Beyond friendliness: crafting authentic marketing strategies for LGBTQI+ travelers

Más allá de la amabilidad: estrategias auténticas de marketing para viajeros LGBTQI+

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Abstract: The LGBTQI+ travel segment is one of the most dynamic and economically influential in tourism, yet it remains underserved by traditional marketing strategies. Social media is a powerful tool for inclusion, advocacy, and self-expression, shaping travel preferences and brand loyalty. Through interviews with twelve LGBTQI+ travelers, this study reveals critical insights into effective digital campaigns, inclusive branding, and authentic engagement. Tailored marketing strategies that embrace diversity, cultural nuances, and safety are essential for success. This research offers actionable recommendations for marketers aiming to connect with this valuable audience authentically.
Keywords: co-creation, LGBTQI+ tourism, inclusive marketing, digital campaigns, brand loyalty.
Resumen: El segmento LGBTQI+ en el turismo se destaca como uno de los más dinámicos y económicamente influyentes. Sin embargo, continúa siendo insuficientemente atendido por las estrategias de marketing tradicionales. Las redes sociales se consolidan como una herramienta poderosa para la inclusión, la defensa y la autoexpresión, desempeñando un papel clave en la configuración de las preferencias de viaje y la fidelidad hacia las marcas. Mediante entrevistas con doce viajeros LGBTQI+, este estudio identifica elementos esenciales para el diseño de campañas digitales efectivas, el fortalecimiento de marcas inclusivas y el establecimiento de conexiones auténticas. Se concluye que las estrategias de marketing adaptadas que integren la diversidad, los matices culturales y la seguridad son fundamentales para alcanzar el éxito en este segmento. Esta investigación proporciona recomendaciones prácticas para establecer una relación genuina y efectiva con esta audiencia clave.
Palabras clave: co-creación, turismo LGBTQI+, marketing inclusivo, campañas digitales, lealtad de marca.

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Introduction

The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) is the world's leading network of tourism businesses for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, plus (LGBTQI+) (International LGBTQ+ Travel Association, n.d.). It creates value and provides free travel resources and information while continuously promoting equality and safety within this tourism segment worldwide. IGLTA's members include LGBTQI+-friendly accommodations, transport, destinations, service providers, travel agents, tour operators, events, and travel media in over 80 countries (International LGBTQ+ Travel Association, n.d.). The IGLTA creates value in a friendly and safe place for this community.

Data from research by Out Now Consulting LGBTQI+ (see Figure 1) showed that residents of the U.S. spent $63.1bn on travel in 2018, representing a 1.9 percent average annual growth rate. In Brazil, the total spend was $26.8bn, while the U.K.'s LGBTQI+ community spent $11.7bn. These numbers are set to grow further: according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), LGBTQI+ travel is one of the fastest-growing segments in the worldwide travel industry (Matsangou, 2019).

Figure 1

The Average Annual Spend on Travel by the LGBTQ Community in 2018

$218 BN	**$63.1** BN	**$26.8** BN
Entire market	The U.S.	Brazil
$20.7 BN	**$13.8** BN	**$11.7** BN
Japan	Germany	UK

Source: According to Matsangou (2019), data published by Business Destination.

