undertaken in the West. As Table 1 reveals, studies have frequently been undertaken in North America and Europe (see also Ballegard & Chor, 2009) with a few recent exceptions in countries identified as developing (Mendoza, 2013). Given that socioeconomic and cultural conditions – including sex, age, gender identities, ethnicity, economic power and social status, among others – can shape the experiences of gay and lesbian communities, there is no reason to believe that the experiences of gay men in the West are the same as those experienced by gay men and lesbians in the Southern Hemisphere, or elsewhere.

## **TOURISM AND LESBIANS**

There has been some recent interest in the tourism patterns of lesbians. However, despite Hughes's (2007) call for research almost a decade ago, there is extremely little published research on lesbians as compared to those on gay men. This situation is true for both developed and developing countries, though it is exacerbated in the context of the latter. Neglecting lesbians in tourism studies may have to do with their perceived reduced market power and their socialisation patterns. According to Hughes (2007):

Lesbians have not been considered economically powerful or visible and have not been targeted as a separate consumer group. . . . They are also considered to be more difficult to reach as they are less concentrated in cities, less likely to socialise in gay bars or events and are more oriented towards private social activity and entertainment. There has been a perception of lesbians (associated, in

part, with an anti-capitalist feminism) as being less interested in 'frivolous' leisure activity, fashion and beauty. (p. 17)

In addition, the exclusion of lesbians from tourism studies can be related to the exclusion of women in general, as a marginalised group (Swain, 1995). The absence of lesbians in tourism research may also reflect the male, patriarchal and heteronormative dominance that tourism research has long experienced (Pritchard *et al.*, 2002; Puar, 2002). Thus as Pritchard *et al.* (2002) point out, lesbians are, at the least, doubly marginalised in the tourism literature for being women and homosexual at the same time.

Bearing in mind that, as Hughes argued (2007), 'there is no more reason to believe that lesbians' holiday profiles are the same as those of gay men's than there is to believe that males and females generally have the same motivations and behaviours' (p. 19). The existing knowledge on gay men's holidays is of little help to reveal lesbians' tourism patterns. Men and women, as socially and culturally constructed beings, experience tourism differently, regardless of their sexual orientation. As Kinnaird, Kothari and Hall (1994, p. 7) claim, 'Women and men are involved differently within tourism processes, and, as a result, the relationships, consequences and the eventual configuration of the tourism experience for hosts and guests is gender specific.' Thus, while it is possible that homosexuality and social constraints influence holiday patterns and experiences of both gay men and lesbians, the holiday needs, motivations, experiences and behaviours of lesbians may be quite distinctive from those of gay men. As compared with men, lesbians experience tourism differently for at least two reasons: on the one hand, for being homosexuals and, on the other, for being women. Other important factors, such as socioeconomic conditions and cultural backgrounds, also play a role in differentiating the holiday experiences of lesbians – not only from gay men but also from a variety of lesbian groups.

## **LESBIANS AND TOURIST MOTIVATIONS**

Tourism motivations can be defined as the biological and sociocultural forces that drive travel behaviour (Pearce, 2005, p. 55). Identifying tourist motivations is relevant for tourism market segmentation and for the study of tourists' expectations, satisfaction,

experiences and behaviour. The importance of tourist motivations has been echoed in academic research, as they have been one of the most consistent, important subject areas in tourism research (Xiao & Smith, 2006).

The number of studies looking at gay men and lesbians' motivations is small. Although these studies have focused directly on homosexuals' reasons for going on holiday, motivations can also be explored through the experiences of tourists. According to Clift and Forrest (1999):

An alternative approach to the study of tourist motivations involves asking about tourists' holiday experiences. It is reasonable to assume that tourists will generally plan holidays, which provides them with the experiences they are seeking, and so patterns of holiday activity may offer a good marker of principal motivations underlying holiday planning and destination choice. (p. 617)

Pioneering studies on gay male tourists' motivations revealed that what gay men look for in a holiday is to some extent similar to what mainstream tourists seek (Hughes, 2006; Pritchard *et al.*, 2000). In Waitt and Markwell's (2006) words, 'For many gay men, the travel motivations are similar to those of many young, single, heterosexual men' (p. 249). However, some studies have concluded that, for homosexuals, there is a particular need to be with other gay people and have access to gay spaces and gay-friendly places (Hughes, 2002). This has been empirically evidenced, although no differentiation between gay men and lesbians has been clearly made, despite the fact that tourist motivations are gendered (Kinnaird *et al.*, 1994). In their study of gay destinations and holiday motivations, Clift and Forrest (1999) found that comfort, good food, rest and relaxation, sunshine, good nightlife, landscape and culture are important elements in tourist motivation of gay men. Likewise, other factors such as socialisation with other gay men, gay spaces and opportunities to have sex have also appeared as relevant holiday motivations of gay men. The findings of recent surveys have been, in some ways, consistent.

