"Pre-topsurgery, the body scanning machine would most likely error:" Transgender and gender nonconforming travel and tourism experiences

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing a qualitative, grounded theory approach, we examined the travel experiences of transgender and gender non-confirming tourists, an under-researched segment of the tourist population. We report findings based on 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed for emergent themes. We found that traveling as a transgender and gender non-confirming individual can be complex with at least some or many additional considerations, behavioral changes, and emotional labor related to their gender identity and gender expression when moving into different spaces or situations. Transgender and gender non-confirming tourists often have feelings of fear and anxiety related to sharing and avoiding sharing their gender identity when going through tourist processes related to identification documents, security thresholds, and check-in procedures. However, participants also reported having positive experiences while traveling. Based on these findings, a substantive theory of transgender and gender non-confirming tourist experiences was developed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the transgender and gender non-confirming (TGNC) community has become more visible in the United States due to increased activism, political debates, media attention, and advocacy from TGNC celebrities, such as Caitlyn Jenner and Leverne Cox (Truit, 2016). An estimated less than 1% of the U.S. population identifies as transgender, accounting for about 1 million adults (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017), while a recent study by UCLA Law reported that 27% of youth in California identify as gender non-conforming (Lawson, 2017). Other evidence that suggests a growing acknowledgement of the TGNC community includes new non-binary options on identification documents in the U.S. states including Oregon, California, Washington, and Washington D.C. (Sanders, 2018). In this research, we use the phrase transgender and gender nonconforming from the American Psychological Association (2015a) meaning "those who have a gender identity that is not fully aligned with their sex assigned at birth" (p. 832), yet we recognize there are many other terms or phrases used within the community such as trans* or the transgender spectrum (Tate, Youssef, & Bettergarcia, 2014). We also use the term cisgender, which refers to "having or relating to a gender identity that corresponds to the culturally determined gender roles for one's birth" (American Psychological Association, 2015a).

The current LGBTQ tourism industry is estimated to be over $200 billion a year (Out Now, 2015). According to non-peer reviewed marketing surveys and popular press, TGNC tourists face unique travel challenges as compared to cisgender tourists, such as navigating airport security and accessibility to single-stall restrooms (Greater Fort Lauderdale & Community Marketing Inc., 2014; Mohn, 2017). Although lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ[1]) tourism has recently received increased attention by academic scholars (e.g., Hughes & Deutsch, 2010; Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, & Araña, 2011), much of this work has focused on the demographics and motivational factors of wealthier, middle-class white gay men without children living in urban Western societies (e.g., Clift & Forrest, 1999; Hughes, 2003; Visser, 2003). Most of these academic studies have lacked a holistic view of the LGBTQ community and assumed the market was homogenous (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016), leaving a void in the literature, in particular for TGNC tourist experiences.

This void can possibly be attributed to the notion that research on the LGBTQ community "can be most vexing, quite dynamic, and assuredly contextual. Seemingly innocuous words are oftentimes fraught with implicit and unexamined heterosexist and homophobic notions or may be perceived by an LGBT individual as offensive," making this type

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[1] We use this acronym to refer to the larger community, yet recognize many other acronyms exist (LGBT, LGBTQIAA+, queer, etc.) and are used by various organizations. For consistency, we will utilize this acronym throughout the paper. However, when citing other literature, we use the language or acronym used by that author.

of research entangled with numerous methodical and ethical challenges in particular for inclusion criteria and the related language (Bettinger, 2010, p. 45). Additionally, access to and recruitment of LGBTQ participants can be difficult (Guillory et al., 2018). In one of the largest national studies in the United States in 2011 with 6450 transgender and gender non-conforming participants, the authors reported that much of the sample "lived in extreme poverty" and were "four times more likely to have a household income of less than $10,000/year compared to the general population" (Grant et al., 2011, p. 2), which of course does not leave much room for discretionary income for travel purposes.

Despite such research challenges and the TGNC community's statistics on household income, a few tourism organizations have proactively reached out to TGNC tourists in recent years. For example, the Greater Fort Lauderdale Destination Marketing Organization provides a website devoted to transgender tourists (https://www.sunny.org/lgbt/transgender/) and includes updated information and resources such as organizations and medical resources that are relevant to their needs and interests.

The aim of our research was to obtain an in-depth understanding of TGNC tourists' experiences while traveling. Since many hospitality and tourism organizations attempt to embody an open, welcoming, and accepting environment for guests and employees and then showcase this to the outside public, we hope our findings would be of great interest to them to provide optimal hospitality experiences.