Figure 1

The Average Annual Spend on Travel by the LGBTQ Community in 2018

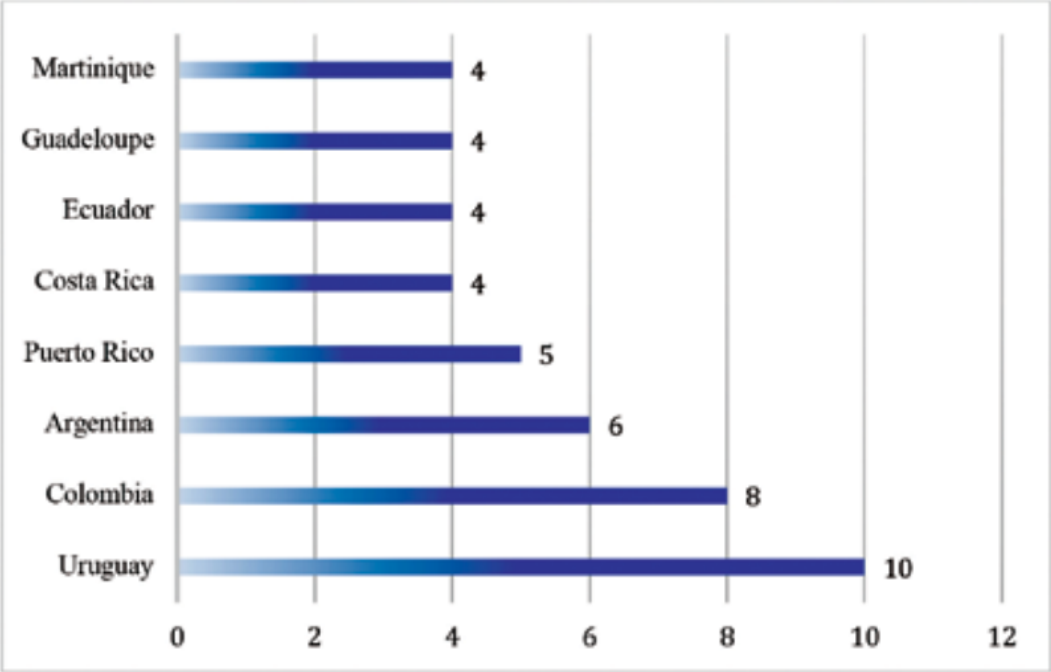
According to Matsangou (2019), data published by Business Destination.

LGBTQI+ people travel the world when countries and entrepreneurs implement positive changes for them in their digital platforms when they feel welcomed, and when destinations are more inclusive and safer. In this context, as shown in Figure 2, López (2022) presented the best-rated Latin American and Caribbean

countries according to the Gay Travel Index 2021. Uruguay was rated the safest Latin American country for LGBT tourists in 2021, scoring ten points. Following in the ranking was Colombia, which scored eight points. In the Caribbean region, Puerto Rico, Guadeloupe, and Martinique ranked in the top three places as the safest travel destinations for this group of travelers (López, 2022). Interestingly, Brazil does not appear first among the safest LGBTQI+ destinations in the world (Spartacus Travel, 2021).

Figure 2

Best-rated Latin American and Caribbean Countries in the Gay Travel Index 2021



Source: According to López (2022), data published by Statista.

Figure 2

Best-Rated Latin American and Caribbean Countries in the Gay Travel Index 2021

According to López (2022), data published by Statista.

For the reasons mentioned above, the main objective of this research is to explore the factors that LGBTQI+ travelers consider important for entrepreneurs to ponder when creating value and designing cross-cultural marketing campaigns on digital hospitality platforms to foster loyalty. In previous studies, around 50 percent of LGBTQI+ travelers indicated that the safety of a destination is a concern when deciding where to go. In addition, another 52 percent said state politics related to their LGBTQI+ identity significantly impacted their decision to travel (Wood, 2023). Not only that, but technology has also significantly affected awareness and attitudes

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toward LGBTQI+ people and their issues (Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020). Technology platforms and cross-cultural marketing communication have been studied before, but there is limited literature on the impact of hospitality's digital media on LGBTQI+ tourism. UNWTO: Global Report on LGBT Tourism (2012) argued that countries with progressive policies toward LGBTQI+ individuals obtain more economic benefits from tourism. Additionally, there are improved benefits from an LGBTQI+-friendly brand image formed by tolerance, diversity, and inclusiveness (Liberato et al., 2018; Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020).