The qualitative, exploratory study by Pritchard *et al.* (2000) on sexuality and holiday choices confirmed the idea that thereasons to travel of gay men and lesbians were similar to those of non-gays. By investigating the travel motivations of gay and lesbian tourists who had 'come out' and who had not, however, they concluded that

sexuality did influence choices of accommodation, booking methods (see also Poria & Taylor, 2001), destinations and packages for many of those interviewed. They also concluded that the need to feel safe, to feel comfortable with like-minded people and to escape from heterosexism emerged as key influences on their choice of holiday. Although their study did not clearly differentiate the experiences and motivations of gay men from those of lesbians, the authors found that lesbians are more likely to search for acceptance and do not associate their holidays with sex, or at least as much as gay men do.

According to Pritchard *et al.* (2000), the need to escape from the pressures of being gay was perceived as the most significant motivating factor for taking a holiday. In the authors' words, 'A key motivation is to be able to enter a world where they can behave in ways that would not be sanctioned or acceptable at home' (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000, p. 279).

Hughes (2002) extended the analyses and findings of Clift and Forrest (1999) and Pritchard *et al.* (2000) by further examining the reasons underlying destination choices— with special reference to risk and avoidance of destinations. Hughes concluded that the types of holidays that gay men go on are the same as those of the rest of society. Gay men choose holidays that are focused on sun, scenery, culture, heritage, sports and entertainment, to name a few. The author points out that motivations such as social interaction, regeneration, self-realisation, freedom, ego-enhancement, evaluation of self, prestige and escape apply in the same way to gay men as they do to others. In addition, Hughes (2002) reported that there was little support for the view that gay men travel in order to be more open about their sexuality or to have more sexual encounters but that sexuality has a significant influence on destination discard and choice. Although Hughes' (2002) research certainly extended and reinforced previous analyses, he recognized that, because his study sample was both opportunistic and convenient, it was unlikely to represent gay men as a population. In a similar vein, the nineteenth LGBT Tourism and Hospitality Survey undertaken by CMI (2014) found that relaxation, fun and culture are the top three motivations of the LGBT population surveyed in the United States. The study revealed, however, that a third of LGBTs have chosen a hotel based on their LGBT reputation. This suggests that for some, the gay-friendly character of a holiday destination is important as well.

Without supporting empirical evidence, Hughes (1997) suggested that one of the reasons why gay men take holidays is the process of forming and consolidating identities, that is, to be themselves. This reason can be explained by social oppression of homosexuality. Of all the variations of sexual behaviour, homosexuality has often been the target of social, religious, legal and gender oppression across different cultures and through various historical periods (Katz, 1992; Reding, 2000; Ruse, 1988; Weeks, 1989). Even though some writers have argued that, over recent decades, many homosexual people have experienced an end to homosexual oppression in some countries (Katz, 1992), negative social, legal and religious reactions toward homosexuals still exist around the world (Reding, 2000). In this vein, holidays play an important role in allowing homosexual people to indulge their sexuality away from everyday social constraints experienced at home.

Holidays have a particular significance for homosexuals: they offer the most significant opportunities for constructing, confirming and/or changing their sexual identity in an anonymous way (Cox, 2001; Hughes, 1997). This is because, most of the time, homosexuals live in areas dominated by heterosexism, which imposes social constraints on homosexuals for both gay men and lesbians.

Taking into account that the gay male community is not homogenous (Casey, 2009), there is reason to believe that the situation of lesbians is no different. Lesbians, as socioeconomic, cultural, gendered and political groups, have different characteristics from those of men and from those of other women. Thus, lesbians need to be studied in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts in order to gain a more holistic understanding of lesbians as tourists worldwide.

Within this framework, the purpose of this study was to explore the tourism motivations of lesbians living in different parts of Mexico. This paper sheds light on how the tourism motivations of lesbians have different socioeconomic and cultural characteristics from homosexuals already studied. In addition, it contributes to an analysis of the relationships between tourism and sexuality in the context of developing countries, which has been largely neglected in the study of tourism and homosexuality.

