UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press

ADVENTURES IN SMALL TOURISM: STUDIES AND STORIES

Edited and with an Introduction by Kathleen Scherf

ISBN 978-1-77385-477-9

The Development of Inclusive Small Rural Destinations for Gay Tourists in Canada

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The typical image of rural regions in British Columbia (BC) is a scene of rugged wilderness and abundant nature. However, these perceptions of rurality cannot be generalized to all people. For those comprising the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two-spirit (LGBTQ2+) community, rural areas are commonly viewed as constraining environments that foster repression and conformity (Gottschalk and Newton 2009; Bell and Valentine 1995; Fenge and Jones 2012; D'Augelli 2006). Outward expressions of homosexuality in rural environments can result in overt discrimination against LGBTQ2+ people, as such acts are often considered taboo in contrast to hegemonic expectations of family and masculinity in rural settings (Swank, Frost, and Fahs 2012; Gottschalk and Newton 2009; Bell 2000; Fellows 1996). This can be partly attributed to the traditional view of rural areas as a haven for people holding socially conservative values regarding marriage, sexuality, and lifestyle (Bell and Valentine 1995). Gay men have avoided tourism in small rural areas in large part due to this perception. The primary focus of this study is on the rural travel experiences of gay men as opposed to the entire LGBTQ2+ community.

Gay tourism can be defined as the development and marketing of tourism products and services to LGBTQ2+ people (UNWTO and IGLTA 2017). Gay travellers visit predominantly urban gay spaces that provide a welcoming environment and allow the establishment of connections to locals and travellers of the same sexual orientation (Herrera and Scott 2005; Cox 2002; Gottschalk and Newton 2009). Urban areas have been particularly important to gay men

because they allow them to connect with their community (Hughes 1997). Consequently, the majority of research on gay tourism focuses on urban areas (Johnston 2005; Hughes 2006; Guaracino 2007; Hughes 2003; Visser 2014) or on coastal beach resort towns (Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, and Araña 2011; Hughes, Monterrubio, and Miller 2010; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Robards 2017). Event tourism for gay men also receives significant attention, including in studies on gay pride parades (Johnston 2005), gay sporting events like the Gay Games (Guaracino 2007; Hughes 2006), and even events that are not explicitly associated with gay tourism but that embrace alternative sexualities and encourage attendance by gay tourists (Baker 2017). In direct contrast, rural gay tourism has not been extensively studied (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2016).

In this chapter we explore gay tourism in rural areas of BC, Canada. We investigate the motivations, behaviours, and preferences of gay tourists who reside in BC and travel intra-provincially. To understand if the gay travel market is an area of interest for small rural destinations, we analyze how rural BC destination marketing organizations (DMOs) approach gay tourism and what actions these DMOs are taking to attract LGBTQ2+ people. Because research on gay tourism has centred on urban destinations, we aim to broaden our understandings of gay tourism by focusing on smaller, rural regions.

For the purpose of this research, we define rural destinations as parts of the province that are situated outside of BC's four census metropolitan areas (CMAs): Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, and Abbotsford-Mission (Statistics Canada 2019). Based on 2019 population estimates, the four CMAs have a total population of 3,710,300, or 69.75 per cent of BC's total population of 5,319,324 (BC Stats 2023). The province as a whole is over 944,000 square kilometres in size (Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development, n.d.). By comparison, the four CMAs in BC comprise just 7,090.82 square kilometres, or 0.75 per cent of BC's total land area. With 30.25 per cent of BC's population living outside of its four major urban metropolises and distributed throughout the remaining 99.25 per cent of BC's land area, the majority of the province is rural and not densely populated, with destination centres being correspondingly small. This vast rural space increases opportunities for rural tourism throughout the province. This study can thus help tourism researchers and professionals better understand how rural destinations can attract gay visitors and develop inclusive communities that welcome diverse audiences.
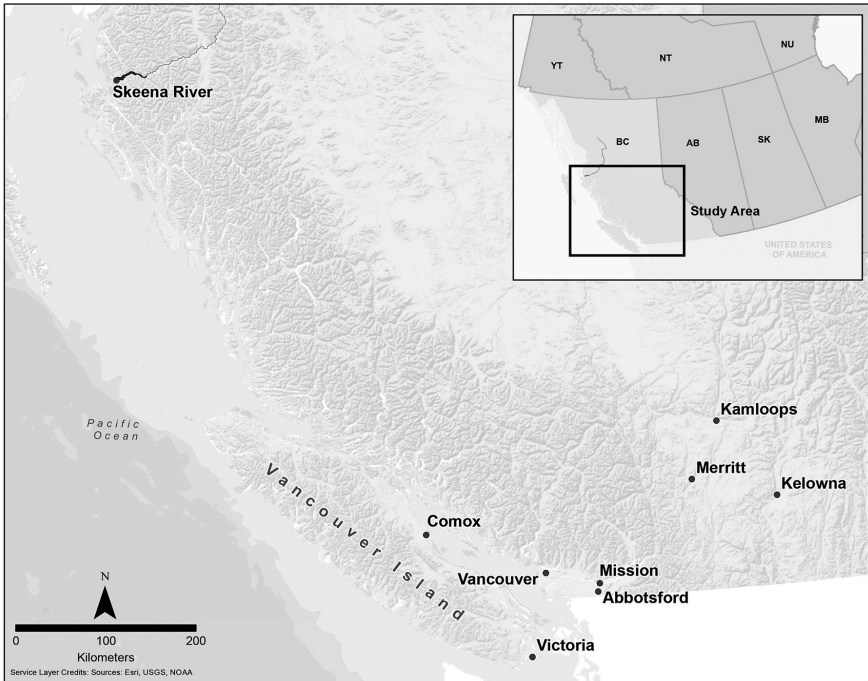
Figure 1.1: Map of Southern British Columbia.