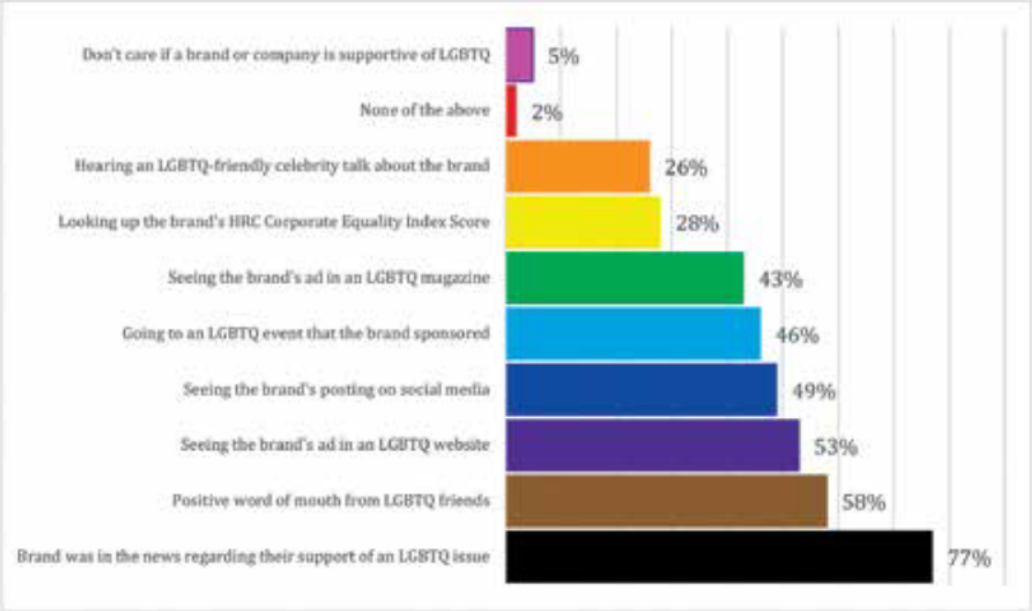
The world is moving to a more inclusive and open-minded era; this tourism area is growing with great potential. It is one of the fastest-growing segments (Liberato et al., 2018;Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020). Travel provides LGBTQI+ people access to places where they can try and experience their orientation (Hughes, 1997; Lewis et al., 2023). Thus, representation in destination marketing materials is essential (Wood, 2023). Despite the previous studies' insights, there are no specific studies on the factors that the LGBTQI+ community considers that tourism entrepreneurs should consult, making it attractive for them to visit. According to Wood (2023), those factors would make them feel more confident that the destination includes the LGBTQI+ community. At the same time, no specific studies exist on the impact and consequences of digital hospitality platforms on the LGBTQI+ online reservations and online interactions sector (Al-dweeri et al., 2017; Liberato et al., 2018; Tombleson & Wolf, 2017). Likewise, despite the dominance of online platforms as primary resources, few studies have examined users' points of view and satisfaction using websites (Sthapit et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is explicit that inclusive and gay-friendly cross-cultural and marketing strategies affect the value co-creation process when utilizing digital platforms for the LGBTQI+ tourism segment (Liberato et al., 2018)

Scholars in the tourism industry agree that many countries are moving to more inclusive times regarding the LGBTQI+ community (Liberato et al., 2018; Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020; Wood, 2023), but still, there are areas of opportunity, according to Usai et al. (2022). Unfortunately, these last authors argued that travelers in previous studies emphasized that their sexual orientation or gender identity affects their destination choices, as specific destinations with solid roots in heteronormativity are frequently avoided. In agreement with these researchers, issues such as security, risk, safety (e.g., Hall et al., 2012), a need for gay-friendly spaces in problematic sociocultural contexts (e.g., Ram et al., 2019), issues with fellow tourists (e.g., Brunt & Brophy, 2006), and avoidance of family destinations (e.g., Clift & Forrest, 1999) were identified in previous studies.

Destinations need to develop tourism products and services that are authentic LGBTQI+ inclusive. Biesiada (2019), in previous studies, found that members of the LGBTQI+ community feel underrepresented in tourism marketing (see Figure 3). Data from Community Marketing & Insights indicates that subsets of the expanding LGBTQI+ market feel excluded from marketing efforts, allowing travel companies to tap into underserved niches (Biesiada, 2019).

