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Irish Gay Men and Tourism: Behaviours and Motivations

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Irish Gay Men and Tourism: Behaviours and Motivations

3rd Annual Conference on Tourism and Hospitality in Ireland
Dundalk Institute of Technology
June 12 & 13, 2007

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Abstract

This paper is an exploratory study of the holiday practices of an increasingly important segment of the Irish tourism market: gay men. Studies show that gay men are, in many respects, desirable tourists: they tend to be more highly educated, have greater disposable incomes and a higher propensity to travel. Yet there has been relatively little research – and virtually none in an Irish context – concerning gay male holiday destination choice, behaviours, and motivations. After reviewing the existing literature on gay men and tourism, this paper employs qualitative research methods – primarily focus group, depth interviews and observation – in an attempt to identify: How do they define a 'gay holiday'? Would they go on a gay holiday? Where do Irish gay men go on holiday? What role does sexuality play in their holiday decision making? What are their experiences with tourism providers? These basic research enquiries facilitate a testing of various hypotheses found in the international tourism literature, including: that gay men employ tourism in 'constructing' a 'gay identity,' and that availability of sexual encounters is a significant motivating factor in holiday choice among gay men.

This paper will be of interest to practitioners who might wish more insight into this potentially lucrative tourism market, and to academics interested in the role that tourism can play in identity construction and self actualisation. Working together in this field, practitioners and academics can help create tourism products that attract high-spending tourists while providing life-affirming experiences.

I. Introduction

This paper explores Irish gay men and tourism. This topic is relevant and timely for several reasons. Gay men may become an increasingly significant portion of the Irish tourist market. In the immediate wake of the recently-announced 'Open Skies' agreement, Aer Lingus announced its intentions to inaugurate a direct route from San Francisco. Tourism Ireland has announced a marketing drive for North America. They have identified the top 15 US metropolitan areas as the best 'targets' for a marketing

drive. These include cities with large gay populations, including San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Miami/Ft. Lauderdale, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston and elsewhere. Tourism Ireland hopes to appeal to financially-better-off 'culture seekers' in its marketing efforts (Tourism Ireland, 2006). There is likely to be a significant overlap between that market and gay men.[1]

My research assumes the desirability of gay male tourists to the Irish tourism market, and focuses on holiday destination choice and motivation among Irish gay men. There is a lacuna in the international literature on this topic. This paper is part of a larger, ongoing project exploring Irish gay men and tourism. It provides some preliminary, emerging findings from the ongoing research.

II. Literature Review

There has been considerable research into holiday choice and decision making (Decrop, 1999; Purdue & Meng, 2006). However, until recently, there has been relatively little research into the factors influencing holiday motivations among gay men (Johnson, 1999-2000; Clift & Forrest, 1999; Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000). There are approximately one half dozen seminal articles on gay men and tourism, which will be reviewed in this section. There is virtually no research about holiday choice and motivations among Irish gay men.

Factors Influencing Holiday Destination Choice

'[W]hat drives consumers to behave as they do is of paramount importance to understand vacation decisions and decision making processes.' (Decrop, 1999: 65). The drivers of

[1] Tourism Ireland does not advertise in distribution channels targeting gay men. Nor does the Tourism Ireland website contain information appealing directly to this market segment. This contrasts with the British Tourism Authority, and with the cities of Vienna, Geneva, Philadelphia, Minneapolis (among others) – none of which are particularly known as 'gay' destinations, but all of which recognise the significance of this market. Research into this reluctance on the part of Tourism Ireland is warranted, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

holiday choice often are characterised as 'push' or 'pull' factors. Push factors are 'socio-psychological forces (motivations) that predispose the individual to go on vacation' (Decrop, 1999: 65). Pull factors are 'the product attributes that attract (as a result of the evaluative process) the individual towards a particular vacation decision' (Decrop, 1999: 65).

Decrop (1999) adopted an interpretivist approach to better understanding the decision-making process in a tourism context. He conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with decision-making units representing the four types of holiday makers: singles, couples, families and groups of friends. He identified the following as important factors in influencing holiday decision-making: gender-occupational status, age, personality and position in lifecycle, family status, economic status, emotionality v. rationality.

As comprehensive as Decrop's research is, it did not touch upon sexuality as an influencing factor in holiday choice. This is surprising, as sexuality is one of the most significant human status characteristics (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000).[2]

Leisure as an Important Element in Identity Formation

While many sociologists argue for paid labour/occupation as the primary source of identity, Wearing and Wearing (1992: 16) argue that 'leisure is just as much as site for the construction of individual identity as is the work place.' Today, most people long to be free from the shackles of work and relate to a wide range of non-work activities in constructing identity.

[2] Conversely, it is important to realise that in examining the holiday choices and motivations of Irish gay men, there are numerous relevant factors in addition to sexuality. Irish gay men are rich and poor, young and old, educated and ignorant, healthy and ill. Some may be married to a member of the opposite sex and subject to family influences. Some are in committed relationships, others are single. Some are comfortable with their sexuality in their home environment, some may be deeply 'closeted' and, perhaps, not even fully accepting of themselves as homosexual despite same-sex sexual activity. The Irish gay male community does not represent a single, homogenous group.

Leisure can be constrained by rules emerging from discourses of groups to which an individual belongs: women's leisure, home-based, family-related, or men's leisure. It can constrain individuals to predetermined roles, rather than liberate them from them. However, 'leisure can create a space for resistance to dominant discourse and an arena for personal satisfaction and transcendence of [e.g.,] gender stereotypes' (Wearing & Wearing, 1992: 12).

Concrete Examples of Leisure as a Tool of Identity Formation

Taylor and Toohey (2001/2002) undertook to research the place of leisure in the lives of Muslim women living in non-Muslim society. They did this primarily to develop suggestions as to how leisure providers could facilitate the needs of this discrete group of leisure consumers.

Mair (2002/2003) undertook a study of the use of leisure activities in a slightly different context. Rather than look at the potential for leisure to play a role in developing a relatively fixed identity, she examined how social activists employed leisure in activities designed to affect social change. This could be regarded as resistance to the commodification of leisure activities along pre-existing acceptable social norms (Wearing & Wearing, 1992).