## THE STUDY

### SETTING

The study was undertaken in Mexico. Over the last decade, researchers have claimed that Mexico is growing in popularity as a gay tourist destination. Cantú(2002)reported, 'Mexico seems to represent a homosexual paradise free of pressures of a modern "gay life style", where sexuality exists in its "raw" form' (p. 148). This can be observed in the fact that Mexico appears in international gay guides. For example, *Spartacus International Gay Guide* (Bedford, 2005), one of the most widely used information sources for gay travellers around the world (Ivy, 2001) –although focused on men (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000) – provides homosexuals with information about bars, cafes, accommodation, dance clubs, saunas/baths, cruises and swimming spots around Mexico. This guide reports Acapulco, Guadalajara, Mexico City and Puerto Vallarta as important gay cities, though other cities and popular tourist resorts are described as well. According to the *Spartacusguide*(Bedford, 2005):

Mexico is a tourist paradise: wonderful beaches, impressive mountains, vast landscapes from the jungle in the south to the desert in the north, a millennial historical past and the melting of three different cultures into a very dynamic and coloured [sic] society. Big, exciting, modern cities, fascinating small colonial villages and rich archaeological areas make of this country a living museum. Last but not less, the authentic Mexican cuisine makes a visit to Mexico a must.(p. 682)

The existence of national travel agencies devoted to gay and lesbian populations is also an indicator of the popularity of Mexico as a tourism destination. *Conociendo México Gay (Getting to Know Gay Mexico)*, for example, is a travel agency dedicated to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestite, transgender, transsexual and intersexualcommunity. It is the first specialised gay agency for group travel in Mexico and offers a large variety of tours ranging from urban destinations to archaeological and gastronomic attractions – all this in a LGBT environment (Turismo Gay, 2012).

Nevertheless, homosexuality is still a target of social and religious disapproval in Mexico. The social and religious

environment in most of Mexico has historically been, and still remains, repressive and sometimes dangerous (Reding, 2000). In Mexican culture, society generally disapproves of homosexuality (Carrier, 1995). Throughout the country, Roman Catholic teachings that homosexuality is a sin have contributed to social intolerance. In order to live an undisturbed, openly homosexual lifestyle in most of Mexico, including large cities, homosexuals need to hide their sexual orientation. Otherwise, there is the risk of violence against them (Reding, 2000). For example, in a recent case, in December 2013, a lesbian couple were travelling on the Mexico City underground. While they were holding hands, a man said to them, 'Filth! If other people do not urinate or defecate on the street, why do you do this here?', referring to the couple's public demonstration of affection. The couple decided to ignore the man's insults and kissed each other. Then the man hit one of the women on the back. They responded to the attack, and he continued hitting them. They called the police, and the man was apprehended. The couple experienced, however, a lack of understanding in the authorities (Reyes, 2013).

On the other hand, homosexuals have made significant political and legal gains in Mexico, and this will eventually have an effect on homosexuals' holiday experiences. Mexico City, for example, has allowed same-sex couples to marry legally and adopt children since 2010 (Malkin, 2010), and the Mexican Supreme Court ruled in August 2010 that all the states of Mexico must recognise same-sex marriages registered in Mexico City (Agren, 2010). How these laws have been enforced in reality, though, is something that is outside the scope of this research but that deserves special attention.

## METHODS

Researching issues related to homosexuality presents difficulties (Hughes, 2002; Pritchard *et al.*, 2000). A literature review suggests that one of the particular difficulties researchers have faced when investigating the relationships between the gay community and their travel experiences is the availability of informants. This may have much to do with the fact that the gay community is a hidden group (Renzetti & Lee, 1993) and its size is ill-defined. Hughes (2004) stated that 'the number of gays and lesbians is unknown; there is

considerable disagreement about definitions and, in addition, some proportion of that population (however defined) will not identify as such to others' (p. 66). Because of the normally small samples in studies, generalisations and assumptions about the homosexual community are therefore hard to make (Poria & Taylor, 2001). However, qualitative methods and snowball sampling procedures reveal a greater range of homosexuals' characteristics, language and tourism patterns than more quantitative surveys do (Hughes, 2004; Pritchard *et al.*, 2000).

