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A Genuine Gay-Friendly City: The Touristic Benefits of LGBT Inclusion


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Title: A Genuine Gay-Friendly City: The Touristic Benefits of LGBT Inclusion

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Abstract:

Israel, as a country, and Tel Aviv, as a city, are not immediately associated with LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) tourism. However, Tel Aviv positioned itself in recent years as a gay-friendly city and initiated many LGBT events. As of 2007, the Tel Aviv city hall has been involved in the organization, financing, and promotion of the Pride Parade. Annual Pride Parades have been observed around the world in order to commemorate the Stonewall riots of 1969 and celebrate LGBT people's demands for full social, cultural, and legal inclusion. In recent years, the Tel Aviv city hall, in collaboration with LGBT groups, has been organizing many Pride-related events that last an entire week. Tel Aviv city hall appoints a (gay) city councilor to be in charge of the parade, allocates a special budget to the event, and promotes the event overseas. This municipal co-optation of the pride events magnifies a rather unique phenomenon, in which the LGBT community is embraced by a local government. The most conspicuous symbol for this phenomenon is the LGBT community center in the center of Tel Aviv, which is operated and funded by the city hall. Consequently, it can be argued that, unlike other cities and governmental agencies that promote LGBT tourism but do not necessarily exhibit genuine homophobic-free policies, Tel Aviv is truly gay-friendly.

A literature review has yielded an empirical lacuna, for only a few studies have looked into the LGBT tourists' actual on-site experiences, from their perspectives. Moreover, no studies that compare LGBT to non-LGBT tourists have been found to date. The current study thus tries to address these lacunae by an attempt to understand and analyze the experiences of LGBT and non-LGBT tourists who attend the Pride events, versus those of other tourists. The present study sheds light on the experiences of tourists from abroad in order to see if, and how, the two groups differ from one another.

The current study, based on a two-step survey, explores the motivations, attitudes, satisfaction, and behaviors of 167 tourists, both LGBT and non-LGBT, to the Pride events of June 2016 and compares them to a control group ($n = 130$) of LGBT and non-LGBT tourists to Tel Aviv two months afterwards. The tourists came from 33 countries, and more than a half arrived from five countries: the United States (19%), Germany (12%), the United Kingdom (9%), Italy (7.2%), and France (6%). Their ages ranged from 20 to 85, with a mean age of 38.8 ($SD = 12.2$).

Regardless of the participants' affiliation with the LGBT community or attendance at the Pride events, they tended to report Tel Aviv as gay-friendly, and hence tolerant and embracing. Although tourists to the Pride events considered Tel Aviv to be more gay-friendly ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 1.166$)¹ compared to tourists to non-Pride events ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.474$), all of them highly appreciated this aspect, and consequently said they would recommend visiting Tel Aviv to others. Generally speaking, Tel Aviv was scored very high in satisfaction ($M = 6.51$, $SD = .769$) and in recommendation intentions ($M = 6.52$, $SD = .852$). Moreover, the majority come here repeatedly (more than half of the participants reported being return visitors to Tel Aviv). We conclude that urban destinations could gain a competitive advantage by providing a true sense of

gay-friendliness via high visibility of the LGBT community and its social inclusion and acceptance, as well as safeguarding its civil rights. In other words, a marketing strategy cannot be based on an image *per se*, but has to be grounded on a substantial integration of the LGBT community within a city's social fabric. Furthermore, we would like to accentuate the conclusion that positioning a city as gay-friendly is attractive to non-LGBT tourists, as well.

Finally, this paper will discuss the queer critique, known as "pinkwashing," aimed at the campaigns to attract tourists to Israel. In the last couple of years, the pride parades have been encountering opposition within the LGBT community. Queer groups and activists have been adamant regarding the "pinkwashing" character and nature of the homonormative and homonational aspects of these events. They criticize the official foreign policy of Israel that portrays it as an LGBT haven in order to conceal the occupation of the Palestinians and their abject position. "Pinkwashing" is an umbrella term to describe the efforts by Israeli authorities to promote the positive image of the state of Israel by portraying it as a true haven for the LGBT community. Pinkwashing serves thus as a propaganda apparatus in order to camouflage the occupation and the problematics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The present study, however, corroborates the success of these campaigns.

¹Scales were Likert type (1–7).