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“Out” in the Countryside: Gay Tourist Perspectives on Rural Travel In British Columbia, Canada

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“Out” in the Countryside: Gay Tourist Perspectives On Rural Travel in British Columbia, Canada

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Abstract

This research explores gay tourism within the Western Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) with a specific focus on travel done by self-identified gay males within rural regions. Research on gay tourism has rarely centred on rural areas, as it is often viewed as an urban phenomenon undertaken primarily in the Global North. This urban focus is related to the perception that cities are more open and accepting of LGBTQ2+ people, which can support respect for diversity and inclusion, than purportedly more conservative rural towns. This study identifies a number of opportunities and barriers to expand rural travel among the LGBTQ2+ market. This qualitative research draws on semi-structured interviews with 20 gay travellers currently residing in BC. Participants indicated that travel to rural destinations is increasingly important for gay men, especially those who wish to escape from city life, access outdoor recreation, and enjoy a slower-paced environment. However, prevailing notions of rural homophobia still exist for many gay men, and some have encountered homophobic microaggressions in rural regions. These experiences have deterred some travellers from engaging in rural tourism. Findings suggest that many rural destinations need to foster safe and inclusive environments for gay travellers. This study also encourages further examination of the diverse experiences of gay travellers to rural regions.

Keywords: gay tourism and travel; gay spaces; rural tourism; rural tourism development

"Dehors" à la campagne: Perspectives des touristes gays sur les voyages en milieu rural en Colombie-Britannique, Canada

Résumé

Cette recherche explore le tourisme gai dans la province de l'Ouest canadien de la Colombie-Britannique (C.-B.) avec un accent particulier sur les voyages effectués par des hommes homosexuels auto-identifiés dans les régions rurales. La recherche sur le tourisme gay s'est rarement centrée sur les zones rurales, car il est souvent considéré comme un phénomène urbain entrepris principalement dans les pays du Nord. Cette focalisation urbaine est liée à la perception que les villes sont plus ouvertes et plus tolérantes envers les personnes LGBTQ2+, ce qui peut favoriser le respect de la diversité et de l'inclusion, que les villes rurales prétendent plus conservatrices. Cette étude identifie un certain nombre d'opportunités et d'obstacles à l'expansion des déplacements ruraux sur le marché LGBTQ2+. Cette recherche qualitative s'appuie sur des entretiens semi-structurés avec 20 voyageurs gays résidant actuellement en Colombie-Britannique. Les participants ont indiqué que les voyages vers des destinations rurales sont de plus en plus importants pour les hommes gais, en particulier ceux qui souhaitent s'échapper de la vie urbaine, accéder à des loisirs de plein air et profiter d'un environnement au rythme plus lent. Cependant, les notions dominantes d'homophobie rurale existent encore pour de nombreux hommes gais, et certains ont rencontré des micro-agressions homophobes dans les régions rurales. Ces expériences ont dissuadé certains voyageurs de s'engager dans le tourisme rural. Les résultats suggèrent que de nombreuses destinations rurales doivent favoriser des environnements sûrs et inclusifs pour les voyageurs homosexuels. Cette étude encourage également un examen plus approfondi des diverses expériences des voyageurs homosexuels dans les régions rurales.

Mots-clés: tourisme et voyages gays ; espaces gays; tourisme rural; développement du tourisme rural

1.0 Introduction

Gay tourism is often defined as the development and marketing of tourism products and services to gay people (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] & International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association [IGLTA], 2017). As a niche of the overall travel market, gay tourism is becoming increasingly mainstream as attitudes towards homosexuality improve in the Global North (Hughes et al., 2010; Ong et al., 2020). Despite some tendencies to lump LGBTQ2+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Two-Spirit) travellers together, research has indicated that each group in the larger queer community has different travel interests and cannot be considered homogenously (Guaracino, 2007).

The focus of this research is to explore gay tourism in the context of rural destinations in the Western Canadian province of British Columbia (BC). We centre on the motivations, behaviours, and preferences of gay tourists who have

travelled in rural BC. Research on gay tourism often centers on urban areas (Visser, 2014; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). This study explores varying conceptions of rural regions outside of a metropolitan framework. We, therefore, define rural destinations as areas of BC outside of its four census metropolitan areas (CMAs): Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, and Abbotsford-Mission (Statistics Canada, 2017). Based on 2019 population estimates, these four CMAs have a total population of 3,512,259, more than 69% of BC's total population of 5,071,336 (BC Stats, 2020). We aim to better understand how rural destinations can make their communities inclusive of diverse visitors and resolve the long-standing assumption that gay tourism is an urban pursuit (Cox, 2002; Hughes, 2003). Consequently, this study focuses exclusively on gay tourism, travel undertaken by self-identified gay males.

Gay tourism represents a small subset of the general population that has unique consumer needs (Hughes, 2005; Murray, 2007; Ro et al., 2017). Gay consumers have been seen as a lucrative market due to their purported higher spending and more frequent travel patterns compared to the general travel market (Hughes et al., 2010; Peñaloza, 1996; UNWTO & IGLTA, 2017). However, researchers have also critiqued studies that primarily explore gay tourism for its economic value as companies chase the “pink dollar” (Puar, 2002b). There have also been critiques of marketing approaches towards the gay travel market, which can stereotype the quintessential gay traveller as young, white, urban-dwelling, and middle class men with high disposable incomes (Gluckman & Reed, 1997; Stuber, 2002).