Before turning to the role of tourism in gay identity construction, it is useful to review the history of gay tourism as a discrete phenomenon.

A History of Gay Tourism

Clift, Luongo and Callister (2002) cite the Victorian era as providing perhaps the earliest example of gay tourism. Northern European men travelled to the Mediterranean in search of same-sex encounters. This occurred under the guise of a pursuit of classical culture. It was primarily an elite pursuit.

A tour guide from New York City in the late 19th century contains what is arguably the first evidence of an acknowledgement of homosexuality in that context (Clift, Luongo & Callister, 2000). In the period leading up to the Second World War there were gay subcultures in New York, Paris and Berlin. These tended to be elite venues, known only to a small group of upper-class men.

After the Second World War, a mushrooming of gay culture developed in New York City and San Francisco. This may have resulted from large numbers of men (assumedly including a proportion of gay men) passing through these cities to and from war. The degrading of urban space opened up the possibility of creating alternative spaces within these cities, including spaces known as homosexual.

The 50s and 60s saw the development of an expressly gay consciousness, culminating, perhaps, in the 'Stonewall riots' in Greenwich Village in 1969. These street riots, sparked when New York City police raided an illegal, after-hours gay bar and routed the predominantly cross-dressing clientele there, lasted three days and are commemorated annually throughout the world in June as the birth of the modern 'gay rights' movement.

In the wake of the Stonewall riots, an active and visible gay community emerged in certain US urban neighbourhoods. There also was a homosexual 'colonization' of certain 'end of the road' destinations such Provincetown, Fire Island and Key West, which became enclaves of gay activities. Brighton developed along similar lines in the UK.

Early Gay Travel, Guide Books and Travel Agencies

Early gay travel often consisted of movement from gay urban enclaves (e.g., Greenwich Village) to another gay 'holiday' enclave (e.g., Provincetown). For rural or suburban gays, these holiday gay enclaves were a chance of escape. Even those who did not visit these locations were influence by knowledge of their existence (Clift, Luongo & Callister, 2002).

Two gay travel guides emerged and developed in the 60s and 70s. These were Damron's Guide and Spartacus. Damron's guide provided listings for locations in North America. Spartacus was more international in focus. These publications represented the formal structuring of gay travel and tourism on a mass scale (Clift, Luongo & Callister, 2002).

One of the first gay travel agencies, Hans Ebensten Travel, was established in New York in 1972. It conducted all-male tours to 'exotic' locations (e.g., Easter Island). and was understood as a gay tour operation even though not expressly advertised as such. (It was, and is, advertised as 'Worldwide Adventures for the Uncommon Traveller' http://www.hetravel.com/index.htm accessed on 1 March 2007.)

Increasing Visibility of Gay Tourism, Destination Response and Trade Associations

Throughout the 80s, gay travel remained isolated and segregated. However, as gay visibility and demands increased, gay tourism became more visible and less isolated. Certain gay events, e.g., the Sydney Mardi Gras, became major tourist and revenue-generating events. The tourism industry increasingly took note of the development of a lucrative and seemingly recession-proof niche tourist market (Clift, Luongo & Callister, 2002).

The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association has grown from a group of about one dozen interested parties to include more than 1100 members in 42 countries. The membership is approximately 60% gay and 40% straight, and meets in various locations around the globe (International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association, http://www.iglta.com/ , accessed on March 10, 2007).[3]

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[3] Another way to view gay tourism is through typology. Graham (2002) categorises three distinct types of gay tourism; homosexual tourism, gay tourism and queer tourism.

Homosexual tourism (characteristic of much 19th century tourism by men with same-sex desires) 'involved travel to distant or relatively distant places' – usually by men who were not open about their homosexuality in their home environment (Graham, 2002: 20). It focused on expressions of a physical gay (male) identity – that is, it typically revolved around sexual encounters.

Economic Impact of Gay Tourism

Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely and Jenkins (1998), referring to market research, suggest that 'an estimated 5-25 million gay men and lesbians spend more than US$10 billion on travel products each year'. The economic power of this market is also evident by the fact that 'the 1994 New York Gay Games [a type of gay Olympics] and its associated cultural festival generated US$4.2 million, attracted 10,200 competitors, whose spending was higher than that generated by the World Cup Soccer tournament held in New York the same week' (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely & Jenkins, 1998: 278). The games 'attracted such high profile sponsors as AT&T, Miller Beer and Continental Airlines, receiving considerable airtime on American television networks NBC and CNN' (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely & Jenkins, 1998: 278).

Holiday Choice and the Individual Homosexual

What does the international literature say about holiday choice and homosexuals? Where do gay men go on holiday, and why do they go there? What do they do on holiday and why? To what extent does holiday choice support identity formation among gay men?

Tourism and Homosexual Identity – the Theory

Gender and sexuality are recognised as relevant to spatial studies. Given the spatial dimension of tourism, it logically follows that sexuality would play a role in such things as choice of holiday destinations and activities (Aitchinson, 1999; Bell, 1991). A major

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Gay tourism destinations do not focus exclusively on sexual expression, but instead 'also encompass the social, cultural, economic, political and health dimensions of life' (Graham, 2002: 21). This form of tourism often involves separate bespoke facilities and neighborhoods for gay tourists.

Queer tourism seeks 'to inject same-sex eroticism into contexts where it is normally absent' (Graham, 2002: 26). A guided tour of Amsterdam's Artis Zoo, for example, includes a visit to 'gay monkeys and geese, a lesbian chimp and flamingoes that have same-sex orgies' (Graham, 2002: 26).

significance of holidays for gay men is 'their contribution to the process of establishing "identity"' (Hughes, 1997: 4).

Hughes concludes that '[t]he holiday … is likely to make a very significant contribution to the creation and validation of identity for many gay men. The nature and dimension of this contribution remain to be examined further' (Hughes, 1997: 7). However, gay holidays may not appeal to all gay men. They can be claustrophobic. The need for 'change' might militate against such a holiday for a gay man living in a gay environment. 'Those who frequent the gay space at home may be expected to feel less need to have a gay holiday' (Hughes, 1997: 6).