Map created by Olea Vandermale.

Dimensions of Gay Travel and Tourism

Gay tourism has slowly become more mainstream as attitudes toward homosexuality improve in the Global North. Gay travel rose in visibility when advertisements targeting gay travellers started to appear in the late 1960s. This brought to the forefront a form of tourism that was usually hidden to protect the identity of gay travellers (Waitt and Markwell 2006). During this same period, gay villages emerged as trendy urban destinations that provided outlets for LGBTQ2+ people to escape homophobia in their daily lives and enter environments that were openly gay (Clift, Luongo, and Callister 2002). It was in these types of spaces that gay men were able to safely express their homosexuality. With the acceptance of homosexuality increasing substantially in the Global North, the expression of sexual freedom may appear to be less

contentious. However, that is not necessarily the case in many regions. One study in Britain found that only 5 per cent of queer couples felt comfortable expressing open affection with their partner while travelling overseas, in sharp contrast to 84 per cent of heterosexual couples (Clarkson 2017). Such findings suggest that gay men experience varying levels of trepidation about openly expressing their sexuality while travelling in unfamiliar environments.

Gay travel is often seen as a form of identity tourism (Cox 2002; Hughes 1997; Monterrubio 2009), and sometimes as a way for gay men to explore spaces that foster self-discovery related to their sexuality (Waitt and Markwell 2006). Many rural-dwelling members of the LGBTQ2+ community do not feel comfortable expressing their queer identity until they visit gay spaces, typically in urban areas, where they feel accepted for who they are (Gottschalk and Newton 2009; Herrera and Scott 2005). Therefore, gay men living in rural areas or small towns undertake travel to traditionally gay destinations to access environments that do not exist in their hometowns (Clift and Forrest 1999), and as a way of escaping the constraints of these heteronormative environments (Herrera and Scott 2005). Gay tourism can also benefit local gay men in host destinations by providing opportunities for them to interact with other gay men and embrace their sexuality (Monterrubio 2018). Travel thus allows gay men to escape daily constraints, be they social, religious, or otherwise, that prevent them from openly embracing their gay identities (Roth and Luongo 2002).

Gay travellers are sometimes defined homogeneously as a group of high-spending individuals with a great propensity to travel because they often visit similar destinations (Golding 2003). This perception is in part due to researchers focusing heavily on the perspectives of younger gay men and neglecting to explore how travel needs and motivations differ among the entire gay population (Hughes 2005). This gap in research means that the diversity in the gay travel market is not recognized. Similar to the broader tourism market, age, race, occupation, socio-economic status, and marital status are factors that influence the desires and abilities of gay travellers (Hughes 2003). There is, however, a growing body of literature showing that the gay travel market is very heterogeneous (Ro, Olson, and Choi 2017; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2016). In fact, destination selection and travel interests among gay men are very similar to those of heterosexual tourists (Blichfeldt, Chor, and Milan 2011; Clift and Forrest 1999; Weeden, Lester, and Jarvis 2016), with the added requirement of gay-friendliness (Hughes and Deutsch 2010). Despite

this, the profile of gay travellers varies from that of the average tourist in some respects. One study conducted in the Canary Islands found gay tourists were more highly educated, stayed longer in the destinations, were more likely to travel alone, and had an average daily expenditure that was substantially higher than that of the general tourist (Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, and Araña 2011). While research specific to gay travellers' preferences needs further research, the most critical consideration for queer travellers is the gay-friendliness of a destination (Hughes 2005; Herrera and Scott 2005).

Gay-friendliness of a destination, which correlates directly with safety, is a central consideration for many gay travellers (Want 2002; Pritchard et al. 2000). Destination selection is often viewed through a risk-avoidance lens to reduce the chance of encountering homophobia and unsafe environments when travelling (Hughes 2002). Many LGBTQ2+ tourists feel they do not receive the same treatment on holiday as heterosexual tourists. Research indicates that queer people often change how they act and conceal their queer identity while on vacation (UNWTO and IGLTA 2017). In this way, gay tourists have fundamentally different concerns when travelling compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Most queer people refuse to travel to destinations that are socially, culturally, or legally unwelcoming to homosexuality. With gay tourism frequently undertaken to escape the constraints of a generally heteronormative society, the safety and acceptance of individuals who wish to express their queer identities while on vacation is an important consideration for destinations looking to attract an LGBTQ2+ market (Pritchard et al. 2000). Small destinations may be especially challenged in this regard.