Rural areas have often been viewed as a haven for people holding socially conservative values regarding marriage, sexuality, and lifestyles (Bell & Valentine, 1995). This implies a heteronormative environment that is exclusionary to gay people and the antithesis to the concept of a gay space. Many gay men in Canada and the United States, but particularly those residing in rural areas, have historically travelled to access gay spaces and connect with their community due to the perceived inability to be openly gay in their home locale (Hughes, 1997). Gay life and politics are seen as inherently urban. Gay men who live in rural areas are more invisible and prone to experiencing homophobia and bigotry than those in urban environments (Kramer, 1995; Schweighofer, 2016). Rampant metronormativity in queer studies has effectively framed gay spaces as an urban construct, reducing or even erasing the importance of rural perspectives on space (Halberstam, 2005; Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018).

In this study, we conducted in-depth interviews to explore the perspectives of 20 self-identified gay males residing in BC. We argue that there is a significant interest in rural travel for gay men in BC. However, perceptions of rural homophobia and conservatism are still commonplace. Important efforts are needed by rural destinations to dispel these safety concerns among gay travellers and market their community as a welcoming, inclusive place to visit for all tourists. Ultimately, this paper counters the dearth of research into rural gay travel. By stepping away from predominant notions of gay tourism as an urban phenomenon and elucidating gay travellers motivations and experiences with regard to rural destinations, this study contributes to, and complicates, scholarly discourses of gay tourism.

2.0 Gay Tourism in Rural Regions

The term rural has diverse meanings. While it is critical to include some measures like population level and census designations to differentiate densely populated

urban areas from sparsely inhabited rural regions (Wienke & Hill, 2013), we contend in this study that such territorial markers of rural space cannot define how people experience rural areas. Similar to other researchers (Woods, 2012), we consider rurality as an object with spatial as well as social dimensions. Rurality can be seen as a dichotomous foil to urbanity, with the urban/rural binary acting as a way to discuss our understanding and connections to spaces (Bell, 2006). With global populations continuing to trend towards urbanization, rural tourism continues to be an underrepresented phenomenon in existing research (Fang, 2020).

Major urban centres and beach resort towns in North America and Europe have undoubtedly been seen as quintessential gay travel destinations as they have large LGBTQ populations that would attract additional LGBTQ people from other places (Clift et al., 2002). Analyses of gay travel media have similarly found North America and Western Europe as the biggest gay destinations, with large urban capitals like Berlin and San Francisco as the most prominent hotspots featured, alongside a few gay-coded beach resort towns like Key West and Provincetown (Waitt & Markwell, 2006). In addition, many portrayals of sexual diversity present it as an undeniably urban phenomenon (Brown, 2008). With these considerations in mind, it is crucial to explore some of the intersections between rurality and homosexuality as a starting point for elucidating potential rural gay travel markets.

The geographic designation “rural” carries certain associations beyond views of a pastoral, sparsely populated countryside; rural areas are associated with more conservative views regarding sexuality and gender (Gray et al., 2016). In consonance with such long-standing generalizations of rurality, a number of studies have found that smaller cities and rural areas can be more constraining for gay people, particularly due to perceptions that rural residents are homophobic and would treat them adversely if they are outed publicly (Gottschalk & Newton, 2009). Discussions of gay migration to inclusive urban metropolises as a response to oppressed rural queer lives appear widespread in literature (Doderer, 2011; Halberstam, 2005). Particularly when homosexuality was less accepted around the world, gay travel was often seen as identity tourism; gay travellers could visit gay spaces that would welcome them and allow them to openly express their gay identity, enabled through connections with other men who identify as gay (Cox, 2002; Hughes, 1997). Indeed, gay men who live in rural areas often rely on periodic trips or move to urban areas to build community connections (Kramer, 1995; Roth & Luongo, 2002). A gay space is a space occupied predominantly by gay people and is designed to address the needs of this specific demographic (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). With traditional societal beliefs that queer life and associated activities should be undertaken in private spaces, gay spaces can be seen as a response to heteronormative environments, acting as a place where gay people can safely express themselves (Binnie, 1995). Gay spaces can exist as an outlet for safe socialization, particularly in the context of travel and leisure (Hughes, 2006).

Gay space is not necessarily a catch-all requirement for gay travel, with one study finding the majority of subjects chose their destination first, without consideration for gay space, only later exploring gay-specific offerings for their chosen destination (Blichfeldt et al., 2013). A number of studies have even found that destination selection decisions and travel interests among gay men are often very similar to that of heterosexual tourists (Blichfeldt et al., 2011; Clift & Forrest, 1999; Weeden et al., 2016). While acknowledging these spaces do not appeal to every gay traveller, gay spaces remain a key driver of destination selection for many gay men (Melián-

González et al., 2011), along with considerations around the gay-friendliness of a destination (Hughes & Deutsch, 2010). Gay spaces may be particularly important for those who fear being discovered as gay within their home environment (Hughes, 2002). Gay spaces can be a comforting factor for tourists—when meeting new people in such an environment, and an instant connection can be created due to the commonality of being gay (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018). The existence of gay spaces is also critically important because destination selection is often viewed through a risk avoidance lens to reduce the chance of encountering homophobia and unsafe environments when travelling (Hughes, 2006).