Figure 3

What Are the Common Ways you Know if a Brand or Company Supports LGBTQ?



Source: According to Biesiada (2019), data published by Travel Weekly.

Figure 3

What Are the Common Ways You Know If a Brand or Company Supports LGBTQ?

According to Biesiada (2019), data published by Travel Weekly.

Therefore, this investigation is necessary because, according to UNWTO: Global Report on LGBT Tourism (2012), as the global visibility of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender market increases, the discussion of the community's economic impact continues to gain traction. Hence, destinations that embrace LGBTQI+ communities are rewarded with visitors. Their success shows that tourism can be more inclusive (McGovern, 2022). Travelers today are savvy; an LGBTQI+ sticker in the window or a rainbow flag is not enough, but needs to go much further. McGovern (2022) highlighted that LGBTQI+ Capital estimates the sector has a global spending power of $3.9 trillion "pink money," but the

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experiences offered in return do not always measure up. Thus, this study will contribute to developing better LGBTQI+ tourism experiences and wealth for the destination country.

Empowering LGBTQI+ Travel: Hospitality Platforms Redefining Co-Creation

Entrepreneurs must consider the pros and cons when implementing new digital or technological changes. According to Girotra & Netessine (2014), "new business model innovation demands neither new technologies nor the creation of brand-new markets: it is about delivering existing products produced by existing technologies to existing markets" (p. 97). No company can prosper, compete, and attract new customers when all providers offer the same product or solutions (Magretta, 2002). Along this line, in service, the drivers of service innovations are clients' demand for novel offerings and executives' desire to create new services for existing markets or to find new market niches for established ones, even implementing the ambidextrous structure (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012). Hence, innovation, technology, and digital platforms have played a role in the growing wave of progress because they allow LGBTQI+ to connect, interact, and make purchases beyond physical boundaries (Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020). The concept of e-commerce defined by Meilatinova (2021) is "an extension of e-commerce sites, integrated with social media and Web 2.0 technology to encourage online purchases and interactions with customers before, during, and after purchase" (p. 1), which opens the door to the value co-creation process. Al-Khayyal et al. (2020) emphasize that platform design is essential for the quality of digital interaction. They highlight key factors such as intuitive navigation, information search, order processing, product and service availability, price and discount offerings, privacy, security, personalization, and system reliability.

LGBTQI+ customers leave digital platforms and websites without activity or purchase when they feel lost, unwelcome, nonidentified, or cannot find their way through the platform. Hence, the platform design and content affect their repeated buying behavior at a particular time (Safa & Von Solms, 2016). On the other hand, electronic customer service/communication is a critical responsive service that quickly responds to customers' inquiries and returns/complaints before and after the sale (Al-Khayyal et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Negrón & Ojeda-Castro, 2022).

Many scholars argue that the development of technology has created a massive opportunity for people to connect regardless of their location or country. The proof is that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have enabled tourists in the queer community segment to actively participate in creating and sharing their tourist experiences (Tourism Marketing and

Management, 2020). This development is possible by conversations on social media with friends, family, and others. As a result, this has decreased the effect of isolation commonly associated with the LGBTQI+ community, and people are creating value with their interactions with ICTs and the destinations they visit. Social media and digital platforms have also helped amplify the voices of those previously marginalized and sidelined, and this new prominence has undoubtedly contributed to increasing acceptance (Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020).

Destinations should promote awareness of value creation, inclusiveness, and tolerance towards the LGBTQI+ community. They have high spending power and more opportunities to travel in the off-season. Tourists in the LGBTQI+ segment utilize all available ways of transmission, with an increased focus on medium and online platforms developed for this community. These channels and platforms include online forums, dedicated websites, apps, and various social networks (Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020) to research and create value with their whole experience. Also, LGBTQI+ people, like any other tourists, connect to and use technology and digital and online tools before, during, and after travel (Liberato et al., 2018). Before their journey, they utilize the ICTs to search for LGBTQI+ inclusive places to visit. While traveling, they engage (create value) with their friends, family, and others through posts and pictures on social media (Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020). This author also mentioned that they evaluate the services after travel and use e-Word of Mouth to share their experiences, often through digital content designed to enhance visibility and recognition by reflecting human-like traits and attitudes on social media (Nieves-Casasnovas & Lozada-Contreras, 2020).