Tourism and Homosexual Identity Construction – Early Secondary Research

Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely and Jenkins (1998) sought through secondary research to identify some of the characteristics of a 'typical' gay tourist, and to suggest some motivations in destination choice. According to these authors, the gay tourist is a 'hyperconsumer' who not only spends more than the 'average' tourist, but also influences behaviour of gay and non-gay acquaintances (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely & Jenkins, 1998: 280). They recognised the preliminary nature of their research and the need for further, primary research: 'The tourism industry could be much more attuned to this market's needs and, to facilitate this, research needs to be conducted to establish its size and concerns' (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely & Jenkins, 1998: 280).

As for the motivations of an individual gay person in making holiday choices, the authors suggested that primary research would show that some gays want to travel to a gay-friendly holiday; other do not seek a gay holiday but do not with to be excluded from 'regular' tourism opportunities. Some destinations are perceived as being gay friendly, but at the time of the article (1998) few cities marketed themselves to a distinctly gay holiday segment.

Tourism and Homosexual Identity – Early Empirical Research

Clift and Forrest (1999) undertook early empirical research into holiday motivations. They sought to answer basic research questions such as: Do holidays play a role in gay identity formation? Are gay men motivated to choose a holiday destination based on the likelihood of a sexual encounter? They hypothesised that, generally, gay men would choose 'gay friendly' destinations (close to the UK) and would be motivated by opportunities to socialise and have sex. Also, they believed that men who chose known gay resort destinations would be more motivated by the possibility of having sex than men who did not choose such destinations.

The authors distributed 346 questionnaires to gay men in Brighton gay clubs, and 345 were returned. They also included 5,000 self-addressed, stamped surveys in a local gay Brighton publication. 250 of these surveys were returned. 590 men answered all segments of the questionnaire; non-UK respondents were excluded.

The standard holiday considerations – colourful location, opportunity for relaxation – appeared to be a significant motivation. 'Opportunities for socialising' was fairly evenly split between 'very important,' 'somewhat important' and 'not important', while 35.4% said opportunities for sex were 'not important.'

The authors tentatively concluded that 'the principal issues which structure holiday decision making and experiences are largely common to gay and straight tourists, although the relative importance of each dimension may vary from group to group and by destination' (Clift & Forrest, 1999: 622). Men who visited destinations known as 'gay resorts' placed more emphasis on socialising and sex. Those who visited locations that did not have a gay reputation placed less emphasis on socialising and sex.

The authors derived various implications for tourism management and for further research. First, about 1/3 of gay men go on holiday looking for sex, and have more sex on holiday than single straight men. The majority of gay men do not go on holiday expressly in pursuit of sex, and tour operators may wish to offer a wider range of product

for this market. Finally, specialist gay tourism operators cater to a relatively small segment of the overall gay tourism market.

According to the authors, 'mainstream operators probably capture a larger, but currently unknown proportion of this market … though this is not acknowledged in their brochures….' (Clift & Forrest, 1999: 623). Furthermore, 'mainstream tour operators may benefit from having some knowledge of the sexual orientation of clients, as this may have a bearing on policies regarding shared accommodations, problems of harassment .. and possible objections by heterosexual tourists….' (Clift & Forrest, 1999: 623). For these reasons, the experience of gay men with mainstream tour operators warrants further research, according to the authors.

Exploratory, Qualitative Studies of Holiday Choices and Sexuality

Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan and Jenkins (2000) set out to examine 'the importance of homosexuality in holiday choices and tourism behaviour and the extent to which holidays provide opportunities to escape the heterosexual world and openly celebrate homosexuality' (Pritchard, A., Morgan, N.J., Sedgley, D., Khan E. & Jenkins, A., 2000: 271). The authors conducted four two-hour focus groups and ten three-quarter of an hour interviews in the Wales and Netherlands. They used a snowballing technique to obtain additional participants from initial participants. They also conducted hour-long interviews with two UK specialist gay tour operators in order to gauge the industry's perception of the issues. They found surprisingly little difference in geographical responses.

The desire to 'be one's self' is another strong holiday motivator, but the authors felt it was particularly acute among their research subjects. '[P]articipants who had not "come out" were much more likely to refer to a need for social acceptance and space to be by themselves on holiday" (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000: 275).

A gay holiday was defined primarily by reference to sex and to semi-naked man. The participants had difficulty defining a 'lesbian holiday.' Gay men were more likely to mention cultural settings, monuments and architectural buildings as influences for destination choices (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000: 275).

Although participants played down the role of sexuality in influencing holiday destinations, the role of (homo)sexuality was pronounced in deciding where not to go, e.g., to locations with pronounced anti-gay attitudes (Pritchard, A., Morgan, N.J., Sedgley, D., Khan E. & Jenkins, A., 2000: 276).

Gay men preferred specialist gay tour operators. However, many respondents criticised gay hotels and the like as being particularly poor value for money. A clear perception emerged that gay's increased discretionary income encouraged operators and destinations to charge a 'gay premium'. The gay specialist tour operators mentioned discretion in dealing with customers, e.g., plain brown wrappers on mailings.

A minority insisted that their sexuality did not play a role in holiday destination choices. A majority said it did play a role. Among those for whom sexuality played a role, there was a desire to be themselves on holiday, and, perhaps, to be openly affectionate with a partner.

Holiday Choice as Risk Avoidance

The research of Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan and Jenkins (2000) resembles that of Decrop (1999). It enumerates a number of possible push and pull factors and interrogates the influence of these factors on choice. Hughes (2002) takes a research approach more similar to that of Purdue and Meng (2006), who explicitly theorised that there were different sets of acceptance and rejection factors in holiday decision making. Hughes conducted qualitative research into the elements affecting choice, and rejection, of holidays in a gay context.

According to the author, 'there is a sexuality issue involved in going on holiday and in destination choice and avoidance in particular' (Hughes, 2002: 310). Hughes hypothesises that the process of discarding holiday destinations can be a significant part of the holiday choice process (Hughes, 2002: 302). In deciding to discard a destination, he argues, risk and safety considerations may come into play. Risk is a more significant factor than safety, according to Hughes. The process or evaluating risk and safety can be influenced by status characteristics. Women face greater potential risks than men, generally. The disabled face unique sets of risks.