Since most gay spaces are found in urban areas, research has not fully explored gay spaces in rural areas and the role that their existence (or lack thereof) plays in destination selection. As rural areas have less clearly designated gay spaces, the gay community has more limited options to interact with each other and often congregate and socialize outside of the standard bar scene seen in urban locations (Kirkey & Forsyth, 2001). Consequently, many gay people residing in rural areas cite the Internet as an important gay space, enabling them to connect with other members of the community if access to physical gay spaces are limited (Baker, 2016). In particular, geospatial mobile applications, such as Grindr, can act as a lifeline for rural gay men who are looking to develop connections to other gay men in their community or explore their sexuality (Clay, 2018). The mobile nature of these applications is fitting for rural gay travel, as they represent portable gay spaces that can move with the traveller, while their hyper-local nature provides instant connections to other gay men in an environment that lacks physical opportunities to do so (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Dalla-Fontana, 2019).

The lack of public gay spaces in rural areas could have implications for rural gay tourism, particularly for gay tourists who value the existence of gay space as an important feature of a destination. It is important to note that emerging research on rural gay events and festivals show that they can act as a temporary gay space to counter rural heteronormativity and the marginalization of LGBTQ individuals in these areas (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). These rural events can challenge assumptions about the acceptance of sexual diversity in these small communities and provide an opportunity to legitimize rural LGBTQ residents, and allow them to develop community connections (Lewis & Markwell, 2021). Moreover, recent research has shown that the use of gay-oriented mobile applications as a digital space to connect with other community members can be a sufficient replacement for physical gay spaces for some LGBTQ individuals (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Dalla-Fontana, 2019). More work can be done to determine the impact of limited gay space on a potential rural gay travel market and how online spaces and queer events can help address this dearth of gay space.

With safety and gay-friendliness of a destination, an important consideration for many gay travellers (Herrera & Scott, 2005; Want, 2002), notions of rural areas being less socially accepting of homosexuality can have a tangible impact on travel to these areas as well. It has been demonstrated that gay people will often avoid destinations where homosexuality is viewed unfavourably, whether socially or legally, whereas destinations that are accepting of alternate sexualities are viewed more favourably (Blichfeldt et al., 2011). Despite this, some gay men do not view these considerations as critical to their choice of destination, choosing to occasionally visit places where homosexuality is oppressed if they have a great enough interest in the local sights and attractions, even if it means changing

behaviour or hiding their gay identity during their visit (Wong & Tolkach, 2017). What this makes clear is that, while it is ideal for rural destinations to dispel perceptions of rural homophobia if hoping to attract the gay travel market, these perceptions do not necessarily prevent gay men from undertaking rural travel if they are still interested in the attractions and offerings of these areas.

Despite some of the aforementioned research portraying rural areas as socially regressive and devoid of gay life, ruralities can differ between regions and cannot be simplistically painted in one light (Schweighofer, 2016). Past research has shown that rural support and acceptance of LGBTQ2+ individuals is not substantially different than what is seen in urban areas, disputing the long-held belief that an urban/rural divide exists on social issues (Anderson et al., 2015; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Many researchers are disputing simplified dichotomies of rural areas as dangerous, bigoted, and lacking community connections for LGBTQ2+ individuals, and of urban areas as safe havens that embrace gay people unreservedly (McGlynn, 2018). This infers the potential for rural communities to be welcoming destinations that allow gay travellers to visit, while feeling safe and comfortable to be their authentic selves.

Significant gaps exist in research about gay tourism to rural destinations. The majority of literature on gay tourism is centered on urban areas (Hughes, 2003; Johnston, 2005) or coastal resort towns (Melián-González et al., 2011; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Robards, 2017). Comparatively, rural gay tourism has received very little attention in tourism studies to date, which limits the applicability of past research with regard to rural destinations. Even reviews of gay travel research acknowledge the predominant urban focus but do not identify rural perspectives on the topic. This is despite the fact that rural tourism, generally, is a fast-growing sector of the tourism industry (Fang, 2020) and an essential component of rural economic development strategies (Phillips et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2001). Notable exceptions to this exist, particularly surrounding the rural Australian town of Daylesford and its ChillOut Festival for LGBTQ people (Gorman-Murray, 2009; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2008) and the rural Australian town of Broken Hill and its Broken Heel Festival, which celebrates the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and drag artistry (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). Despite these exceptions, rural gay tourism is worthy of deeper exploration.

Some researchers have indicated that future gay travel research should reexamine the motivations, behaviours, and demographics of gay travellers and how they interact with gay spaces when travelling (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). Research in tourism has tended to result in disembodied, masculinist, heteronormative constructions of the tourism phenomena (Johnston, 2001). While there is a notable body of literature that has examined sociological and social geographical aspects of gay tourism, there remains a focus in scholarly work on topics like marketing, advertising trends, and new markets, even though these gaps were identified decades ago (Puar, 2002b). By “othering” queer bodies and voices in these ways, queer perspectives are often excluded from entering mainstream tourism discourses. This research aims to help counteract this and encourage unapologetically “queer” tourism discourses in research through critical exploration of gay perspectives on tourism in rural spaces.