Inclusive Messaging: Building Authentic Connections with the LGBTQI+ Community

Throughout early media history, the LGBTQI+ community and issues were invisible. Once news and advertising media started paying attention to these communities, the portrayals were often negative, leading to stigma and marginalization (Hicks, 2019). Many cross-cultural advertising techniques are no longer country-specific but aim to build global support movements. Tombleson and Wolf (2017) stated that the emergence of electronic communication and user-generated content has further exposed the limitations of the ethnocentric lens, which has been the basis for much traditional public relations and communications research.

In this age of digital media, LGBTQI+ culture has been disseminated but often forgotten globally. Social platforms like Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram have been the

epicenter of spreading valuable LGBTQI+ information (Mokhtar et al., 2020). To achieve competitive advantages based on innovation, knowledge creation, transfer, and application, it is necessary to develop new services that allow the firm to reach the competitive frontier, especially when dealing with digital platforms and marketing initiatives (Donate & de Pablo, 2015). Contreras and Ramos (2016) highlight that understanding the evolving perceptions of marketing managers is essential for creating relevant and effective marketing strategies, particularly when targeting diverse communities like LGBTQI+. Incremental innovations involving improvements in LGBTQI+ digital platforms and processes help sustain short-term financial performance.

Hospitality digital platforms and social media have evolved the speed at which we share experiences and removed traditional geographical boundaries around cross-cultural campaigns (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017). Authors agreed that international publications need more products and websites designed and directed to LGBTQI+ customers (Liberato et al., 2018). They also agreed that large-scale campaigns to support LGBTQI+ rights had spread messages beyond the country of origin. In other words, information and communication technologies modify the interaction with individual or institutional clients and enable the acquisition of innovative business models and electronic sales channels for tourism products. As Liberato et al. (2018) propose, "ICT in tourism has become an essential tool in today's world of quick information, especially regarding LGBT tourist's options" (p. 264).

The LGBTQI+ community "connects to everything technological, digital and online, and use these tools before (phase of the search of the places to visit and consequent decision making) during (phase of the trip itself to communicate with the rest of the community: photos of the sites and posts) and after their trips (evaluate and comment about the products and services consumed during their travels)" (Liberato et al., 2018, p. 274). Also, Tombleson and Wolf (2017) addressed how hashtag activism campaigns, such as #loveislove, #lovewins, and #equalityforall, show how high social media engagement, digital platforms, and participation across geographical borders have enabled various grassroots organizations to launch global campaigns for their benefit.

Conversely, studies from LGBTQI+ people in five countries (Russia, Greece, Colombia, South Africa, and the province of Quebec, Canada) report distinctive challenges they have faced when promoting and communicating LGBTQI+ rights (Moreno et al., 2020). Thus, the mass media play an essential role in public perceptions of LGBTQI+ people. They also provide the lens through which the community sees itself (Hicks, 2019). Following Hicks (2019), we concur that by examining news coverage and advertising over the years, we recommend that making social media and digital

coverage more inclusive of sexual minorities will help counteract a negative image by attracting LGBTQI+ visitors and promoting value co-creation.

Crafting Loyalty Through Co-Creation: Innovative Strategies for Modern Brands

Co-creation has become a significant media platform trend (Khajeheian & Ebrahimi, 2021), and these authors also affirm that users' participation and involvement in value co-creation significantly affect their loyalty to the media brand and business. Brand reinforcement is the most prominent variable in making consumers of digital platforms loyal. Shams and Kaufmann (2016) point out that entrepreneurs can strategically and operationally enhance their partners' relationships and customer participation to reinforce entrepreneurial co-creation and fidelity.