According to published findings, qualitative methods are currently commonly used for data collection not only in tourism studies in general (Ballantyne, Packer & Axelsen, 2009; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Riley & Love, 2000) but also with regard to the holiday experiences of homosexuals. Several pieces of work support this observation. When conducting their exploratory investigation of the travel motivations of gay and lesbian tourists, for example, Pritchard *et al.* (2000) opted to use in-depth interviews and focus groups, as these would allow the researchers to understand and conceptualise the connection between homosexuality and holidays. Similarly, Poria and Taylor (2001) opted for a face-to-face interview method of data collection when exploring how the Internet provides the gay and lesbian population with sources that support anonymity. This qualitative technique was selected since the authors wanted to gather a rich, rather than representative, sample of perspectives. Hughes' (2002) study is a further instance of the use of qualitative approaches in the study of homosexuality in the context of holidays. This researcher opted to undertake a small number of structured interviews with gay men in order to determine what influences their choice and rejection of holiday destinations. The rationale for his qualitative approach, the author argued, lies in the ability to gain insight into behaviour in a way that is difficult through quantitative methods. In a similar vein, when examining the use and significance of leisure travel by gay men in a small city, Herrera and Scott (2005) opted to use in-depth interviews and participant observation since they believed that these approaches help explore informants' reality and allow them to speak in their own voice. More recently, Casey's (2009) research on gay men's motivations to undertake holidays and Hughes and Deutsch's (2010) study of holiday profiles of older gay

men reflect the value of qualitative methods – particularly in-depth interviews –in the study of homosexual tourism experiences.

Having established the validity of this methodology, this study also adopted a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews. The study was undertaken in Central Mexico. Twenty-one Mexican women self-identified as lesbians or gays<sup>2</sup>residing in different parts of Mexico were interviewed.The criterion of self-identification was adopted bearing in mind that, as Hughes (2000) recognised, ‘Sexuality is a very fluid concept and being homosexual is ultimately a self-defined category’(p. 202). Initially twenty-eight women were approached for participation; however, seven could not participate due to time restrictions mainly. The informants were recruited largely via connections with the authors of this paper. The sample was, in some ways, opportunistic, utilising the researchers’ personal contacts and social groups – with some snowballing associated with these. Snowball sampling is useful when the population is so widely dispersed that other sampling techniques may not be efficient; it is used to identify potential participants when appropriate candidates are hard to locate and involves using referrals from initial participants (Altinay&Paraskevas, 2008). The final number of informants was based on the researchers’ judgement, reaching a theoretical saturation, that is, when no new categories emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although this procedure was opportunistic, a special effort was made to gather women from diverse socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds so that diverse voices could be heard. Guidelines for interviews were obtained from the literature review.The instrument included questions regarding destination choice, travel patterns (e.g. frequency), reasons for tripsand the interviewees’ perspective on the relationship between their sexual orientation and holidays. Examples of specific questions are as follows:

- How often do you travel?
- What type of destinations do you usually go to?
- Do you travel alone or with somebody?
- What type of activities do you commonly get involved in?

- What makes you travel when travelling for pleasure?
- What type of accommodation establishments do you usually stay in?
- How important is the gay character of a destination for you to visit it?
- How do you define yourself in terms of sexual orientation?

The research goal and interview procedure were introduced to each interviewee. With interviewees' prior consent, each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis and interpretation. Each researcher independently reviewed the transcriptions and then sought agreement on the tourist motivation categories that emerged.

## FINDINGS

The women in this study reported, on average, taking three trips a year. While most of them reported travelling within Mexico, some of them have travelled abroad as well. Destinations in the United States, Canada and Europe were reported for international travel. Particularly on domestic trips, lesbians travel quite often with their family. Sometimes, they travel with their partner or friends or, on rare occasions, alone.

As stated by Pritchard *et al.* (2000), tourists travel for a multitude of reasons, and lesbians have much in common with mainstream tourists. This study reinforces this notion by revealing a large number of motivations for the lesbians studied. However, unlike other studies on homosexuals' motivations, experiencing new places and, especially, learning about other cultures in Mexico was the most reported motivation by the lesbians in this study. The cultural and, to a certain extent, natural richness of Mexico was a motivational factor for many of the informants. Culture as a tourist motivation for male homosexuals has also been reported in other research (Clift & Forrest, 1999), but, for the women of this study, culture is an extremely important factor in travelling. A single, 45-year-old informant said:

I go to places where the culture, music, traditions and food are appealing. I like to travel around Mexico because of the cultural

attractions. I like to meet different people, experience their lifestyles and Mexican traditions. This is the main reason why I travel.