3.0 Rural British Columbia as a Research Site

In direct response to the previous research outlined above, this qualitative study was designed to explore general interests and travel intentions of gay men in relation to rural destinations. BC was chosen as the case study for this research due to its unique combination of widespread support for homosexuality and diverse rural tourism economies. With an estimated population of 5,071,336 people occupying a total land area of 944,735 square kilometres, BC has a low population density of 5.37 people per square kilometres. The province is mostly defined by rural areas that cover two-thirds (60 million hectares) of the province's land, comparable to the combined geographic size of Germany and France (Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development, n.d.). BC's status as one of Canada's fastest-growing and most diverse provinces, combined with its ample rural tourism opportunities, makes it a unique case study for this research.

4.0 Research Methods

This study highlights the perspectives of gay men (namely, self-identified males who are sexually and emotionally attracted to other males). Exclusively centering this research on the perspectives of gay men occurred due to the challenges of representing the diversity of the LGBTQ2+ communities in one study (Gottschalk & Newton, 2009; Therkelsen et al., 2013; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Focusing this research on BC residents also ensures a greater likelihood that participants will be familiar with rural destinations in the province.

We conducted semi-structured interviews and an interview guide was co-developed by the researchers and a few key LGBTQ2+ community organizations. Based on feedback from key participants, we revised the guide, incorporating their feedback. Some of the core research questions explored in the interviews were the aspects of a destination that appeal to gay travellers, how gay travellers perceive rural regions of BC, how this perception influences their travel decision-making, and how lived experiences during past travels produce barriers, or shape, future intentions for travel to rural BC.

The first author (Toth) of this research self-identifies as a gay male who has worked in economic development, tourism marketing, and community engagement in rural BC. The second author (Mason) self-identifies as a heterosexual male whose scholarly research is centred on rural and Indigenous tourism in Western Canada. As the first author is an active member of the gay community, some personal acquaintances were recruited to participate in this study. Snowball sampling was used to recruit further interviewees. Two LGBTQ2+ community organizations were also contacted, who referred participants with whom the researchers had no previous contact. In total, 20 individuals from eight different municipalities participated. This research does not claim to be representative of all gay men's perspectives on rural travel in BC. Moreover, as the sample was comprised exclusively of current residents of BC, the perspectives represented in this research may not be representative of the views of international or interprovincial Canadian tourists.

All participants in this study were guaranteed anonymity, and pseudonyms are used in the data presented below. While this research was conducted in 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, 18 of the 20 participants were interviewed prior to the escalation of government lockdown measures across BC on March 17, 2020.

Consequently, the global COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout had little influence on the data collection of this research.

The average age of participants was 33.4, with an age range between 25 and 50. The majority of participants live in Metro Vancouver (65%), Kamloops (20%), Victoria (10%), and the Fraser Valley (5%). The majority of participants (75%) were born and/or grew up in BC, four participants (20%) indicated a hometown in another Canadian province, and one participant grew up in Europe (5%). The greater majority of participants are in a relationship (55%) or married (25%). Five participants identified as either single or other (25%). Income data reported that 20% had an annual household income over \$120,000 CAD, 30% of participants reported \$80,001 to \$120,000 CAD, 35% reported \$50,000 to \$80,000 CAD, and 10% reported earning less than \$50,000 CAD annually; one participant did not feel comfortable reporting income.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. The researchers closely read and reread the transcripts to establish themes using open coding. The authors then discussed coding to identify relevant sub-themes. Trustworthiness was established through the collaborative nature of the data analysis and content validation. Participants were provided with their own verbatim interview transcripts to ensure reliability and accuracy, and to allow for edits before the research was consolidated into final themes. The two key themes that emerged from our analysis centred on the motivations and constraints that gay travellers encountered when visiting rural areas of the province and the critical concerns of welcomeness, safety, and inclusion. We organized our results below according to these central themes.

5.0 Motivations and Constraints for Visiting Rural Regions of the Province

Gay men have diverse motivations for undertaking travel. One of the main motivations for visiting rural BC that participants discussed was being outdoors and undertaking outdoor activities.

At the end of the day, I really like hiking and even just being within nature. So if that means hiking up to a chalet and just hiding away for a weekend, that's something that is very appealing to me as a holiday idea. (Dorian, personal communication, March 13, 2020)

Coincidentally, when participants were asked to provide their opinion on what BC has to offer visitors as a travel destination, every participant in the study stated that BC's tourism offerings and overall image relate to the province's natural beauty and the ample amount of outdoor excursions to undertake.

Boundless nature, like it's every ecosystem you could ever dream to have available at your fingertips. As much as I love the city and concerts and the hustle and bustle, there's still something amazing about exploring the mountains, the rivers, the creeks, the fields...(Martin, personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Building on this reflection on BC's tourism offerings, 19 of the 20 participants said that their personal travel interests align with BC's wealth of nature-based travel experiences. The thought of having many types of activities and landscapes in proximity to each other was a recurring opinion.

British Columbia, especially the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island, has exactly what I was talking about...a great balance between urban and rural... it's an opportunity to spend a day or two in Vancouver and then an opportunity to go to Whistler skiing, and go to the Fraser Valley fishing. I think that's what BC has to offer, it's that you can do all of that in a one-week stay, you can do everything. (Jackson, personal communication, March 5, 2020)

In general, participants tended to view rural areas as having considerable access to outdoor activities to enjoy. Research indicates that nature-based recreational opportunities can be one of the attractions for rural tourism (Fang, 2020).

