Exploring the case the dark side of gay tourism: (half-)naked bodies, race, precarity and sexual harassment

Anastasios Hadjisolomou; Dennis Nickson; Tom Baum

Strathclyde Business School, Department of Work Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

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Summary

This case study focuses on the gay tourism industry in Gran Canaria and Sitges. These destinations in Spain offer a niche of service organisations intended for and marketed to gay customers. It discusses the sexualisation and commodification of employees' appearance (also known as sexualised aesthetic labour) and sexual harassment by customers. Specifically, the case study presents the experiences of hospitality workers, focusing mainly on migrant workers of colour, whose appearance and racial characteristics are commodified by employers to attract customers. This process of commodification leads to customers subsequently harassing employees leading to widespread third-party sexual harassment.

The value and interest of the case study

This case study provides important insights from the highly sexualised context of the gay tourism industry and discusses how management's creation of sexualised labour leads to extensive sexual harassment by customers. This is particularly important to understand for vulnerable migrant workers, and workers of colour, whose race and appearance is exploited by employers as a tool to attract customers, neglecting the impact this has on workers' safety and wellbeing.

Gay tourism and the research context

Authors describe gay tourism as a dynamic and vibrant phenomenon (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021a), which has received academic interest due to the increased visibility and acceptance of gay men and women, as well as the increased demand from gay consumers (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy, 2016). Vorobjovas-Pinta (2021a: 1) defines gay tourism as "a form of niche tourism that refers to the development and marketing of tourism products and services to lesbian, bisexual, transgender,

queer/questioning, intersex and other people (LGBT+)". This case study, similarly, uses the term 'gay tourism' to describe a travel market that primarily caters to the needs of LGBT+ clientele (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy, 2016), whilst the term 'gay' is used in a wider sense to include all sexual orientations and/or gender identities found within the LGBT+ community (see for example Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021a). Although the case study focuses on gay male tourism, it should be recognised that research participants and/or customers in this market might identify differently (e.g., bisexual, non-binary, transgender, queer, asexual).

Tourism scholarship has long given attention to aspects of sexuality (Monterrubio and López-López, 2016; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy, 2016). The literature, however, has focused mainly on the experiences of gay men, and specifically on gay customers (Hughes, 1997; 2002; 2006; Melián-González et al., 2011). The majority of the research has focused on the gay traveller's assumed economic power and their motivations for travel, highlighting the opportunities for sexual encounters as the most significant reason for travel. Although these arguments have been challenged and disputed by scholars, suggesting that other reasons also motivate travel (see for example Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy, 2016), it remains true that the LGBT+ tourism literature has been relatively homogeneous over time in terms of the topics covered. As Ong et al. (2022) have recently argued the individual experiences of customers, as well as customer behaviour, are the most prominent and frequently researched topics in this area. Surprisingly, little is known regarding the experiences of people working in LGBT+ tourism, whilst dysfunctional customer behaviour, such as abuse and sexual harassment, which have been described as the 'dark side of tourism' (Cohen, 2014), have received limited attention in gay tourism scholarship.

This case study explores the experiences of workers in the gay tourism industry in Spain. It reports on total 36 semi-structured interviews with six owners/managers