Major urban centres and beach resort towns in North America and Europe have historically been quintessential gay travel destinations, as they frequently have large LGBTQ2+ communities that attract additional LGBTQ2+ people from other places (UNWTO and IGLTA 2017). As a result, many gay resort towns are situated in close proximity to urban metropolises, particularly in the United States (US), to ensure easy access for urban-dwelling gay men. North America and western Europe are the biggest gay destinations, with large urban capitals like Berlin and San Francisco the most prominent hot spots, alongside a few gay-coded beach resort towns like Key West and Provincetown (Waitt and Markwell 2006). However, increasing acceptance of homosexuality, combined with a growing desire by gay men to expand their travel beyond the walls of traditional gay utopias, means small rural destinations have a new opportunity to market themselves to gay travellers

(Roth and Luongo 2002). Rural communities are increasingly embracing the LGBTQ2+ community, as is the case in the US state of Arkansas, where Eureka Springs' Spring Diversity Weekend and Fayetteville Pride attract a significant number of gay visitors (Kesslen 2019). Currently, large-scale events for the LGBTQ2+ community in rural areas are uncommon, but some exist and can act as a means of promoting rural gay tourism. The rural ChillOut Festival in Daylesford, Australia, which is located roughly a hundred kilometres north of Melbourne, attracts over fifteen thousand visitors annually, including an international contingent (Gorman-Murray, Waitt, and Gibson 2012; Gorman-Murray 2009). Similarly, the former Michigan Womyn's Music Festival attracted a considerable lesbian audience to a women's-only event in rural Michigan (Browne 2011). Even traditionally conservative spaces are starting to provide distinctly gay event offerings, with the gay rodeo circuit as one example that actively subverts the hyper-masculine rodeo scene (Hanvelt 2004). Events marketed to the LGBTQ2+ community, combined with a growing acceptance of homosexuality, can all help grow the tourism industry in rural areas.

Research Methods

This qualitative research explores rural gay tourism in BC based on in-depth interviews with DMOs and self-identified gay travellers. The choice to centre this research on the perspectives of gay men was made as a result of the challenges of representing the diversity of the LGBTQ2+ communities in one study (Gottschalk and Newton 2009; Toth and Mason 2021). BC was used as the focus due to the diversity of rural tourism opportunities within the province. DMOs that promote rural BC destinations are responsible for marketing these areas both within Canada and internationally. Each DMO's perspective on gay tourism are presented from one or more staff member from each organization. We used a semi-structured approach for interviews with rural DMOs. The interview guide was provided to the interviewee at least one week in advance to provide adequate time to consult their team on current practices and future plans related to gay tourism. We used convenience sampling to reach possible participants, utilizing the researchers' existing connections. In total, five DMOs participated in this study: one provincial DMO, located in Vancouver, and four other DMOs representing different regions of the province's interior.

The second aspect of this research involved self-identified gay men living in BC as a significant, if smaller, segment of BC's intra-provincial travel market. Intra-provincial travel comprises 52.4 per cent of total visitation in BC (Destination British Columbia 2019). As a result of the identified gaps in research related to rural gay tourism, we considered this aspect critical to our study. While we also used a semi-structured approach for interviews, we did not provide participants with the guide in advance. To recruit participants, we invited some personal acquaintances of the first author, as he is an active member of the gay community in BC, to participate in the study. We used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants, along with referrals from two LGBTQ2+ community organizations based in rural BC. Ultimately, twenty individuals from eight municipalities across the province participated in this study. The average age of the gay men participating in the study was 33.4, with an age range between 25 and 50.

We developed interview guides separately for both research groups. For rural DMOs, the goal was to understand each organization's perceptions about gay tourists and determine how gay tourists are considered as a segment of the travel market. The interviews with gay men explored pull factors for travel, perceptions of rural destinations in BC, the impact of this perception on travel decision making, and how past rural travel experiences in the province have shaped future intentions to visit small rural regions. We primarily conducted in-person interviews, with phone or Skype used for only two interviews conducted after COVID-19-related public-health orders were instituted in March 2020. Each interview was voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The interview transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis, with themes established using open coding. The researchers then collaboratively discussed this coding to determine appropriate sub-themes and collectively reviewed the data analysis and validated the results. Each participant was emailed a copy of their verbatim interview transcript to review and edit. All of the gay men interviewed for the study are identified by pseudonyms.

Gay Men's Perspectives of Rural Travel

Research participants held generally positive perceptions of rural BC as a travel destination. Every interviewee spoke about the province's natural beauty and the wealth of outdoor activities as a core tourism offering. Participants

were unanimous in their belief that rural BC has a unique mix of nature and local culture that contribute to a one-of-a-kind tourism experience.

> I think the likes [of visiting rural BC] would be . . . meeting people and having experiences that I've never had in [urban] BC. You know, I've ate fresh seafood straight out of the ocean with some First Nations friends of mine at the mouth of the Skeena River, and we went on a little boat ride around the islands with them and saw dolphins jumping up alongside the boat, playing with us. It was just unreal. (Preston, interview with authors, 14 March 2020)

Participants also highlighted the welcoming nature of rural BC residents, and how this adds to the unique experiences they have had in rural areas.

> You start talking to people at . . . a pub or a bar and everyone's like, "Come on over here gentlemen!" And you get to know, I guess, a little bit more of the flavour of the town, and I kind of like that community vibe. (Edward, interview with authors, 25 February 2020)

In addition to offering a great tourism experience and welcoming residents, participants living in urban communities talked about rural travel as a means to get away from the hectic nature of city life. Going from dense urban living to slower-paced, small-town vacations was one appealing aspect of travel to rural BC.