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 towards looking at rural type of places. Because they're traditionally located in spaces that provide easy access to those types of experiences of hiking, mountain biking, kayaking, camping, those types of things. (Connor, personal communication, February 26, 2020)

The natural setting of rural BC was of particular interest to participants living in urban parts of the province. Using rural travel as an opportunity to get away from the hectic nature of city life was a key consideration for a number of participants, in consonance with research about rural idylls representing a therapeutic contrast to urban living (Gorman-Murray et al., 2012). "[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, personal communication, March 3, 2020).

A number of participants indicated their interest in Indigenous tourism and how the unique culture of the province's Indigenous peoples was an appealing aspect of rural BC's tourism offerings. Indigenous tourism is important to consider in rural BC as it is a key sector to Indigenous rural community economic development in the province (Murray & King, 2012; Thomlinson & Crouch, 2012). One participant highlighted that Indigenous tourism experiences can lead to exceptional travel experiences while supporting Indigenous communities economically as well.

I think [Indigenous tourism] is very rich and thriving in certain areas and regions... they've been stewarding these lands and waters for so long and it is a sustainable way that they can continue to steward them and keep them healthy, while also generating income and economic activity. And so it makes me feel good when I go out and take a water taxi in Tofino that's

owned by the Ahousaht or go to parks in Chilcotin territory, or even on the West Coast Trail where there's Indigenous guardians, that makes me feel better about my relationship to the Indigenous peoples of this land. Also I think it's a unique experience and I love learning about the peoples that have been here forever. (Preston, personal communication, March 14, 2020)

The accessibility of rural BC was also discussed by several participants. With everyone participating in the study being a BC resident, many participants expressed gratitude at being able to have world-class travel offerings at their own doorstep.

I think we're very lucky, especially in Kamloops, to be so close to a lot of things. I mean, it's very beautiful here, but I mean the Okanagan only being two hours away and that, in my opinion, is really nice in the summer... and that's world-class. We're not that far from the Rockies as well, either winter or summer. So we're very, very fortunate – people come, you know, from around the world to basically travel to places that are very close to us. (Eric, personal communication, February 22, 2020)

While 11 of the 20 participants indicated they prefer to undertake travel outside of BC, the majority of these individuals qualified this by saying they would still prefer local travel within BC for weekend trips and other short-term vacations. For those indicating a greater interest in travelling locally within BC, versus travelling further afield, the relative affordability and accessibility of the region was a key consideration for this opinion.

I think, now that I live here, it's a shame to let amazing places go to waste that are so close and accessible. So it's almost "support the local economy" tourism, but also just to make sure I'm aware of the place I live in. But there's also a practicality [aspect], if somewhere is only two hours' drive away... that's very doable and inexpensive to go. (Eric, personal communication, February 22, 2020)

While a diversity of travel interests were generally highlighted by participants, the most common interest when visiting rural BC was exploring the province's beautiful and rugged natural beauty. The ability to step away from the hustle and bustle of city life and enjoy some respite in the countryside was also a key appeal for participants living in urban areas. While there was a clear appetite for rural travel expressed by the participants in general, diving deeper into gay-specific travel considerations is an important piece of the puzzle when considering rural travel by this audience.

While there was a lot of appeal to rural BC travel for the majority of participants, there were a number of constraints discussed that either prevented or reduced the frequency with which some gay travellers visited the region. Some of these constraints included the general lack of gay spaces in rural BC and perceptions of rural BC as less welcoming and accepting of gay people.

The existence of gay spaces and events at a destination was a key topic of discussion during the interviews. Participants assigned varying levels of importance to the presence of gay spaces and events as a travel motivator. While 13 of the 20 participants had travelled for a gay event in the past, 12 participants stated that they did not prioritize travel to partake in events related to the gay community. While gay events can be an added bonus, participants frequently indicated that they prioritize other travel interests in their decision-making process, such as cultural activities, food, or visiting friends and family. As one participant pointed out, a general interest in gay events does not necessarily make it a priority when considering travel plans.

It's one of many things that would be on a list of attractions to a location. It would never be the sole driver, I would say, except for on the rare occasion. Of course, one of the things I would look at participating in when [travelling is] a gay bar or whatever. And I think you, more often, in larger cities will see that. Now it's rare that I go to a large city without visiting some sort of queer-related establishment or event or something. But it's, again, never usually the main reason that I'm there. (Eric, personal communication, February 22, 2020)

Half of the participants indicated that gay events and gay spaces are factors considered in their destination selection process, though only four participants said it was a primary motivation for their travels. For the few that viewed it as a key travel motivator, the ability to be yourself and safely socialize with other gay men was central to this interest.

I actually was just looking at my calendar from a couple years ago where it was just super gay... Seattle Pride, Vancouver Pride, Victoria Pride, Kamloops Pride, Nanaimo Pride. Luckily, they're all stretched out every couple of weekends and stuff like that. But, yes, that definitely becomes a sort of driving force because it is a big party and you're surrounded by a whole bunch of other gays. You can really be yourself walking down the street, whereas outside of that time frame maybe you're not as out or comfortable walking around. (Edward, personal communication, February 25, 2020)

Most participants noted that gay spaces tend to be more common or visible in urban locations. In line with this, one participant felt that gay spaces were a travel motivation for urban travel, but not rural travel. This highlights that the lack of gay spaces in rural BC may not necessarily act as a deterrent to rural travel for this audience; the enjoyment of visiting gay spaces when travelling can be a contextual preference depending on whether such offerings exist in the chosen destination.