and 30 employees, out of which five are workers of colour. Participants are working across a range of hospitality organisations, which either exclusively or primarily cater to gay male customers. The research was conducted in 2019 in Gran Canaria/Maspalomas and Sitges which are two openly gay-oriented Spanish destinations where gay tourism makes a significant contribution to the local economy and the local labour market. Gran Canaria, is explicitly advertised as one of the 'greatest gay tourism destinations in Europe', offering a wide range of gay exclusive or gay friendly establishments and has a long history in gay culture. Since the 1990s the gay tourism industry has been thriving in the south of the island due to the weather conditions, offering warmer weather all year long and winter sun. In addition to 'winter sun' tourism, the region hosts a number of gay events throughout the such Gay Pride and Winter Gay Pride. (see year, as https://www.grancanaria.com/turismo/en/gay-friendly/gay-friendly/; Melián-González et al., 2011). These provide an important source of income for the local economy, whilst the island has been established as one of the most popular LGBT+ tourism destinations in Europe. Similarly, Sitges is promoted by the Spanish government as an internationally famous LGBT+ destination, along with Ibiza and Maspalomas (see https://www.spain.info/en/discover-spain/gay-pride-madrid-ibizasitges/, offering gay-friendly leisure activities, accommodation and parties. These local economies have invested in strategies to support a 'pink euro' economy. Vorobjovas-Pinta (2021: 4) explains 'pink currency' as the branding of the high purchasing power of the LGBT+ communities, with much of the literature recycling false assumptions of gay men having more disposable income and higher spending power (Ooi, 2021; Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021). The pink currency argument regardless of its veracity - embraces a logic of profit maximisation for tourism businesses (Ooi, 2021). As the data in our study shows gay tourism organisations in the two geographical areas explored have developed business strategies driven by 'pink euro' marketing strategies and the assumption that sex is one of the main reasons for travelling for all gay tourists (see Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy, 2016 for

critique). As one of our manager interviewees commented: 'Here what brings money is sex. There are so many people vising here in GC that you can have sex every day with different people. This is why people come here.'

This view was widely held by the participants in our research, whilst our data shows that the majority of gay tourism organizations have located 'sex' as a central concept in their business strategy. This strategy has driven the sexualisation of the industry and the workplace, both as a physical space and a space of work. As one worker commented:

'People come here to find sex. There are still people who go there and want to have fun but now it is more about going in the sex club, take off your clothes, have sex and go home. That's it. The sex clubs business grows more and more.'

Different organisational contexts were explored during the fieldwork. Although our observations revealed different levels of sexualisation of the service environment, it was evident that organisations operating within the gay tourism industry of the two geographical areas have explicitly used 'sex' as a selling strategy, highlighting Ram et al.'s (2016) argument that tourism and hospitality is an industry that subtly or overtly sells sex themes. Specifically, many bars, hotels and clubs were decorated with sexual images, actively promoting the sexualized nature of the market. For example, a men-only resort has decorated the inside wall of the resort with giant posters of half-naked men, whilst a men-only hotel chain also decorated the rooms and corridors of the hotel with wallpaper with similarly sexualized images. The sexualisation of this environment was also informed by a culture of nudism. In a male-only resort customers are allowed to be naked on the premises, even in public areas such as the pool and the open space restaurant. The majority of organizations were catering towards men only, with the exception of the hetero-friendly gay bars. However, even within the latter category, where women are also welcomed, there was strong evidence of sexualisation of the space. For example, explicitly sexualized

decorative elements, such as posters with (half-) naked men, were installed in different areas of the venues. But even within this category the levels of sexualisation varied, with some bars, for example, having introduced a darkroom area where customers can have sex.

Sexualised Aesthetic Labour and Race

The sexualisation of the service environment is not limited to decorative elements of the physical space, but is also extended to employees' appearance, as a crucial element of the organisational strategy to attract and retain customers. This is known as sexualised aesthetic labour, where employers intentionally use the embodied attributes of employees as a source of competitive advantage and commercial benefit. Service organisations are not just concerned with the attitudes of their employees, but also how employees appear to customers (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). There are demands for employees to 'look good and sound right' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001), to be attractive to the customer to enhance initial and repeat custom (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Hence, service employers mobilise and commodify employees' physical attributes, through employment practices such as recruitment, selection, training, monitoring, discipline, and reward, intending to (re)produce a service encounter that appeals to the senses of customers, most usually visually or aurally (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007).