An informant who normally travels twice a year added, 'I like to experience different places, and I like to learn. I love culture, and I am fascinated with learning about other ways of thinking and people's customs.' A woman who has travelled widely within Mexico and abroad reinforced this finding. 'What makes me travel? Getting to experience new places, meeting different people, enjoying architecture, typical food and items of the region is what motivates me to travel.' Whilst, in other studies, local culture has ranked eighth, in terms of what gay men look for in a holiday (Clift & Forrest, 1999), culture was mentioned as a top motivational factor for the lesbians in this study. This may be explained by gender dimensions, as it has been suggested that women place significantly more importance on holiday cultural experiences than men (McGehee, Loker-Murphy & Uysal, 1996). This suggests that lesbians' motivations are diverse, but, in the context of the Mexican women studied, culture (e.g. lifestyles, traditions, cuisine, behaviours, languages, architecture and museums) is an extremely important reason for lesbian travel.

Pritchard *et al.* (2000) found that, for the majority of their respondents, sexuality was an important determinant of their holidays. Seeking safety in gay spaces, a desire to be among like-minded people and the need to be oneself and escape from heterosexism were important motivations for gay and lesbian holidays. The findings of this study, however, suggest the opposite: the majority of the lesbians interviewed actually denied that their sexual orientation has an influence on their holiday patterns and experiences. Virtually all of them declared that their sexuality is an independent issue from their decisions to travel. A 37-year-old informant who has travelled widely abroad and within Mexico noted:

My trips are not associated with my being gay. I have visited many places just because I want to visit them. For my partner and me, travelling is important because we enjoy being together and discovering new places together. We decide on and make bookings together. We do everything together, but we do not search for gay places.

In a similar vein, a 28-year-old woman travelling at least twice a year said:

Once, I went to a gay place, but I did not like it. To me, it is not important to visit gay places. For my partner and me, other things such as museums, colonial cities, the people, the history and the like *are* important.

The above assertions were consistent with the activities and travel patterns that the majority of the informants engage in during their holidays. The descriptions of their holiday activities reinforce the idea that sexuality is not an important component of lesbian holidays. A housewife stated, 'When I travel on holiday, I usually get involved in hiking. I explore new places, try to get in contact with nature.' Likewise, an informant who works as a teacher reported, 'I often walk around. I talk to people, try to experience local culture and get involved in local people's customs and everyday life.' A woman who normally travels four times a year added, 'It is not relevant for me to go out to gay places. Sometimes, I just stay in my room resting, watching TV, reading or listening to music.'

Furthermore, almost none of the informants indicated an interest in meeting other lesbians or staying at gay or gay-friendly hotels. In fact, unlike findings that suggested that the gay and lesbian market is associated with specific brand hotels (CMI, 2014), extremely few informants in this study look for luxurious or expensive hotels. The great majority stated that they are not demanding in this regard: cleanliness, tranquillity, safety and a good location were the basic requirements for accommodations. A single 27-year-old said, 'I just need a clean and safe place, that's it!' A woman that commonly travels to visit her family members added, 'When travelling, I normally stay at my friends or my relatives' house. All I need is a bed, water and a toilet.' Furthermore, the notion of lesbian sexual orientation was not associated with food establishments in the interviews. None of the informants reported looking for gay or gay-friendly places to eat. In fact, most of them reported eating at local food markets (*mercados*) where traditional, authentic food can commonly be found in Mexico. Certainly, gay spaces were mentioned, but, as suggested by the extracts above, it was not reported as being relevant to their travel motivations and experiences. Instead, visiting gay spaces – mainly bars and nightclubs – was rather a matter of chance. A typical response was given by a woman who often travels with her family or partner. 'I am not the type of

person who is into gay bars and that stuff. If there is a chance to go, I go; if not, everything is okay.' Then, the gay space seems to be irrelevant for some lesbian travel.

Although this study's findings suggest that sexuality does not influence holidays – or, at least, not significantly and not for everyone – holidays do give lesbian couples the chance to spend more time together and strengthen their relationship, similar to heterosexuals and any other couples. An informant who has been living with her partner for 10 years said:

Travelling is important for us. We enjoy ourselves when travelling together. We get to know each other better. Holidays give my partner and me the chance to be together all the time, something that does not happen during the rest of the time, due to our work schedules.