Well I think that would apply more to an urban destination. And yes, we would do a search and just see, "Oh, is there a gay village?" Not that we

would particularly spend all our time there, or look for accommodation there or anything, but yeah, for an urban destination, sure. For a more rural one, no. (Shawn, personal communication, March 3, 2020)

In a similar fashion, rural communities were seen by one participant as limiting for the expression of their sexuality compared to the openness and freedom of attending gay travel events. As Dixon highlights, gay-oriented travel experiences can help to temporarily create gay spaces in which attendees can find safety and camaraderie.

So when you go to a smaller community, you're always a little bit mindful, like, you have your spider senses up, your gay senses, like, "Do I need to be careful what I'm doing here? Am I sashaying too much?" Where, on a gay cruise or a ski week, you're completely authentic. It's pretty remarkable. (Dixon, personal communication, March 3, 2020)

While visiting a destination, meeting local members of the gay community was an important aspect of travel for eight participants. Due to the changing nature of gay spaces with the advent of technology, and particularly in those rural areas that lack physical gay spaces, connecting with the local gay community has largely moved to mobile applications. This movement towards accessing online gay spaces in the absence of physical gay spaces in rural areas was noted by one study set in the eastern province of Nova Scotia (Baker, 2016) and was a notable discussion point in several interviews for this study.

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 just like, "Hey, friendship, we're looking for a tour guide" kind of thing. We kind of want to meet someone there, to tell us what it's like living there and sort of get that experience, so I appreciate that. (Edward, personal communication, February 25, 2020)

While online applications can be leveraged as an opportunity to develop community connections in rural areas (Clay, 2018), some travellers also use online applications to connect with local gay men to determine a destination's safety and get a more localized understanding of the area that may not be shared in traditional 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. While we recognize that Grindr has always been for hooking up, meeting somebody for dating, or whatever nefarious purposes you're looking for, it 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. So I think that has, in many respects, changed the perception of rural travel

because of the access to information. (Keith, personal communication, March 13, 2020)

The existence of gay spaces and events in rural BC was discussed with participants. While gay spaces can be a motivator for gay travellers, participants noted the general lack of such spaces in rural areas. This lack of gay spaces in rural areas is in line with past research that most gay spaces are centered in urban and gay-specific communities (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Kazyak, 2011). Fifteen of the twenty participants could not directly recall a single gay space encountered in their past rural travels in BC. The observed lack of gay spaces by participants could have implications for rural destinations that want to tap into the gay travel market, as gay spaces can sometimes act as a driving factor for destination choice and accommodation selection among this demographic (Pritchard et al., 2000). A few participants recalled gay spaces that exist in rural areas of BC, but they were often tied to temporary Pride events, or participants had trouble recalling the exact details of the space.

One of my favourite things to do, because I love planning trips, I will look and see where Pride is happening at various cities, or towns, that we like to visit... We'll try to map that out so we have that in our calendars, and that's a big driving force because obviously there's lots of gay-friendly action going on at that point... But as far as going to gay spaces, I think Powell River had something. (Edward, personal communication, February 25, 2020)

Despite a seeming lack of gay spaces in rural BC, a number of interviews highlighted that such spaces do exist, albeit in limited numbers. Participant Preston noted that a rural gay campground provided a welcoming outlet for building community connections.

You know, that's why I go to Shadow Falls [gay campground] is that they have weekends where all the bears [heavy-set, hairy gay men] go and then camp together, you can meet people that are within your community that are like you. (Preston, personal communication, March 14, 2020)

In addition, some participants noted that more LGBTQ2+-oriented events are starting to spring up outside of the province's urban heart in Vancouver. This increase in rural gay events is an encouraging trend indicating there is a future potential of rural gay travel.

I feel Vancouver always gets [deemed the most gay-friendly place in BC]. And that may be just because it's the large city. In reality, I think that that's it. But I think a lot of places have done more to feel like they might have something to give to the LGBT population. Whether it is through the Peak Pride series that goes through various [mountain] resorts, Whistler Pride,

and even Kelowna having their pop-up gay dance parties now... So I feel like there's definitely a push to have things outside of [Vancouver]. (Eric, personal communication, February 22, 2020)

Physical indicators of the LGBTQ2+ community, like rainbow flag stickers that businesses will occasionally put on their front window, were discussed in various interviews. These symbols can act as indicators of safe, gay-friendly places (Pritchard et al., 1998; Reynolds, 2009), so that even communities with a lack of specific gay spaces can still find ways to make gay residents and visitors feel safe and welcome. This could act as one method for destinations to counter rural BC's general lack of clearly designated gay-friendly spaces.