Gay men may feel themselves at risk of homophobic violence, Hughes claims. There is also the risk of real or perceived disapproval. They may face the risk of discrimination, and be denied desired accommodations (e.g., a double bed), or entry to certain establishments (e.g., bars), due to their sexual orientation.

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with gay men in bars in Manchester. In total, he interviewed 40 gay men, 14 were aged in their 20s, 18 in their 30s, 4 in their forties, and 4 in an older age group. All but one of the respondents had been to a foreign destination. They were asked about their most recent holiday and asked to describe the processes for selecting the location. In addition, they were asked about their behaviour and experiences on holiday, particularly as these may have influenced holiday destination choices.

The answers revealed that holiday destinations were chosen for a wide range of reasons, and that factors such as age, income, and personality were often more important than sexuality in destination choice. Price was a decisive factor for a few. Some men obviously were influenced by their sexuality in destination choices, with remarks to the effect that they were straight at home and wanted to be gay on holiday. 'There was a greater likelihood of single men and groups of men choosing gay destinations largely because of the desire to meet others' (Hughes, 2002: 305).

Hardly any mentioned sex expressly as a reason for choosing a destination. Meeting others for social purposes seemed more important than sex. Some chose the same locations year after year, building up a network of friends at a holiday destination and being recognised by tourism providers. Although not all men sought explicitly gay accommodations, they mentioned a desire to avoid places that were not gay friendly.

Some men wanted to avoid large, commercial destinations, irrespective of whether they were perceived as gay or not. Some said they feared roving bands of young, heterosexual drunks in commercial destinations, and feared anti-gay attitudes and assaults. Some mentioned avoiding 'family' destinations.

Sexuality was a dominant factor in the wholesale rejection of certain countries or regions on the basis that there were homophobic. Examples included Turkey, all Arab countries, and some African countries.

Most of the men who were fairly open about their sexuality in their home environment were not more 'out' on holidays, even when visiting gay-centric destinations. There was not a marked increase in sexual activity on holiday for most of the respondents.

Some mentioned having to modify their behaviour so as to not be perceived as homosexual in predominantly heterosexual holiday destinations, with the extent of modification depending on how gay friendly the locations was. Some said they refused to modify their behaviour under any circumstances.

Experiences of Gay Tourists with Accommodation Providers

Paria (2006) undertook a qualitative research study on gay experiences with tourism providers involving 54 self-identified lesbians and gay men (20 lesbians and 34 gay men), identified through organisations, personal contacts and 'snowballing.' The interviews were conducted face-to-face in gay-friendly venues. Anonymity was assured.

Regarding staff behaviour, the most common complaint was the assumption that a same-sex couple checking in would want two beds. Secondary was inappropriate gestures, such as a lesbian couple who booked a 'honeymoon' suite and received a bottle of champagne in their room addressed to 'Mr. and Mrs.'

The guests also claimed that staff often reacted in some way to the fact that they were a gay couple. Some of this reaction was positive, as in noting in an affirmative way that the couple were gay. Some was neutral but embarrassing, as when staff pointed out to other staff the unusual nature of the guests being served. Some behaviour was perceived as homophobic, as in a chilly response to the realisation that the couple was gay. Most often these attitudes were 'intuited.'

Some participants felt sexuality was irrelevant to hotel attributes, while others thought it was relevant. The latter group thought that guest guides left in hotel rooms should include information about gay establishments if similar information was provided about predominantly heterosexual establishments in the vicinity. Others thought attributes of particular significance to gay guests would include late breakfasts (due to late-night venues in gay scene)., and gay porn if porn was offered on the 'pay per view' channels.

Conclusion

This section reviewed existing literature concerning decision making and holidays. The issue of holiday decision making is a multi-faceted prism that can be approached from any number of directions. One can inquire into the status characteristics that influence holiday choice. Sexuality is a very significant status characteristic, and it is surprising there has not been more research into the influence of sexuality on holiday decision making. However, it is important not to lose sight of the full constellation of characteristics that can influence holiday decision making.

It is also important to query whether the factors used in selecting and de-selecting holiday destinations are the same. Researchers have suggested that the variables employed to

reject a destination may be different than those used in affirmatively selecting a holiday. Furthermore, the factors for rejecting a destination may be more powerful than attractors. This may be particularly significant among gay men, who still face the threat of hostility and violence in certain destinations.

There is a long and developing history of gay tourism as a discrete phenomenon. It might be categorised along various axes, and gay men may be attracted to one type of holiday or another depending on various internal and external factors. Certain destinations may be particularly attractive to certain gay men due to their infrastructural characteristics.

Research has theorised and found evidence for the role of tourism in creating a gay identity, although there also are gay men who do not employ tourism for this purpose. Qualitative research gradually is building a theory of holiday choice among gay men. One possible outcome of this research is a theory that holiday choice among gay men is an exercise in risk avoidance, where sexuality plays a much greater role in the 'de-selection' of potential holiday destinations than in the selection of destinations.

Experiences at a destination site, particularly with accommodations providers, may play an important role in tourism as a tool in identity formation among gay men. While gay men do not want to be singled out unnecessarily by reason of the sexual orientation and may wish a degree of anonymity in this respect, they may resent automatically being assumed heterosexual when travelling with a same-sex partner.

Largely absent from the literature is any discussion in the use of the internet by gay men in tourism. None of the literature encountered to date has explored the foregoing issues with respect to Irish gay men.

The existing international literature can be criticised on several grounds. This literature largely treats the subject group as 'the gay community,' or 'the gay male community.' It does not divide this community into recognised decision-making units in exploring holiday motivations and behaviours. These units include single gay men, gay male

couples, and gay male groups. A deeper understanding of behaviour in the gay community might be achieved by recognising these groups.

III. Methodologies

Quantitative versus Qualitative Approach

Research into tourism behaviour has been dominated by quantitative approaches.

Quantitative research has been associated with a positivist approach to research. Positivists argue that there is an objective, knowable reality, the truth of which can be discovered largely through quantitative research. Positivists may condemn qualitative research as being mere journalism, overly influenced by political or other views of the researcher.