An informant who sometimes travels with her family reported that 'during holidays, my partner and I escape from our everyday routine. We give ourselves time as a couple, and, when we travel together with our families, we can spend more time and share more with them.' So, lesbian travel, as any other form of leisure travel, provides individuals with the chance to enhance partner and family relationships. In this regard, the role of tourism is not differentiated on the basis of individuals' sexual orientation.

Furthermore, a frequently reported motivation and activity while travelling was to strengthen family bounds by travelling and spending time with family members and visiting relatives. This motivation, though, does not seem to have much to do with sexuality but perhaps more with cultural issues. It might be deeply associated with the meaning and importance that family has historically had for some Mexican people (Jones, 1948). In this vein, for the lesbians interviewed, holiday activities and travel patterns are intrinsically related to family ties: they travel with family members (commonly parents, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces). This aspect shapes their holidays. According to a woman who travels four or five times a year, 'Where I go and what I do depends on who I am travelling with. If I go with my family, we go to family places.' A woman who loves travelling for pleasure said: 'I travel a lot with my family; my sister lives in Jalisco [a western state] and my cousins in Monterrey [a northeastern city], so my family and I visit them once or twice a year to spend time all together. We also go to other places in

southern and central Mexico to spend a week as a family. I love spending time with them.'

Finally, for others, the spiritual dimension of travelling is the main motivating factor. An interviewee who has travelled extensively around Europe said, 'I am a free spirit. Travelling feeds my soul. I cannot go for a long time without travelling. It makes me feel alive. It makes me feel very excited. It fills me up.' Getting away from routines, relaxing, socialising and having fun were also reported as reasons by the informants – motivations reported by gay men and mainstream tourists as well.

The empirical evidence and reflections above suggest that the differences between mainstream and lesbian tourism are not significantly determined by the sexual orientations component. Based on this exploratory study, there are similarities between lesbian tourism and perhaps many other forms of leisure travel in terms of the travel patterns, the motivations themselves, the leisure activities women get involved in and the significance that travel has for them. Unquestionably, for some lesbians tourism may be relevant for their own sexual or cultural identity, but something similar happens with other forms of heterosexual tourism, such as the case of heterosexual males who travel abroad to reinforce their masculinity (Garrick, 2005). Then, this study suggests that sexuality may be part of motivational factors in lesbian tourism, as it may be in other forms of leisure travel in the heterosexual world.

## CONCLUSIONS

Much of the existing literature on homosexuality and tourism tends to be male dominated and comes from quite specific contexts, in particular, those of specific Western countries. The holiday motivations and experiences of lesbians in the context of developing countries have thus been largely neglected. The existing literature suggests that homosexuals' holiday motivations are similar to those of other tourists but that sexuality has a critical impact on their tourism choices and experiences (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000). Set in the context of a non-Western country, this study, however, suggests that, for some lesbians, sexuality does not play a relevant role in tourism experiences. While generally shared motivations such as rest and relaxation were reported by the women studied, cultural experiences

and strengthening family ties were often reported as travel motivations. Tourism may give lesbians an opportunity to spend time with their partners – as it does for heterosexual couples – and the use of gay spaces is more a matter of chance rather than planned behaviour.

This study thus suggests that special caution is needed when talking about possible lesbian holiday patterns, motivations and experiences. By incorporating the voices of lesbians from different contexts than those already studied, this study has shown that not all tourism motivations apply to lesbians. The type of travel in terms of purpose, people they travel with, their economic power and family relationships, among other aspects, shape their varying tourism motivations. In addition, scholars need to bear in mind that talking about lesbians as a homogenous group is risky, since the experiences of those yet unheard cannot be said, by any means, to be represented by the voices of lesbians studied here. If intra-gender differences often indicate the varying ways in which different women and men experience social practices (Kinnaird *et al.*, 1994, p. 28), researchers, therefore, should also consider intra-sexual and intra-cultural differences in order to gain a more integrated understanding of lesbians.

While this study widens the current understanding of lesbian tourists' motivations by presenting contexts never studied before, some possible limitations need to be considered. Particularly, it is highly likely that the fact that respondents were addressed based on the authors' personal contacts, their holiday motivations will be somehow similar; so a different sampling procedure may be useful to gain a larger variety of informants. Likewise, some issues still need further attention. The degree of the impact that culture has on lesbian tourists' experiences – as compared with that of sexuality and other issues, such as age and ethnicity – needs to be understood in order to gain a deeper understanding of lesbians as tourists.

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