People identify with the little rainbow sticker on the door right? It's just that kind of recognition that you're in a safe space. It doesn't need to be a particularly, you know, gay pub, though I would love there to be a gay pub or some kind of an actual establishment. (David, personal communication, February 19, 2020)

This research made it clear that gay spaces and opportunities to connect with other LGBTQ2+ individuals were important travel considerations for participants. Even for those who did not specifically travel to partake in gay events or visit gay spaces, the existence of such offerings were highlighted. While gay spaces are few and far between in rural BC, seasonal gay events and accommodations are beginning to emerge in many regions. For those rural communities without such offerings, there is an opportunity to highlight safe spaces that can help reassure gay travellers that they are welcomed visitors.

6.0 Welcomeness, Safety, and Inclusion

Several participants stated the importance of a travel destination being welcoming and inclusive of gay individuals. Considering BC as a whole, every participant noted they view larger urban cities in BC as very gay-friendly. “[Vancouver is] very, very, very friendly. I've never felt unsafe anywhere I've been, I've walked around on Friday night in a fucking yellow jacket and a wrestling singlet... I've never felt in danger.” (Martin, personal communication, March 3, 2020).

Consequently, the perception that smaller and more remote towns in BC are less tolerant of gay people compared to larger cities and urban areas was frequently mentioned. The act of being openly gay in rural spaces can be challenging for many gay men, as highlighted by frequent discussions with participants about gay identity and whether participants conceal their identities when travelling in rural BC. While most participants felt the gay-friendliness of a destination was a consideration, the majority indicated they would still be willing to visit destinations that were perceived to be unaccepting of homosexuality, even if they had to change their behaviour or actively conceal their identity as a gay male. All but two participants reported having actively concealed their gay identity or changed their behaviour while travelling, like reducing public displays of affection (PDA) with their partner.

I can't think of a time where I was scared to be gay outwardly. I think I'm kind of always aware of my circumstances, so PDA and those kinds of things might be checked a bit more. I maybe wouldn't go down the street in Ashcroft holding hands with my partner – that's maybe not the thing to do. But I don't think I've intentionally ever been like, "Yeah, I'm straight." (laughs) [David, personal communication, February 19, 2020]

While 18 of 20 participants indicated that they did conceal their identity or change behaviour when travelling generally, only nine individuals suggested they did this specifically in rural BC. However, many participants noted how their perception of rural BC subconsciously discouraged them from embracing their gay identity while travelling.

We'd not really hide it, though we'd maybe turn it down a little bit if we're camping in some backwater location with a bunch of big trucks and rednecks and guys drinking around us. We may not make out to Madonna super loud or have a big flag on top of the car or something like that, but that's maybe common sense also a little. (laughs) [Edward, personal communication, February 25, 2020]

It should be noted that three participants who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour (BIPOC) highlighted experiencing uncomfortable encounters in rural BC due to either overt or perceived racism. This suggests that further work is needed to explore intersectionality in tourism research and how travel experiences may differ among individuals when jointly considering their various identities (be it sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, class or otherwise), as researchers have previously highlighted (Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014; Puar, 2002a).

Smaller towns usually aren't very diverse. As an Asian guy, sometimes if you're with other people of colour and you just walk into an establishment, everyone just stares at you, which is pretty bad. (Rory, personal communication, March 1, 2020)

Issues of safety and past experiences with homophobia in rural BC was a topic of discussion. Three of the 20 participants had encountered some minor incidents during rural BC travels, but the majority had not directly encountered any problems as a result of their sexuality. One participant brought up an incident he experienced while at a restaurant in rural BC, which highlights how even indirect homophobia can have an impact on traveller's willingness to be openly gay while on vacation.

I think once we were at a restaurant in... a rural place, somewhere in the Kootenays. There was a group of guys beside us that were just being completely inappropriate with their conversations... I was sitting there with my partner at the time and I think they started using language like, "Oh, you

stupid faggot” and stuff like that to their friends as an insult and a slur. And so when you start hearing that language quite loudly in a small pub, as they’re getting their drink on, you start to feel small right? You start to feel inferior; you start to feel discriminated against; and you start to kind of... shrink. It wasn’t directly at us, but people don’t pull that in an urban centre anymore. (Keith, personal communication, March 13, 2020)

For the majority of participants, the gay-friendliness of a destination was not important, or only a secondary consideration, in the decision to visit a specific location. However, there were concerns about the welcomeness and safety of rural destinations, which is often a prime consideration for gay travellers.

LGBT friendly is important for me, but it’s not necessarily the first thing I look to... it’s really about the other things to do AND knowing that the LGBT side of it isn’t going to be a problem. You know, I still want to go see the beautiful parts of British Columbia, it’s just knowing that it’s going to be safe to do so. (David, personal communication, February 19, 2020)

As supported by recent research (Wong & Tolkach, 2017), a number of participants indicated that gay-friendliness and tolerance was a more important consideration when undertaking rural travel solo, with a same-sex partner or an exclusively gay group of friends.

If you find discomfort in a space when you’re travelling alone or in a group that’s not comprised solely of gay people, it’s easier to blend in, whereas if you’re travelling just with your partner it’s harder to, so I definitely find myself wanting to know if it’s gay-friendly more if I’m travelling with my partner than if I’m travelling alone. But travelling alone, knowing that a place is gay-friendly still does put your mind at ease because you don’t have to consciously hide. (Dorian, personal communication, March 13, 2020)

Some participants felt gay-friendliness is better understood as a safety consideration, a way of determining whether local residents of a destination would respond negatively to encountering a gay tourist. The importance of safety for gay travellers suggests a need for rural destinations to be more explicitly welcoming of this community and foster an inclusive environment, as safety is a primary influence on the travel decision-making for gay men (Pritchard et al., 2000).