> [Rural towns] are quiet; I would say they're relaxing, and they're quite remote if you want to get away from the hustle and bustle. (Ken, interview with authors, 3 March 2020)

In general, outdoor activities, events, food, nightlife, arts, and cultural offerings were some of the most popular attractions and amenities highlighted by participants. Outdoor activities and camping were the most commonly mentioned travel interests specific to rural BC.

> Predominantly one of the driving forces for the types of vacations that we're looking for have to do with outdoor experiences—that has lent itself toward looking at rural places. Because

they're traditionally located in spaces that provide easy access to those types of experiences of hiking, mountain biking, kayaking, camping. (Connor, interview with authors, 26 February 2020)

In spite of a desire for more remote experiences, accessibility was a distinct concern for several participants. The remote nature of many parts of rural BC made visiting difficult, particularly for urbanites without a vehicle.

It's just hard to get to the [rural] places. I was torn with the idea of going north for some small trip in the summer, and it just takes time to get up there. So I would say the remoteness can be a negative . . . and we lost the Greyhound [bus transportation], so there's not really many options for travel within rural BC unless you own a car. (Dorian, interview with authors, 13 March 2020)

While there is a desire to visit rural areas in BC, participants also pointed out that gay spaces and events are limited. The majority of participants could not recall a single gay space in their past rural travels in BC. At least two participants indicated that travelling to visit gay spaces and events is an urban pursuit, and therefore not an interest of theirs when visiting rural areas.

Even with some gay events taking place in smaller cities and rural towns throughout the province, participants had mixed opinions of rural communities in BC. They noted that rural BC still presents a challenging environment for openly gay people, in part due to perceptions about how accepting rural BC communities are of homosexuality.

The only other dislike [about travelling in rural BC] is that feeling of not being able to necessarily be open with expressing my sexuality in some of these small communities because of—really, only my perception—that people in those areas may be less welcoming toward that. . . . I would say [there's] acceptance, yes; I wouldn't necessarily say that I think rural BC is gay-friendly. I think there's not a lot of folks that would dislike you or turn you away from their business if you were gay . . . but at the same time I think people just don't know a lot of gay people in rural communities, and are either curious, or they don't know how to act, or think it's odd or strange. So I get that in rural communities

sometimes, where I might mention my partner and people kind
of give me a weird look. But I don't think it's homophobia, per se;
it's just not something that they're used to as much there. (Preston, interview with authors, 14 March 2020)

Another participant mentioned that their perception that rural communities in BC are less welcoming of LGBTQ2+ people compared to urban centres is tied to their belief that rural residents of BC lack exposure to diversity.

Vancouver Island [is gay-friendly] for sure, and Vancouver
downtown proper. I wouldn't go, honestly, past [Vancouver's
suburbs]. . . . I only say that because, from what I understand,
there's not as many people, population-wise, therefore the lack
of representation means a lack of diversity . . . and people understanding. (Linden, interview with authors, 13 March 2020)

Perceived intolerance resulted in a tangible concern for personal safety among participants, and several participants noted that they changed their behaviour if they felt unsafe in an effort to decrease the potential risks of travelling in rural areas. This can manifest itself as avoidance behaviour, such as preferring to remain in urban areas to assuage any safety concerns or discomfort associated with rural travel.

I think that I'm more cautious. Maybe, in those communities,
they're smaller, you're more apt to find people that are going to
be prejudicial in those circumstances, and so no PDA [public
displays of affection]. . . . I certainly think that I'm more cautious
in those spaces. I think for that reason we gravitate toward urban
travel a bit more. (David, interview with authors, 19 February
2020)

Research indicates that safety is important for gay tourists when deciding their travel plans (Pritchard et al. 2000). This is particularly relevant to rural BC due to the circulating perceptions of these regions as less gay-friendly than urban areas. Yet, while many participants felt that rural BC is less welcoming to LGBTQ2+ people compared to urban BC, this perception is not always warranted. Demystifying small rural communities in BC is a critical

consideration for tourism businesses wishing to develop more welcoming and inclusive destinations.

> I think gay people also have a stereotype of rural communities, which isn't necessarily always true. And, you know, my experiences in rural communities have definitely been positive, and there's a way for rural communities to actively try and dismantle that. (Preston, interview with authors, 14 March 2020)

Half of the participants indicated an interest in connecting with the local gay community when travelling, and some participants worked around the safety concerns related to travel in rural areas by finding local gay community members with which to interact. Due to the changing nature of gay spaces, the work of making these connections has largely moved online.

> When we go [to rural areas], we'll totally try to meet with some of the people there and try to chat. . . . I'll use Grindr and I'll try to find some of the locals, not in a sexual way but more so in . . . [terms of] friendship, we're looking for a tour guide kind of thing. We want to meet someone there, to tell us what it's like living there and get that experience, so I appreciate that. (Edward, interview with authors, 25 February 2020)

As mentioned in the previous quote, some participants used mobile technologies, like Grindr or other gay-oriented mobile apps, to connect with local queer people. The benefits of these connections are twofold: they allow gay tourists to quickly and easily determine a destination's safety, and they encourage a more nuanced understanding of the local area that may not be shared in other forms of online media.