2. Literature review

2.1. LGBTQ tourism

LGBTQ tourism has been shown to be a catalyst for economic development and social benefits for tourism destinations (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2017). As early as the late 1980s, several popular press media outlets labeled the LGBTQ community as a "dream" market due to the potential for higher incomes (e.g., Rigdon, 1991), and the acronym DINK (dual-income, no kids) has often been used to describe LGBTQ tourist couples. Despite these reports, a recent study by the Williams Institute showed that the LGBTQ community face heightened burdens relating to economic conditions as LGBTQ Americans are less likely to be financially thriving than heterosexual Americans (Gates, 2014). In particular, as previously stated, TGNC individuals are likely to be living in extreme poverty (Grant et al., 2011).

Tourists make safety and assessments about a destination before and during traveling (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Risk and safety assessment of a destination is critical for the LGBTQ tourist, yet little known research exists in this area. In 2018, it is still illegal to identify as LGBTQ in 72 countries, and in 8 countries homosexuality can result in death (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2017). Yet, within the U.S., there are changing cultural attitudes where 64% of Americans believe that people should be accepting of LGBTQ individuals, which leaves a large percentage who still feel otherwise (Brown, 2017). Despite these legislations and attitudes towards the LGBTQ community, LGBTQ tourists engage in travel behaviors. Researchers from the 1990s and 2000s have examined the motivational factors of gay tourists and found that gay men travel with an intention to express their sexuality, meet other gay men, validate one's sexual orientation, explore sexual opportunities, and be in a safe space (Clift & Forrest, 1999; Melián-González et al., 2011; Waitt & Markwell, 2006). For queer tourists, traveling to new destinations is an opportunity to be one's self and explore one's sexual identity. Other researchers found the importance of gay spaces such as bars, restaurants, and neighborhoods in the cultivation of LGBTQ identity, community support, and destination branding (Boyd, 2011; Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Hughes, 2003).

2.2. Mistreatment and discrimination of the TGNC community

TGNC individuals often experience discrimination in employment, health care, and numerous other societal avenues (Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2006; Coleman et al., 2012; Grant et al., 2011). Homicide rates of transgender people tend to be less than cisgender individuals, however young transfeminne Blacks and Latinas are killed at a higher rate due to the intersections of racial hierarchies and discrimination (Dinno, 2017). In health care, transgender persons rate their general health as fair or poor relative to cisgender adults; transgender individuals are more disadvantaged than cisgender individuals with respect to health care access and use and experience a lack of health care coverage, health care providers, and dental coverage (Meyer, Brown, Herman, Reisner, & Bockting, 2017). Furthermore, economic challenges are often experienced by the TGNC community as 15% of transgender people are unemployed (about three times more than cisgender) and 29% of transgender persons live in poverty as compared to 14% of the U.S. population (James et al., 2016). Thirty-nine percent have experienced serious psychological distress as compared to 5% of U.S. population, and 40% have attempted suicide as compared to 4.6% of the general U.S. population (James et al., 2016). All of these studies highlight that TGNC individuals experience on average more discrimination and distress as compared to cisgender individuals.

A few scholars in hospitality and leisure have examined TGNC individuals and reported mostly negative experiences. For example, Elling-Machartzki (2017) found transgender people in the Netherlands often felt unsafe in environments with mainstream sports and physical activities and venues, such as when visiting swimming pools. Oakleaf and Richmond (2017) examined transgender adults' experiences in public recreation, and found TGNC people often manage their risks, negotiate privilege, and embody their gender while utilizing public recreation. While participants explained they felt safe in some public parks, they also described struggles related to maintaining that safety. To manage their safety, they were hyper vigilant, continually worked to "pass" as a binary gender, and avoided "certain spaces and activities" (Oakleaf & Richmond, 2017, p. 113). Their participants were often met with spaces that assumed cismorativity, yet these leisure activities allowed them to negotiate and fully embody aspects of their gender identity, contributing to an experience that was somewhat positive. Negative travel experience is not limited to TGNC individuals as people of color, a community of people who have historically and today also experience oppression, often face discrimination while traveling (Lee & Scott, 2017).

3. Methods

Tourism is a unique phenomenon of movement of people to a new place. Obstacles may be faced that cisgender tourists do not face or experience while traveling, and unearthing these experiences of the TGNC community is the goal of our study. Due to the lack of research on TGNC individual's experiences while traveling, we used a grounded theory, qualitative approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After approval of all procedures from the Institutional Review Board at our university, we conducted 15 one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place either in person (n = 1), over the phone (n = 6), or video chat (n = 8), depending upon the participant's preference, availability, or location. The in-person interview took place in the second author's single-occupancy work office, which has a great deal of privacy.

A combination of interpretative and critical social science approaches informed our philosophy towards this research (Neuman, 2011). In this philosophy, we assume meaning is constructed "in ongoing processes of communication and negotiation" through human interactions that are culturally constructed (Neuman, 2011, p. 102). We use this approach to "discover what actions mean to the people who engage in them" (p. 103). Our philosophy towards research is best summed that we want to "acquire an in-depth understanding of other