It’s a consideration, yes. The consideration is more about safety than it is about friendly. There are places I won’t travel to because I perceive them as being unsafe for gay people, but yeah, I don’t think that I would necessarily seek out is one destination more friendly than another destination. (Jackson, personal communication, March 5, 2020)

Safety with regard to interactions with tourism & hospitality workers came up in three interviews. Accommodation providers are seen as a particular challenge for gay and lesbian travellers (Hughes, 2002, 2006), and a few participants reaffirmed this based on their past experiences.

There was one incident or conversation where my husband and I arrived at a hotel to check-in and the clerk identified there was one bed for both of us and questioned that and was quite taken aback by our response of “No, we only need one bed, we’re married.” And so, it’s not that she was upset or frustrated, it was more that it had not crossed her mind that that could be the type of space that we would have wanted, or that we would only want one bed. But there was a learning moment I could see in that interaction. (Connor, personal communication, February 26, 2020)

Even an encounter with a rural mechanic on Vancouver Island was an uncomfortable experience for one participant. This suggests a need for greater diversity and inclusion training for businesses.

I’ve gone to a music festival on the Island and our car ended up breaking down on the way back, so we took it to a mechanic in a very, very small town...like no cell service or anything like that. We were chatting with the mechanic and he was a really nice guy and kind of towards the end of it, I think maybe he was trying to ask whether we were gay or not, but it came off as really homophobic...he was like, “Were there any of them gays at that festival?” And both my friend and I, who are both gay, looked at each other and were just kinda like, “Yeah, probably!” (laughs). So I think there’s a level of safety, where I’m sure it was innocent, but you just feel less comfortable expressing your sexuality in small, conservative places. (Preston, personal communication, March 14)

Ultimately, the wealth and diversity of travel experiences that research participants had in rural BC cannot be adequately defined in polarizing terms as either welcoming or unwelcoming. The greater majority of participants have not encountered any significant challenges while travelling in rural BC as openly gay men. Despite this, perceptions of rural BC as less inclusive and welcoming of queer people were still predominant, and a few individuals did experience homophobic microaggressions that underlined concerns about safety and inclusion in rural areas. With LGBTQ2+ acceptance becoming more widespread in Canada, even in rural areas, it is important that rural destinations do more to combat perceptions of rural homophobia if they want to expand their potential travel market and ensure that no barriers to visitation exist.

7.0 Conclusion

Our findings clearly show that gay men have incredibly diverse travel interests and seriously consider the role their sexuality plays in travel decision-making and experiences. Rural travel, in particular, had appeal for the majority of gay men participating in this research. All participants expressed at least some interest in further travel around rural BC, indicating that demand exists among gay residents for the attractions rural BC has to offer. To successfully build on this potential, though, communities in rural BC will need to address long-standing perceptions of the region as being more conservative and homophobic than urban areas of the province. Such efforts will require rural municipalities and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to actively foster an inclusive and welcoming destination, while outwardly advertising such efforts to gay travellers. It is worth noting that there is a lack of research about how DMOs are tangibly working to improve accessibility and market their destination to suit gay travellers. This is a key area of future research that warrants the attention of critical scholars.

This study's exploration of rural gay tourism is only one step towards queering rural tourism studies. One opportunity for future research is to investigate how non-gay LGBTQ2+ people travel in relation to rural destinations. As highlighted above, our research is specific to gay travellers and not representative of other members of this community like lesbian, transgender, or two-spirit individuals. Reviews of queer tourism research have found most research centres on sexually diverse groups, such as gay and lesbian individuals, with less consideration for bisexual and gender diverse travellers from the transgender and intersex communities (Ong et al., 2020). Tourism research regarding LGBTQ2+ peoples has also been heavily focused on Euro-North American perspectives and lacks diversity (Baker, 2016). Research that looks specifically at issues of race in a queer tourism context, highlighting BIPOC perspectives, is critically needed.

Overall, despite the majority of participants expressing interest in further travel within rural BC in the future, perceptions of rural communities as being less accepting of gay people still persist, and, as a consequence, a number of participants expressed reluctance towards future travel in rural BC. As such, more work needs to be done to ensure that rural destinations are safe for LGBTQ2+ visitors if these communities wish to tap into this far-reaching interest in rural gay tourism. Our findings contribute fundamental insights into the motivations, perceptions, and interests in the rural travel of self-identified gay males residing in BC. These results have transferable benefits to rural destinations in countries with similar socio-economic, cultural, and political attitudes towards the gay community. While this research cannot purport to be inclusive of all perspectives held by BC's gay community, the LGBTQ2+ community at large, or even residents of neighbouring provinces of Canada, it is an in-depth exploration of what rural travel means to gay males presently.

With urbanization increasing globally, the sustainable economic development of rural communities is an important consideration for many regions and nations. As tourism is a crucial contributor to rural economies, the tourism sector and its underlying industries are well-positioned to support rural development efforts. This study makes it apparent that rural gay tourism can become a valuable and desirable alternative to urban and coastal resort tourism among gay men, but rural destination development and marketing efforts must help ensure that this group feels welcomed and safe to be themselves during their stay in the countryside.

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