> I think what the apps give you, how they can influence gay rural travel, is you can go onto an app to actually gauge the sense of the safety of the community. Grindr . . . is also a way to connect with a community virtually that might be underground, to learn how safe it is or what there is available to do as well. So I think that has, in many respects, changed the perception of rural travel because of the access to information. . . . The apps now allow you to go into a rural situation and know that there is

this community here. They're like, "Don't go to that bar because you might not be safe there." (Keith, interview with authors, 13 March 2020)

Connecting with local gay men was important for participants not only for the opportunities such connections provide to learn about a place, but also because they allow them to assess the safety of a destination before their arrival. Using this type of technology to make those connections is a novel approach to learning about destinations and an important consideration for DMOs working to attract a more diverse tourist base as they seek to appeal to smaller "niche" communities.

Rural travel held a lot of appeal for the gay men participating in this research, particularly those living in urban areas. There still exists a pervasive belief that rural BC is less accepting of LGBTQ2+ people; however, in spite of this perception, participants did not avoid travelling in rural BC. Nevertheless, many gay tourists change their behaviour to avoid inadvertently outing themselves, and some avoid rural travel altogether. Based on the perspectives of gay travellers in this study, attracting gay tourists to small rural areas requires an active and ongoing effort. With this in mind, we now examine how rural DMOs in BC approach gay tourism so as to understand how rural gay tourism in the province can be further supported.

Destination Marketing Approaches and Responses to Gay Tourism in Rural BC

Community and provincial DMOs are crucial to understanding the current state of rural tourism to rural and small community destinations in BC, and how these destinations view and attract gay tourists. Although many DMOs lack proper resources and act more as information offices than managers and marketers for their particular destination (Adeyinka-Ojo, Khoo-Lattimore, and Nair 2014), DMOs in this study proved to be hands-on champions for their local tourism industry. There was an overall interest in creating inclusive tourism experiences to attract LGBTQ2+ travellers, but there is clearly a need for increased resources in order to realize that objective. The provincial DMO noted that its approach to inclusive tourism is not direct, but instead focuses on supporting individual DMOs across the province wishing to address the LGBTQ2+ market. Offering a province-wide perspective, the provincial DMO explained its process as follows:

> [Our organization] partners on the premise of leading where we can lead best, such as at the inspirational level, and then [we] support our partners to do specific marketing that attracts specific consumer segments to our [BC] destination. (Provincial DMO, interview with authors, 26 May 2020)

Similarly, from a local perspective, most community DMOs focus their marketing efforts on visitor interests and passions, rather than marketing to specific demographics. Depending on what a given community has to offer, different activities are targeted, but most activities in rural BC revolve around the outdoors, nature, sports, and events. One participant explained that targeting interests over demographics is a core strategy for many BC DMOs.

> There's quite a few of these DMO professionals [in rural BC] that are actually openly LGBTQ2+, that are actually sitting in these executive positions. . . . They are smart marketers, brilliant marketers, but I never saw them openly going after that [the LGBTQ2+ travel market] ever. Even though they were part of that community, they never targeted that community, they just went after the activity and the interests. (Former DMO employee in northern BC, interview with authors, 18 March 2020)

As stated by this former DMO employee, most DMOs target tourists broadly rather than focusing specifically on welcoming LGBTQ2+ tourists. This is particularly the case in small, isolated cities, due to personnel and financial constraints. DMO representatives did explain, however, that while advertising campaigns are not usually aimed directly at prospective LGBTQ2+ visitors, it is still important to many destinations to promote themselves as inclusive and welcoming of all people.

> Our tagline right now is "[our community], where you belong," so we're always looking to promote an inclusive, welcoming atmosphere. And so that's something that's important to us, [but] we haven't specifically worked out any part of our campaign that would be specific to gay travel. (Community DMO 3, interview with authors, 6 April 2020)

Even though they are not creating marketing campaigns aimed directly at the LGBTQ2+ community, DMOs actively welcome LGBTQ2+ tourists while at the same time marketing activities and events that are relevant to the LGBTQ2+ community.

> [Our community DMO] welcomes gay tourists with open arms. We have a page on our website, we have hosted influencers to help tell our story, blog posts, we support the pride festivals, and we are working with [a national DMO] on the LGBTQ2+ campaign to [attract] gay and lesbian American tourists. . . . We target by both passion and demographics. (Community DMO 2, interview with authors, 9 June 2020)

A major component of the participating DMOs' support for the LGBTQ2+ community is to always list pride events on the events pages of their websites and communicate with event organizers regularly. This support for local pride associations and their events is seen as a way to help connect with the LGBTQ2+ community and advertise that they are a welcoming destination.

In addition to participant DMOs, there was ample discussion by gay travellers about marketing destinations and attractions to gay men or the wider LGBTQ2+ community. While specific efforts to entice gay consumers can be met with skepticism (Stuber 2002), LGBTQ2+ community members' decision making can be impacted by an organization or destination choosing to give back to the queer community (Roth and Luongo 2002). Some gay participants noted that they are more inclined to financially support destinations and businesses that are outwardly supportive of the LGBTQ2+ community.

> Every crosswalk in the city should be a rainbow, not just to make me feel happier but because everyone loves a rainbow—rainbows are fantastic! For me, with a business, it definitely is a nice thing to see, coming from a place of little visibility to knowing that something as simple as Starbucks or a bank are welcoming. I understand I'm being pandered to, to a degree, because it's in the [gay] village, but it's still a nice gesture to see, and it does encourage me to go to the business or appreciate the business. (Martin, interview with authors, 3 March 2020)

While the majority of participants appreciated such efforts to reach out specifically to the gay community, they were weary of perceived "pinkwashing" by businesses. Pinkwashing is the act of advertising to the LGBTQ2+ community so as to appear gay-friendly, in an attempt to leverage the benefits of increased spending and goodwill on the part of LGBTQ2+ customers (Stark 2015).