However, qualitative research is becoming more common. Qualitative research is associated with an interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. 'Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers stress the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 8).

Qualitative research is not necessarily synonymous with the interpretivist paradigm, however. A researcher must choose within which paradigm to situate his research, even if he or she employs qualitative methods.

Qualitative researchers in a positivist vein tend to employ methods akin to quantitative researchers, with emphasis on verifiability and repeatability. Postmodern researchers 'seek alternative methods for evaluating their work, including verisimilitude, personal responsibility, and ethic of caring, political praxis, multi-voiced texts, and dialogues with subjects' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 10).

Qualitative research in a postmodern vein is valuable in exploring behaviour and motivations that are subtle and complex. According to Riley and Love (2000), 'qualitative research provides a crucial perspective that helps scholars *understand* phenomena in a different way from a positivist perspective alone.' (emphasis in original)

Several prominent researchers in the field of gay tourism have embraced qualitative research methods. The qualitative method, 'enable the generation of diverse data encompassing "an enormous, rich spectrum of cultural and social artefacts"' (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000: 272).

Qualitative research is particularly useful in developing hypotheses concerning human behaviour and attitudes. This observation should apply particularly in areas of homosexuality. The qualitative method is inductive. 'Theories emerge from particular observations' (Decrop, 2000: 339).

Qualitative research typically begins with a few broad research questions or guiding hypotheses. The approach is dynamic, as data that emerges may force a change in the original hypotheses. This interpretivist qualitative approach is particularly well suited for examining tourists' decision-making processes (Decrop, 2000: 341).

Research Questions to be Explored Qualitatively

The broad research questions for this dissertation include: Where do Irish gay men go on holiday? Why do they go there? What do they do there? How do Irish gay men define a 'gay holiday'? Are they attracted to a 'gay holiday'?

The literature review has identified a number of subsidiary questions, such as: Do Irish gay men employ tourism as a means of constructing a 'gay identity' for themselves? Do they use tourism as a means of seeking sexual encounters? What are their experiences with tourism providers, such as accommodation providers? Are the factors leading gay

men to select a holiday the same factors that influence de-selection of a holiday destination?

Qualitative research is well suited to exploring these subjective motivations. The aim is to inductively develop a theory applicable to holiday behaviours and motivations among Irish gay men. The qualitative method 'enable the generation of diverse data encompassing "an enormous, rich spectrum of cultural and social artefacts"'. (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000: 272)

Sample Size

The qualitative researcher does not decide a priori on a sample size. Subjects are added to the sample (through random sampling or processes such as 'snowballing') so long as the researcher believes that new insights can be gained by adding additional subjects. The researcher stops at the point of 'theoretical saturation', when new subjects fail to offer new insights or information (Decrop, 2000: 344).

'[I]nformant samples for interpretive research tend to be relatively small and non random … A sample set as small as a dozen people might be appropriate for qualitative-research projects where the main objective is deeper understanding of some complex behaviour or meaning.' (Kwortnik, 2003: 121)

The sample size for this research was not set a priori. Initially, contact was made with a gay social group, Dining Out. Although somewhat diverse in nature, the group consists primarily of white, middle-aged, middle-class, self-identified gay men resident in Ireland – the vast majority of whom were 'native' Irish. (By 'native' Irish I mean men born and reared in Ireland.) This group was chosen in order to obtain a relatively homogenous group of Irish gay men, in an effort to reduce the impact of other variables such as income, race, ethnicity, and age.

Individual interviewees and gay male couples were chosen based on personal contacts of the researchers, e.g., friends and friends of friends. Through the technique of snowballing, these initial subjects provided contact details for additional interviewees.

I accompanied a group of members from Dining Out on a city break to Belfast and observed them engaged in tourist activities there.

Thus far, the sample size comprises 8 single, gay male subjects, 3 sets of gay male couples, and 2 focus groups with approximately 8 gay males in each focus group. There were approximately 15 gay men on the city-break holiday to Belfast, in which I participated. In total, approximately 35 Irish gay males comprise the sample set to date (although there is some overlap in participants). Through 'snowballing' more respondents are currently being located.

In my participant observation research, some of the individuals knew that I was conducting research and others did not. Knowledge of my status as a researcher did not seem to have an observable effect on behaviour.

Choice of Qualitative Research Methods

A number of different methods can be employed in qualitative research, including interviews, observation, case studies, focus groups, life story and self interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Each method brings its own impact on the subject being studied.

My research employs multiple qualitative research methods, including interviews with individuals, couples, and groups, as well as participant observation. This is done to enhance the reliability of the observations. 'The combination of multiple methodological practices … in a single study is best understood … as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry.' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 5) Also, by expressly choosing to interview different decision making units (singles, couples and groups), I hope to provide richer data than that produced in previous research.

It is, admittedly, difficult to 'know' the subject of research, particularly research into topics as sensitive as transgressive sexuality. '[T]here is no clear window into the life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lens of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity…. Subjects or individuals are seldom able to give full explanations or accounts, stories, about what they did and why…. [Q]ualitative researcher deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 19).

Interviewing

My research proceeds primarily by way of semi-structured interviews. Jennings (2005: 101) notes the following characteristics of semi-structured interviews. They are 'conversation-like'. The design is 'semi-emergent'. The researcher stance is 'subjective,' and the researcher perspective is that of an insider. There is reciprocity in the exchange of issues during the research process. The material collected consists of field notes, transcripts and recordings. The basis of analysis is textual, and the findings are expressed as 'depthful and thick descriptions'. The written style for reporting the results is narrative. Semi-structured interviews are framed by broad, overarching research issues. A set of broad, open-ended questions are used to guide the discussion or interview. 'Probes' are used to provide precise definitions of 'generic' terms. (Kwortnik, 2003: 119)

The less defined the research question, the less structured the interview. The objective is to inductively develop a theory of behaviour that emerges from the data. The design of the research project must be fluid and flexible, accommodating questions that might emerge from exploratory depth or semi-structured interviews. (Kwortnik, 2003: 119)

Group Interviews or Focus Groups

Qualitative research can be conducted with groups of people.