Aesthetic labour has become an important analytical category in contemporary research on interactive service work (Hall and van den Broek, 2012). The work of Warhurst, Nickson, and colleagues (2000, 2007, 2009) has been influential within this analysis. Following Warhurst and Nickson (2009), this research explored whether and how aesthetic labour is strategically sexualised within the gay tourism market, where there is a thin line between selling services and selling sexuality, and the links with sexual harassment (Hadjisolomou et al., 2023).

To date, research on this process of how employees' looks are sexualised has usually focussed on women, who are expected to demonstrate aesthetic appeal aligning with the sexual desires of the heterosexual male customer (Spiess and Waring, 2005). A typical example is the case of the American restaurant chain Hooters, where sexualised labour is essential in the product/service. Similar expectations, however, are evident in the highly sexualised gay tourism industry where management strictly enforce rules and regulations on employee appearance. A stand-out example from our research was the 'underwear bar' where workers were half-naked, wearing just, usually, white brief underwear when serving customers. Evidently, the sexualisation of employees' appearance is the organisation's main strategy to attract customers in the bar and increase sales, based on the assumption by management that sex is the only travelling motivator for gay men. As a participant commented:

They ask people to work in underwear because it is an attraction to the gay people. When a man sees another man in underwear or naked or something similar you might think that you have more opportunities [for sex]. These people come to the bar because it is something different. The gay customer wants to see naked men.

In other, more extreme cases, for example in the gay sex clubs, workers were asked to work naked. Specifically, many of the gay sex clubs organise theme nights such as sport fetish or leather fetish events, underwear nights, jockstrap nights and naked nights. Employees in these venues, the majority of whom are migrant workers, are forced to follow the theme night and match the customer's appearance.

Although the expectations for nudity and semi-nudity are made clear to those working in these organisational contexts, the underwear bar, as well as the sex clubs, have high employee turnover. The majority of workers stay with the organisation for a limited time and move to other less sexualised organisations. Others, however, stay longer due to high unemployment in Spain, the unavailability of full-time work, the

precariousness of employment contracts in this low paid market, and their socioeconomic status. Although the precarious nature of hospitality work has been well discussed in the literature (Robinson et al., 2019), it is particularly precarious for migrant workers and in this case workers of colour. Hospitality is a first port of call for migrant workers (Janta et al., 2012) and as our data show organisations similar to the 'underwear bar' attracted illegal migrant workers. As an African-Caribbean participant worker explained, the high turnover of these organisations was mainly because workers were asked to work half-naked (or even fully naked). Nevertheless, they provided an employment opportunity for him when he first illegally moved in the island:

'I used to work in the bar that workers wear underwear. I was 24 when I came to the island, so I decided to start there because I didn't have any [legal] papers at the time. They told me that to work there I have to wear the underwear, and sometimes even a jockstrap. But I didn't care at the time, I needed the money, no one else would hire me so I started there. As soon as I got my papers, I found a new job and quit.'

Interestingly, organisations like the 'underwear bar' often particularly seek to recruit men of colour to work as bar staff. This is related to the sexual racial stereotypes for African-Latinos and black men, which is widely utilised by gay tourism organisations in the area to attract customers, selling them a sexual fantasy, as another participant worker of colour commented:

The gay customer wants to see naked men. They look at me, 'oh a black guy' and they come. There are not many black men here... I was the only black guy there and everybody was coming to me. It is because they are curious you know, what the people say about black men, that we have a big c**k and we always had people coming into the bar to check. Being black makes you desirable to the customer as well as to the boss. It's the business you know...

I am black, I was young and they said yes you can work for us, they were looking for someone who speaks English and he is a little bit sexy. So, I got the job the same day. They asked me would you start tonight? It happened immediately. Some people from other bars approached me as well and said hey would you like to come and work with me.