A number of participants felt it was easy to tell when an organization was advertising to the gay community in an inauthentic manner. And while pinkwashing in an urban centre is sometimes derided, many participants felt differently about the same actions in a rural context. This hints at greater acceptance of marketing to gay audiences in rural areas, as such acts help to deconstruct common perceptions of small rural communities as less welcoming of queer individuals.

> [At] the Vancouver Pride Parade, I'm very . . . questioning of [corporate sponsorship]. That's kind of like everyone's getting involved because they want the gay dollar. . . . But if you're dealing with a smaller town, the context of that is very different, so that's one or two individuals trying to make more visibility and trying to support the community. I see that more and I appreciate that more, in that sense. (Edward, interview with authors, 25 February 2020)

According to participants, advertising also needs to be more inclusive of different types of gay men. Marketing of circuit parties and other gay events can project the image of exclusionary spaces aimed primarily at affluent Caucasian gay men with toned, muscular bodies (Waitt and Markwell 2006). Marketing to gay audiences should include more diverse imagery that includes people of different ages, racial backgrounds, and body types.

> I think the one thing I'd add . . . this might open up a can of worms . . . is just there's a huge opportunity for gay spaces to be body-positive as well. . . . If I were to be piqued to take a look at gay promotions or anything, I would also want to be reassured that there's space for body positivity. (Xavier, interview with authors, 12 November 2020)

For destinations and tourism businesses interested in attracting gay visitors, it is important to actively speak to LGBTQ2+ people in marketing efforts and community initiatives. With some indications that mainstream tourism-marketing efforts actively exclude queer individuals by focusing on heterosexual subjects (Stuber 2002), a number of participants wished to see more direct marketing efforts to their community.

> Marketing specifically to the community and making a real effort to attract gay tourists [is important], because we are a very small community and word of mouth travels fast. And so the latest thing I've heard is that all the gays are moving to [a small rural town] . . . and so now I'm thinking of, "Oh, well maybe a year or two down the road I would visit there because it's a place that is attracting members of my community." (Preston, interview with authors, 14 March 2020)

Attracting gay tourists to small rural areas should be an active process driven by DMOs. Gay men are keen to travel to rural areas; however, there is still an uncertainty about the extent to which rural areas in BC welcome LGBTQ2+ people.

In general, BC is widely perceived as a gay-friendly place to live, work, and travel, but there is still a need to actively market rural areas to LGBTQ2+ travellers. Several DMOs talked about this need while highlighting that insufficient resources can make marketing directly to one audience a challenge.

> I think this depends on the destination. I would expect that each DMO should have a pulse on their community and decide on which target demographics they think make sense. Many DMOs are operating at capacity and may not have capacity to add to their plates. I do think that LGBTQ2+ tourism is a big opportunity, which is why we are putting effort into this space. (Community DMO 2, interview with authors, 9 June 2020)

DMOs are balancing personnel and financial constraints with the goal of expanding their marketing goals. There is a need for additional funding if DMOs are to introduce new marketing strategies, including marketing specifically to the LGBTQ2+ community. Every participating DMO indicated they would consider actively pursuing the LGBTQ2+ travel market if they

had the additional resources and information needed to develop inclusive, well-rounded marketing communications and events.

> Yeah, I think support in general would be needed. . . . The resources, the information, the data side is very important. But also, the funding side. . . . We have lots of facilities here and we're looking to bring in more festivals and events and things like that, so that can be something that we're partnering with other organizations to bring in those. And if there's a pride event that is looking to find a new home, then we'd definitely be open for that. We've had some other festivals relocate to the community because they feel welcomed here. (Community DMO 1, interview with authors, 4 March 2020)

Several participating DMOs communicated that budgetary constraints limit their ability to market to LGBTQ2+ travellers. A number of participants explained that their funding is usually tied to the Municipal and Regional District Tax (MRDT), which was introduced by the BC government in 1987. Its purpose is to help fund tourism marketing and associated programs through a tax of up to 3 per cent applied to short-term accommodation stays (Destination British Columbia, n.d.).

When discussing their current challenges, DMO representatives stressed funding as one of their most significant issues. For those DMOs that were not primarily funded by the MRDT, getting buy-in for tourism from the local community and municipal government is a critical barrier.

> One of the biggest challenges was proving, in an oil and gas community and a farming community, that tourism has the value to be part of the municipal budget. (Former DMO employee in northern BC, interview with authors, 18 March 2020)

Limited funding means limited marketing budgets. Participants said this was one of the main reasons they marketed to prospective visitors' interests instead of specific demographics.

> [A considerable challenge is] the funding and the market return, the return on value. With marketing directly to that specific group. . . . I had so little funding, as it was, to really reach out

and leverage . . . so I needed to hit as many people as I could with the money that I had. . . . So we're going to go after that activity, as opposed to that demographic. (Former DMO employee in northern BC, interview with authors, 18 March 2020)

With sufficient funding for tourism development a necessity, external funding and programs are extremely important. However, tourism grant applications are very competitive (Wilson et al. 2001). When asked to identify possible support programs they would like to see introduced to enhance efforts to target LGBTQ2+ travellers, funding was emphasized. At least one participating DMO indicated that they would also appreciate programs or initiatives that would help them use their marketing dollars more efficiently, such as through collaborative campaigns with other DMOs.