Qualitative groups are generally defined as a group of people brought together to discuss a particular topic of interest. Groups may range in size from four to twelve, but often consist of eight people. A moderator guides or facilitates the group; this is often a qualified researcher (Boddy, 2005: 250).

'Focus groups enable "the respondents or informants [to] … react to one another … more naturally," enabling the researcher to gather a richer picture of how information is processed and constructed and how conclusions are drawn' (Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan & Jenkins, 2000: 273).

Participant Observation

Finally, this research employs participant observation in exploring the holiday motivations and behaviour of Irish gay men. I accompanied a group of gay men, members of 'Dining Out', on a brief, city-break holiday in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

'Participant observation is especially appropriate to examine and understand phenomena inside a collective' (Decrop, 2000: 350).

Analyzing Qualitative Data

The data and pictures typically produced by qualitative research have both advantages and disadvantages. The data is closer to the original thoughts of the informants. But the data is more difficult to analyse.

Qualitative research seeks understanding and discovery through theory building. The theory emerges from an analysis of the data. The qualitative researcher looks for patterns, categories, themes and concepts as revealed by the raw data – which usually takes the form of transcribed interviews.

Attention to methods can enhance reliability. '[I]t is critical that [qualitative] researchers prepare, plan and consider the structure of their research projects … and constantly monitor and review the processes and procedures and materials collected to guide the future steps and the closure of the study.' (Jennings, 2005: 112)

This research employs a variety of methods in interpreting the data collected and ensuring its reliability.

IV. Preliminary Data

In this paper, I am going to report on some preliminary findings, focusing on data from semi-structured and focus group interviews. I will focus on preliminary data around a few broad research inquiries. These inquiries are: How do Irish men define a 'gay holiday'? Would they go on a 'gay holiday'? What attracts them to a particular holiday destination? What would cause them to de-select a holiday destination? What has been their experience with tourism providers, particularly accommodation providers?

What is a 'gay holiday'?

Respondents had some difficulty defining what they mean by 'gay holiday.' They tended to focus on the holiday participants, the activities on the holiday, or the reputation of the location. There was some mention of the infrastructure at a destination. However, there was little or no reference to tourism providers in the definition of a 'gay holiday.' This is somewhat surprising, given the existence of any number of Gay Tour Operators, at least in the U.K., with which the respondents would be assumed to be familiar.

John, a 38-year-old, single, environmental consultant, when asked for his definition of a 'gay holiday' said:

> ‘Going to the gay beach, followed by going to the gay bars, followed by going to gay clubs, followed by going to gay saunas, it’s pretty much gay, gay, gay, gay, gay.’

A participant in one of the focus groups gave a similar definition:

> ‘If you’re going to end up doing gay things, going to gay bars, going to a gay parade, you know anything along those lines, then I would probably classify it as a gay holiday, otherwise, not.’

A recently separated man also described a ‘gay holiday’ with reference to activities [these were undertaken while still married and living with his family in Dublin]:

> ‘Well I would often go to my place in Spain on my own and I know that I can do whatever I want, and I would go to, my agenda would be to go to gay bars and gay clubs and maybe a gay show or stuff like that, a drag show or something.’

Declan, a 30-something gay man, and one half of a couple of six years’ duration, said:

> ‘You are talking about you know going to the in-bars and the in-clubs and where people wear the right clothes. But there’s much more than that, I wouldn’t go on that kind of holiday. But I would go to places where they might have say bear clubs.’

Michael and Richard, a couple, and both 49-year-old government lawyers, said:

> Michael: ‘I think a gay holiday you are going to be going to Sitges or Ibiza or some place like that. Perhaps with friends or without friends.’
>
> Richard: ‘Clubbing and you know hanging out and hoping to meet people intimately – I have seen such things on television (laughing)’.

John, a 37-year-old barrister and author, defined a 'gay holiday' by reference to the destination characteristics:

> 'Where you go to an area that has a higher than normal gay quotient. An intensively gay presence, with lots of gay venues.'

Terry, a 50-year-old, single, solicitor employed in local government, was one of the few respondents to refer to travel agencies or organisations that organise gay-themed holidays:

> 'I would call it a gay holiday if it was organised by a gay group, you know, a travel agent or a gay travel company or something of that nature, I've heard of them, and for example they are often in the Canaries I think they have them, or they used to have them and there are also gay cruises.'

Willingness to Take a 'Gay Holiday'

However they defined a gay holiday, most respondents thus far have said they would not care to go on such a holiday. This was true even among those respondents [such as |John, the environmental engineer] who actively pursued sexual contacts on holidays. John said:

> 'A pure gay holiday with you know, pure, just totally gay men doesn't really appeal to me….I get bored with like talk about "dick" and "cock" and "ass" you know, good looks and bodies and you know, that's fine for a bit of a laugh but after a while it just gets, it gets a bit tedious so….. I like the idea of going to a place, if I can say this, go to a place where you get a bit of culture and a bit of cock, and it doesn't matter if one holiday you get a bit more cock and you do a bit of culture, then so be it, you know. But I like a mix of the two and I often feel sometimes going away with straight people you get a different perspective on you

> know, going on holiday than going with just purely with gay men. Eh, sometimes I find, especially going on beach holidays, it's a bit too, it's a bit too I suppose tunnel vision, narrow minded and a bit claustrophobic in terms of it's just gay, gay, gay, gay, gay and while being gay is an important part of my life it's not the be all and end all, so I like a mix of the, I like a nice mix of it.'

Gay holidays would not appeal to Terry, the government solicitor:

> 'I think it's too much you know to spend your whole holiday, I don't think it would appeal to me. I think I would be bored on something like a gay cruise.'