Overall, our research highlights how gay tourism organisations have developed strategies exhibiting half-naked or naked bodies, driven by the business culture of 'skin sells, sex sells', a common phrase used by participants. The majority of research participants commented that their appearance was commodified by management, including men of colour, and other migrant workers who are recruited based on their race and skin colour raising questions about lookism within organisations, as well as respect and dignity towards vulnerable workers. Indeed, many workers of colour in this market are low-skilled and illegal migrants in Spain, coming from Cuba and Latin America, who are seeking employment in an already segmented and precarious labour market. The high turnover rate in the highly sexualised gay tourism organisations offers employment opportunities for these individuals which, however, are accompanied with the high cost of exploitation of their race and appearance, limited space for negotiation of employee appearance rules, as well as personal humiliation and lack of dignity at work, as the sexualisation of employee appearance leads to uncontrolled incidences of sexual harassment by customers.

(Half-) naked bodies and sexual harassment?

Research in a variety of national contexts reveals sexual harassment (i.e., unwanted and unwelcomed sexual advances) as endemic, rampant and uncontrolled in the hospitality industry (Good and Cooper, 2016; Kensbock et al 2015; Yagil, 2008). For

example, hospitality workers report more incidences of harassment than any other private sector industry (Poulston, 2008). European research shows that 4% of employees (both men and women) in the hotel and restaurant sectors are sexually harassed each year (FRA, 2014). A survey by Unite the Union in the UK hospitality sector, entitled #NotOnTheMenu, revealed that 79% of the participants had experienced one or more incidents of sexual harassment in their working life (see Womensgrid, 2018), whilst even more worryingly, as TUC (2018) reports, sexual harassment is sometimes dismissed as being 'banter' or just a joke. Around half of workers who had been harassed said that the experience made them want to leave their job and made them feel unsafe and less confident at work. Similarly in the USA, 58% of hotel workers and 77% of casino workers surveyed have been sexually harassed by a guest (UNITE LOCAL, 2016). This widespread sexual harassment in hospitality workplaces has negative impacts on individuals, organisations, and society as a whole (Ram et al. 2016).

The majority of research on sexual harassment, however, has focused on female employees who are called upon to cope with heterosexualized interactions with male customers. Little is known about male-to-male harassment, especially in sexualised environments such as the gay tourism industry. As this case study shows, sexual harassment by customers is regarded as an embedded part of the job in this market, with daily incidences of sexual advances, both verbal and physical, being reported by participants. As a worker commented:

Gran Canaria is very specific, it is not like other places. Here it is all about sex tourism. So, people come and they try different stuff and they have no respect for the people working here ...They think they are on holiday and they can do anything they want, such as touching your ass, pulling your t-shirt, calling you names and stuff like this. It happens a lot ...And you have to deal with it. It is part of the job.

Evidence shows that this customer behaviour is driven by the sexualized culture of the gay tourism market and the sexualisation of employees' appearance, leaving workers exposed and vulnerable to customers' sexual advances. As reported by African-Latino workers for example, the lack of negotiation with employers regarding their appearance, and the enforcement of sexualised aesthetics, has led to encouragement of customers to make unwanted sexual advances. As one of our interviewees who worked in the 'underwear bar' commented:

They [customers] always wanted to see more, what's under the underwear. I've been asked thousands of times. [They said] is it true what people say about black men, or would you like to meet me after work or hey do you want to join us for a threesome, or would you like to meet us for drinks in our hotel room. I've heard many many things, all sorts of things.

Arguably, unwanted sexual behaviour by customers is a product of the sexualised aesthetic labour practices, confirming arguments that the hospitality industry too often is willing to tolerate such sexual behaviour (Poulston, 2008; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). Workers are perceived by customers and management as 'objects' attached to the sexualized and sex-driven customer service culture of the industry, normalising customer misbehaviour and sexual harassment. As reported by a worker in a gay bar:

When it is very busy and there are many, many people in the bar you feel all the hands on your ass. It is normal... We always have customers who come in and always try to touch you. It happens a lot here, every night.