One thing I would say is that [our local tourism organization] always looks for opportunities for our marketing and event dollars to go further, so we keep a grasp on any co-operative programs that fit with our goals of attracting visitors. . . . So if something like that were to become available, whether it's a co-op or something where we could join in so that our marketing dollars go further, then that would be something that we would likely look into, as long as it's matching with our goals. (Community DMO 3, interview with authors, 6 April 2020)

Ultimately, participating DMOs struggled to undertake all of their desired marketing activities with the limited resources at their disposal. Rural DMOs focused heavily on dealing with the challenges around using a small marketing budget to attract sustainable numbers of visitors. Marketing their destinations to LGBTQ2+ tourists, while widely desired and seen as worthwhile, could not be easily justified due to this demographic's perceived niche nature; it is doubtful that limited resources will be spent on smaller market shares. Without additional funding and other resources, rural DMOs in BC are unlikely to be able to market their destinations to LGBTQ2+ travellers. Short of government funding, or an increase to the MRDT tax on short-term accommodation stays, DMOs will need to develop innovative partnerships with LGBTQ2+ event producers as one means of attracting queer events and festivals to their rural communities.

Understanding who is travelling to which destinations is an important first step in demonstrating the need for marketing that targets the LGBTQ2+ community. Every DMO participant indicated that research and data collection are crucial parts of their operations and help determine marketing strategies and which demographics to target. However, none of the participating DMOs directly indicated that their research or data collection centred on LGBTQ2+ visitors.

> We do not have unlimited budgets and therefore we must choose the markets, channels, and target consumers we focus on. These decisions are based on data, [like] economic factors, product match, tourism industry infrastructure, . . . [whether] they [can] get here, . . . [or if] we have the product they have. If we see that a consumer segment in a market is one we should focus on, then we will pivot, based on budget, to undertake target marketing. (Provincial DMO, interview with authors, 18 March 2020)

Some rural BC communities do not take an in-depth approach to data collection due to stakeholders' singular interest in the value of tourism for the local economy. This reduced the importance of more targeted marketing initiatives to smaller groups and underlined the use of broader targeting for rural destination marketing campaigns.

> The numbers that really mattered for us at the time were visitors . . . so the number of visitors that were tracking through the door to our visitor centre, essentially, was critical to our survival, it was critical for funding from the city. It was a very conservative approach to tourism, but not uncommon in the region. (Former DMO employee in northern BC, interview with authors, 18 March 2020)

The primary reason given for not gathering more information or conducting research about LGBTQ2+ travellers to their destination was the sensitivity surrounding asking visitors about their sexual orientation, which is an important ethical concern. Participants explained that demographic information and other data, including some related to LGBTQ2+ travel, is often obtained from regional and provincial tourism bodies, but that these resources are lacking. Easier access to data about LGBTQ2+ travellers could

help DMOs justify using their marketing budget to attract gay tourists and encourage further investment for this type of research.

Destination marketing plays a key role in welcoming gay travellers to a destination, and destination image contributes to perceptions of value and increases the likelihood of repeat visits (Phillips et al. 2013). In light of historic discrimination against LGBTQ2+ people, it is crucial for marketers to actively encourage gay travellers to visit their destinations, and to do so they must demonstrate that they are safe spaces (Guaracino 2007). Marketing activities that specifically target LGBTQ2+ people, like advertisements that include photographs of same-sex couples, can help build loyalty (Hughes 2005). Destination marketers and developers need to increase their use of gay-friendly symbolism (like the rainbow flag), add more mainstream travel media focusing on LGBTQ2+ travellers, and encourage greater corporate investment in queer events (Guaracino 2007). Ultimately, marketing directly to LGBTQ2+ visitors can be beneficial to destinations as they pursue new markets. It is vital that DMOs and other tourism marketers ensure they are forthright about attracting the queer community.

Inclusive Destination Development Approaches to Gay Tourism in Rural BC

While most participating rural DMOs do not directly target LGBTQ2+ visitors, several brought up the importance of creating inclusive and welcoming communities to ensure that LGBTQ2+ visitors have a good experience. While DMOs are not able to directly control attitudes toward homosexuality in their rural communities, they can help steward a more inclusive and welcoming environment. Many discussed public initiatives, including the use of gay symbols like rainbow flags and rainbow crosswalks to publicly indicate support for and inclusion of the LGBTQ2+ community.

> Two years ago there was a pride bumper sticker campaign that occurred in [a small rural community in the interior of the province], and there was around eight hundred bumper stickers that went out just in the first week to the community to make sure that community members are sharing that they're LGBTQ supporters, and they were available at multiple stores and they continue to be distributed there. . . . Businesses [also] got behind

that [initiative]. (Community DMO 1, interview with authors, 4 March 2020)

Such symbolic gestures, like supporting the installation of a rainbow crosswalk or working with the local government and other organizations to support pride initiatives, were one way participating DMOs helped to shape a more inclusive destination for LGBTQ2+ visitors. Some DMOs spoke about the positive results of programming they developed.