The gay couples also were not attracted to the idea of a 'gay holiday'. John, one-half of a partnership with Declan for the past six years, is a lecturer in the Irish national university. He described his extreme displeasure in encountering a group of Irish retirees on holiday in Chile, and being 'stuck' on a bus with them as they sang songs like *Molly Malone*. When asked what he thought a gay holiday would be like, he responded:

> 'Hell…Well the only thing I would consider almost as bad as the Molly Malone brigade would be to be stuck in a resort where everybody is gay. I just think that the competition and the bitching would be at such a level that it would be unbearable. We were in Mykinos in 2002. I found it a bit much to have so many gay people concentrated in one place. I mean the tetchy kind of edgy sexual tension becomes too much I think. I find it too much. There's so much emphasis on image and on looking great and everything that I always feel out of place in these situations. I thought gay was about being yourself and you know expressing yourself as a personality and escaping the rigid rules of social morality that larger society has imposed on you. Then you are supposed become liberated and you just walk into another prison. '

The idea of an exlcusively 'gay holiday' as confinement or a 'hellish' experience was also referred to by Conor, a 40-year-old IT worker:

> ‘I like the mix, you know the gay things is there if I want to get involved in gay life or do something but to be stuck with it all the time I don’t know if I’d like it. It’s fine if it works out well but if it doesn’t I think it can be kind of hellish. You know just people if you don’t get on with them or whatever, you know, if it’s not going well you are in this confined thing. So no, it’s nice to be able to go and see the major sites. I like that flexibility.’

John, the university lecturer, described his experiences on a predominantly gay-themed holiday, the Manchester Mardi Gras:

> ‘I went to Pride Manchester one year [before he met his partner] and I thought it was the most awful, it was one of the worst holidays I’d had because I just felt you know it was just far too much, just wall to wall, you know, I was just reminded, every turn I was reminded of being a single gay man. I was never particularly good at thee cruising scene and picking people up and all that kind of thing. So it was just hell. I’d never, I just wouldn’t do that again. I’ve no problem going to a few gay bars but I wouldn’t go to the most trendy or fashionable gay bars in town.’

John’s partner, Declan, held the notion of a ‘gay holiday’ in slightly less disdain:

> ‘I think you can plan your gay holiday along a different line. I can plan it to do what you’ve described [being in an exclusively gay, sexually-charged atmosphere] or you can plan to do what I would think is a gay holiday. If we went to say Madrid or Barcelona we might go, we would certainly go to gay restaurants, we would check out gay bookstores, we did this recently in Paris. We would go to a gay museum, there’s a gay memoriam, so there would be a strong gay theme but we would not just go to gay venues.’

What attracts gay men to a holiday destination?

Although the respondents were gay men who took holidays (and often quite a few holidays), they were not keen on the notion of a 'gay holiday.' Virtually every respondent echoed the attitude of Graeme, a 30-something training manager at a tourism agency, who said:

> 'Going on a gay holiday is probably not the first reason I would go anywhere, it's very much because I want to go there and of course working in a travel agency I want to go everywhere. So it's not the primary reason but I would always research into the gay scene while there.'

John, the environmental engineer, talked about selecting a holiday destination:

> 'It's not necessarily chosen because there's a fantastic gay scene there, it's chosen because you know both of us want to go there [if he's travelling with a friend] and we both like it. But having said that, once I know where we are going I do look up gay bars and what sort of gay scene it has.'

Virtually every respondent in the semi-structured interviews mentioned 'culture' or other 'non-gay' attributes as major 'pull' factors and/or described cultural or other typical tourist activities engaged in on holiday.

Terry, the government solicitor, described why Rome is one of his favourite holiday destinations:

> 'I was just having a great time without ever going to a gay place, I couldn't be bothered. But as a destination for holidays it's fabulous because there is so much there, you know, the archaeology is magnificent, the premises, the architecture is magnificent, the climate is nice if you go at the right time of the year. It's a great buzz, plenty to do and the food is lovely.'

Liam, a 44-year-old from Laois, said:

> 'My primary motive for travelling to these places is to see new places. Meeting new people is secondary, I can meet people wherever I go.'

In describing a recent holiday he and his partner, Declan, had taken to Paris, John said:

> 'We wanted to do both kinds of things (gay and non-gay) in Paris. We wanted to do general touristy things, it really was to get away and relax together and just be together, not having schedules to meet. Then we wanted to do some Paris things, some of the big French tourist things but also we wanted to see a bit of what gay life was like in Paris as well.'

Conor described the attraction of an upcoming trip to Athens:

> 'It's mostly to see a lot of famous sites, to encounter one of the great European cultures.'

Michael and Richard typically research cultural offerings of the cities they visit and usually try to take in an opera wherever they visit.

Declan's partner, John, mentioned the tension between cultural pursuits and enjoying the gay lifestyle of a particular location:

> 'But if you're investigating the gay scene you have to forget about doing a lot of things during the day. You can't go out and have a drink in every gay bar and stay out until 3 or 4 am and then beat the crowds at museums. There's always this tension. You can't always do both. At most you can see a few gay bars in the evening but if you want to do even one thing the next day you can't be in bed until 3 in the afternoon.'

However, Shane, a 29-year-old man from Co. Offaly who has sex with men but who is not 'out' to any of his close friends or family, gave a different description of the balance of his activities on his travels. He routinely travels to London for the purpose of having sex with men whom he has met on gay internet sites. He also has travelled to Rome for this purpose. He had an affair with a married man in Dublin for several years, but now pursues sexual relations with (older) men outside of Ireland. In his home environment, he dates women and is regarded as completely heterosexual. He declines to define himself as gay or bisexual, insisting that his frequent (approximately bi-monthly) trysts with other men are merely, 'A hobby.' During these trips, he sometimes takes in typical tourist sites (the V&A museum in London, ruins in Rome), but this is primarily incidental to the sexual liaisons, which are the primary purpose of his trips.

What would cause gay men to 'de select' a holiday destination?

In describing what would cause them to 'de select' a holiday, most respondents referred to criteria other than that which influenced there choice of a holiday destination. Homophobic attitudes or threat of anti-gay violence was mentioned by several respondents.

John, the environmental engineer, would avoid places with an anti-gay reputation:

> 'If I felt I was going to be intimidated or I felt uncomfortable, yeah, I wouldn't go near it.'

He would not go to Tehran, for example:

> 'I would be quite worried and paranoid about you know having sex with some other guy behind closed doors and being found out and all the nightmare consequences following that, so that would put me off, yeah.'

Turn off for John, the barrister, were 'crime and drugs.'

Conor would not go someplace that was 'hostile or dangerous for gay people.'