Sadly, the philosophy of the contemporary service economy, within which 'the customer is King', constructs perceptions of superiority of customers over service providers, implying that customers can misbehave without evident penalties. This situation becomes particularly problematic for migrant workers and men of colour who remain particularly vulnerable to sexual advances by customers due to the fear of losing their job. As one worker of colour commented:

Some customers that I didn't like said to me 'OK how much you want to meet me for sex. I'll pay you 100, 200'. I said no thank you, I am not an escort. If you want an escort, you can go to places that you can find one. Here is a small place, everybody knows everybody, and I didn't want people to start gossiping about me because it was very difficult for me to find this job. So, I want to be respected by everyone. If I wanted to be an escort I could do it without problem because I get so many people saying 'I'll give you money come and meet me in my hotel after work, this is my room'.

Evidently, the sexualisation of race and sexuality exposes workers of colour to unwanted sexual attention by customers. As reported by participants, the creation of the sexual fantasy of the 'black man' serving customers, leads to blurred boundaries of what is acceptable within the customer-worker interaction. An Afro-Latino worker in a gay sauna described the following incident and commented how the exposition of his racial characteristics and the promotion and recycling of the sexual stereotypes in relation to his race, drive customer misbehaviour:

I had customers touching each other [and looking at me], or had their c**k outside trying to turn me on. Hey look at my big c**k and we can meet you after work...Or they would say oh you are black you must have a big c**k, I would like to s**k you...here in Gran Canaria they [customers] are totally open and they do things that normally they don't do in their countries. So here they are more open because here they come only to have sex. Believe me when they see that you are black, because most of them they don't have the possibility to meet black guys, this is what they said to me: 'In my country, in my town we don't see black guys like you, it's very difficult to meet someone, would you like to meet me or f*** with me.'

Workers, however, would rarely challenge or report unwelcomed sexual advances by customers for two main reasons: the normalization of such behaviour in the industry and the customer-centric culture developed by management, putting the customer in a powerful position, as directed by the mantra of the customer always being right. Additionally, the precarious nature of hospitality employment leaves employees' often powerless to address poor employment conditions, including endemic sexual harassment from customers. The low wages in the industry and the dependence on tips, for example, drives workers to tolerate touching and sexual comments by customers, as one participant worker in a gay resort commented:

In the gay scene everything is about money. People have to work, and they need the money, so they accept the touching. In the summertime for example [low season] when it is a bit quiet nobody wants to lose their job. The salary is cut so people in work are forced to accept these behaviours.

Overall, unwanted sexual (mis)behaviour in the gay tourism market is associated with the personal characteristics of the workers, and the sexual stereotypes created and reinforced by the industry and broader society, as well as the precariousness of hospitality work and the nature of service delivery, which involves close, at times intimate, interactive relationships between employees and customers. Workers, including migrant workers of colour, are expected to develop a 'thick skin' towards such (mis)behaviour as they remain unable to challenge customers because of their socio-economic status and fear of job loss.

Conclusions

Evidence shows that selling sex remains fundamental in the ideology of tourism and hospitality, suggesting a strong link between tourism, sex, and sexual harassment (Ram et al., 2016). In the organisations we considered in our research the sexual commodification of employees' appearance (e.g., individuals working in their underwear or naked) as a sales strategy to attract customers, leads to unwanted sexual advances by customers, putting workers in a vulnerable position of having to accept

or tolerate such (mis)behaviour. This is strongly associated with the perceived characteristics of both the employees and the nature of service. In the research for this case study, workers of colour are amongst those who are affected by business models that include the utilisation of sexual racial stereotypes to attract customers, neglecting the impact on workers' experience on daily life. In conclusion, parts of the gay tourism industry still overtly sell sex themes and use workers appearance to 'serve the emotional and sexual needs of tourists' (Pritchard and Morgan, 2000: 888). Whilst such practices are tolerated and sustained, unwanted sexual behaviour will, worryingly, remain a part of the job.

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