> While I was there they actually put in a rainbow sidewalk right near [a major local attraction]. Without that [attraction], nobody would stop in that town. And to them, a conservative town in [northern] BC, in the centre of oil and gas country, to put down a rainbow sidewalk? Big deal. Huge deal. (Former DMO employee in northern BC, interview with authors, 18 March 2020)

Actions that demonstrate support for the LGBTQ2+ community can have a palpable impact on a queer person's decision to visit a destination. Every participating DMO perceived their local community to be welcoming and inclusive.

> [Our destination] is known, in general, to be an accepting, welcoming community. When the pride workshop [around diversity and inclusion] was offered, several businesses participated and took immediate action to be more inclusive in their messaging. (Community DMO 3, interview with authors, 6 April 2020)

Creating inclusive communities also involves diversity and inclusion training related to the LGBTQ2+ community. Participating DMOs affirmed that they pursued tangible actions to support these efforts.

> Yes, under the SuperHost training provided by [our organization] there are a few programs that have a section on LGBTQ2+. These programs could benefit from some additional and updated content. All visitor-servicing staff or volunteers must take Service For All, and it talks about mindfulness with LGBTQ2+, Indigenous groups, new Canadians, seniors, etc. (Community DMO 2, interview with authors, 9 June 2020)

DMOs in this study are making every effort to foster a welcoming environment for visitors. However, the visitor experience will ultimately come down to whether local attitudes toward homosexuality line up with a DMO's vision for developing an inclusive destination. Despite the conception that all destinations are welcoming, there can still be barriers as it is impossible to ensure that the majority of local residents feel the same way.

Overall, DMO representatives in this study appeared interested in creating inclusive tourism experiences to attract LGBTQ2+ travellers. Development efforts to support inclusive community building are taking place in destinations across rural BC, but more resources are needed to increase destination marketing efforts. Budgetary constraints were the primary barrier to marketing rural BC to gay men, as most rural DMOs operate as non-profits with limited resources to spend on advertising their destination. Given this constraint, broader marketing initiatives that advertise the community's unique local attractions and activities seems the most effective way to maximize marketing resources, particularly given the limited number of gay spaces and events in rural BC. There is a need for governmental bodies, as well as provincial and national DMOs, to support community-level or regional leadership to expand the scope of their destination marketing efforts through the provision of funding, programming, research, and other supports for gay tourism.

Discussion and Conclusion

Destinations that have a supportive and accepting cultural and legal climate have an advantage in attracting LGBTQ2+ visitors. While tourism alone cannot change homophobia or socially conservative policies within a destination (Hughes 2002), DMOs and tourism and hospitality businesses can contribute to the construction of safe and welcoming communities for all visitors, including LGBTQ2+ people. However, more planning is needed to ensure a welcoming destination for gay travellers in rural BC. Our interviews established that gay men, and the broader LGBTQ2+ community, are rarely the focus of DMOs' efforts to attract visitors. For a destination like BC, which has an existing image as a gay-friendly place to live, work, and travel, growing rural gay tourism remains a complicated process.

The gay tourism landscape is shifting. While some tourism products and services are created exclusively for LGBTQ2+ visitors, including gay-only resorts or tours designed for queer travellers, these do not interest all members

of the LGBTQ2+ community. DMOs are increasingly focused on providing comfortable, welcoming, and respectful destinations to LGBTQ2+ travellers, but without catering to them specifically (UNWTO and IGLTA 2017). Our study found that gay tourists often do not view gay-specific activities and spaces as a required feature for a prospective destination unless the purpose of the trip is to attend a gay event. Consequently, rethinking gay tourism is a necessary step in small rural communities that do not have the gay population to support venues and events, or the resources to develop gay travel marketing. Our evidence suggests that fostering an inclusive and welcoming community, while aiming to attract gay events and festivals where possible, is the best option for rural destinations.

DMOs should view gay men as an additional market segment and not an enigmatic group with complicated needs. While gay men undoubtedly have unique requirements as travellers, including an interest in gay spaces and events, the gay travel market is not fundamentally different from the wider tourism market, and gay men's travel interests are similar to those of non-queer travellers (Blichfeldt, Chor, and Milan 2011). While many destinations that are popular with the LGBTQ2+ community will likely continue to position themselves as queer sanctuaries for travellers, some rural locations with limited resources are better off focusing their efforts on broader initiatives to improve LGBTQ2+ inclusion. In addition to developing queer-specific programming like LGBTQ2+ events and festivals, destinations can attract members of the LGBTQ2+ community by working to ensure their regions are as inclusive and welcoming of diversity as possible. Our results suggest that the adoption of inclusive imagery and messaging in marketing efforts can make queer visitors feel welcome and dispel some concerns among gay men about safety in rural BC.

Ultimately, this study has demonstrated that welcoming gay visitors to rural BC is no simple process. While the majority of participants enjoy visiting rural BC and its small towns, and plan to continue travelling to those regions, it is evident that there is a widespread perception of rural areas as being less welcoming of LGBTQ2+ visitors, which impacts these travellers' behaviour and destination choices. Insights into this market encourages community DMOs in western Canada, and in similarly rural and/or socially conservative regions internationally, to design more-inclusive communities that will attract the gay market and foster meaningful change to better support gay travellers to diverse rural regions.

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