Members of the Focus Group also said they were not keen on going to Islamic countries with anti-gay laws or attitudes, although one participant struck a contrary note:

> 'The thing is if you go to these places, just the same as Ireland, you mean, you're hardly going to go out and walk down the street and camping your knickers off and saying "Hello, boys!" you'd be eaten, but you'd be eaten anyway doing that, you know what I mean, so I mean you have to take things in perspective and not so much, it's just in feeling safe in terms of what the environment might provide, the other side of it is that you don't insult the environment or you don't go mad in the environment.'

Experience with Tourism Providers, Particularly Accommodation Providers

Unsurprisingly, Irish gay couples related more experiences related to accommodation providers than did single gay men.

> 'We arrived and we had obviously booked a double room. Well she [the hotel manager] saw the two of us together and she said she'd made a mistake and they were overbooked. So we were going to have to go somewhere else and she did find us somewhere else.'

John and Declan take have encountered issues around asking for a double bed:

> Declan: 'One of our first trips to Madrid we went to a hotel just outside the gay district and when we went in and asked for the room just one bed and the reception said 'One bed!' She was schocked.'

They now take steps to avoid issues around asking for a double bed:

> John: 'Frequently we book a room that is supposedly for two people or for a couple and we end up with a room with two beds because what we think happens is that as soon as the hotel sees it's two men coming to them they automatically put two beds into the room. So we've now come to the stage where we now ask the travel agent if there is a travel agent to ensure that we are given one bed so that you know we are not going to have to start moving furniture late at night when we are tired.'

Michael and Richard claim not to have encountered issues around a double bed, although they did relate a misunderstanding that can be common in these circumstances:

> Michael: 'Eh, no, not at all. To be absolutely honest, we were at a friend's wedding and I remember the B&B that we stayed in there and when we came down for breakfast the next morning uncle Frank was at the table and the woman was asking "did the two of you have to stay in the bed last night" and I said "yes". "Oh I could have made a bed up, oh that's awful, and that's awful if only I'd known" (laughing) In front of my uncle Frank! But it wasn't an issue, she just thought it was inconvenient for two gentlemen to have to share a bed.'

In the Focus Group, respondents offered anecdotal evidence related by friends:

> 'Two friends I know went to the Aran Island and they booked into a B&B and they were as nice as pie when they booked in, they stayed in the room and when they went to make up the beds the next morning, they seen it was a double bed and two of them slept in, the other single bed wasn't slept in, the tea was slammed down in front of them, their breakfast was slammed down in front of them, you know, they didn't want to condone any type of you know that behaviour…'

Another Focus Group respondent claimed that when an Irish B&B realised that a group of gay men had booked into their accommodations to attend a gay disco being organised

at a neighbouring hotel by a social group for rural gay men called Outwest, they cancelled all the bookings:

> 'Well it was around Rooskey we were staying, that area do you know. But like they literally figure out what was going on and they literally cancelled all the bookings, well there was only four or five bookings but still four or five bookings, you talking about a few hundred euros.'

V. Some Analyses

This paper has meant to present emerging findings from ongoing research. But some preliminary analyses can be undertaken. Some of my research findings support hypotheses derived from the international literature. Some of my findings are at odds with hypotheses in the international literature.

- There is considerable difference of opinion among Irish gay men as to the definition of a 'gay holiday.'

- The majority of Irish gay men define 'gay holiday' by reference to the activities on this holiday (e.g., clubbing) or the proportion of gay men present in the destination.

- Irish gay men by and large do not define a gay holiday by reference to such things as gay travel agencies or tour operators. This is somewhat surprising, due to the number of gay tour operators in the adjacent UK market.

- Regardless of the definition of 'gay holiday,' Irish gay men are not attracted to the idea of a 'gay holiday,' using words like 'hellish' and 'claustrophobic' to describe the notion of a gay holiday.

- Irish gay men are attracted to holiday destinations primarily be reason of the attractions available at the destination; these attractions are not predominantly sexual.

- The primary attraction to a potential holiday destination is the 'cultural' offerings available at the destination, particularly museums, architecture, and historical or archaeological sites.

- Irish gay men invariably research a holiday destination to learn of the 'gay' offerings available at the destination, even if this is not the primary reason for visiting a destination. For some Irish gay men, the lack of a gay 'scene' is not important; others might not choose a destination completely lacking a gay scene.

- The primary method of research the gay 'scene' at a prospective holiday destination is through the internet (e.g., gaydar), although gay guide books also are used.

- Most Irish gay men do not refer to their sexuality or destination attitudes towards homosexuality when describing factors influencing a choice of holiday destinations.

- However, Irish gay men who are less open in their home environment tend to relate using tourism and travel as a means of seeking sexual encounters or 'being gay.'

- Irish gay men more often mention their sexuality or destination attitudes towards homosexuality when asked reasons why they would not choose a particular holiday destination.

- Not surprisingly, Irish gay male couples experience more notable incidents relating to accommodations providers, particularly with respect to use of a double bed.

VI. Tentative Conclusions and Recommendations

Academics and practitioners may wish to consider some of the tentative recommendations and conclusions emerging from this ongoing research project.

- There is little evidence that Irish gay men expressly employ tourism or travel as a means of constructing or strengthening a 'gay identity.'

- However, men just coming to terms with their sexuality or men who have sex with men but do not regard themselves as gay or bisexual may use travel and tourism to have sexual encounters.

- Destinations that wish to attract gay male tourists might wish to emphasise cultural offerings as opposed to gay-themed offerings, as these are cited more often as motivating factors.

- Destinations wishing to attract gay male tourists may wish to advertise cultural offerings on web sites used by gay men to research the 'gay scene' in prospective destinations.

Some recommendations for future research include:

- Whether there are substantive differences between decision-making units within the Irish gay male community, e.g., single Irish gay men, Irish gay male couples, and Irish gay male groups of travellers

- Whether there are substantive differences in the use of the internet in tourism planning by Irish gay men and the wider Irish population.

- What is the role of tourism in the lives of men who have sex with men but do not regard themselves as gay or bisexual?

- This has meant to be a preliminary report on findings emerging from a larger study on Irish gay men and tourism. Any feedback or suggestions are welcomed.

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