Electronic loyalty (e-loyalty) has recently become a vital strategy in e-commerce (Rodríguez-Negrón & Ojeda-Castro, 2022; Safa & Von Solms, 2016). E-loyalty leads the LGBTQI+ community to repurchase, commit, and have a favorable attitude toward online companies and digital platforms. Also, embracing co-creation activities and developing customer trust can further enhance loyalty (Ailawadi et al., 2014). According to Malhotra et al. (2012), when customers feel convinced that organizations exceed service quality efforts, they feel satisfied, loyal, and eager to maintain quality relationships with this company and leave good reviews online. Preserving loyal customers is critical to e-commerce success (Safa & Von Solms, 2016). Building relationships has become a significant weight in LGBTQI+ conventional and e-service marketing.

Methodology

Qualitative hospitality research is an interpretative method of collecting and analyzing data to explore and explain a phenomenon (Walsh, 2003). This qualitative research examined the factors that LGBTQI+ travelers and entrepreneurs should consider when creating value and designing cross-cultural and LGBTQI+ inclusive marketing campaigns on digital hospitality platforms. The methodological approach used was phenomenological since it allows us to understand the essence of the experience lived by the participants. The researcher sought to identify patterns and typical characteristics of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2023). Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews. The instrument used was a semi-structured question guide that contained four demographics and eleven focused questions. To ensure that the sample was representative of the LGBTQI+ community, we contacted twelve individuals (three

lesbians, four gays, one bisexual, one transgender person, one intersexual, and two queers), 21 years and older, from the LGBTQI+ community, who had used digital platforms throughout their travel. Two local LGBTQI+ service clinics (Translucent and Grupo Ararat) and personal friends from the LGBTQI+ community were contacted to identify the participants. They were contacted through their social media pages and telephone numbers. A convenience sample was used due to the exploratory focus of the study and due to the demographic changes the LGBTQI+ community experiences locally. The idea was to measure whether the person who belongs to the community perceives or not that the communication strategies are fulfilling their purpose and being somewhat attractive. The interviews were recorded to increase the accuracy of the data collected, allowing data transcription and facilitating the content analysis process. The information collected from the interviews was organized by topic in a matrix, and the six steps of topic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used: (1) become familiar with the data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) review the themes; (5) define and name the themes; and 6) prepare the final report.

Beyond the Buzzwords: What that Data Really Says

Findings

The findings are interpreted from in-depth interviews with twelve LGBTQI+ local travelers aged 21+ years. Their ages range from 1971 to 1997, and their education encompasses from associate to doctorate. From now on, we will identify them with letters and numbers (Lesbians: L1, L2, L3 | Gays: G1, G2, G3, G4 | Bisexual: B | Transgender: T | Queers: Q1, Q2 | Intersexual: I).

The interviewees mentioned some digital platforms they use when planning or organizing their travel (e.g., Google, Google Flights, GayTravel, TripAdvisor, Expedia, Momondo, Booking.com, Travel bloggers, Pinterest, Airbnb, and Facebook). Lesbians mostly look for specials, LGBTQI+ activities, and specific details like cancellation policies. Gays look for different accommodation choices, nightlife, gay-friendly tourist guides, excellent locations, and amenities during their flights and around their neighborhoods and accommodations. Bisexuals are interested in the tourist-inclusive environment because "few places demonstrate their inclusiveness with different communities" (Mentioned B). Meanwhile, transgenders focused their research on places to visit and "places that can maybe give us the opportunity for professional development" (Mentioned T). Intersexuals search for places close to where they are staying. Similarly, queers look for things to do, events, and dining places. They also use the source of influencers because "they bring a great deal of interest to the cities or countries I visit" (Mentioned Q2).

When asked about LGBTQI+ marketing local campaigns that come to their mind, most do not recall any. However, "it would be important for companies to focus on gender equality because I understand that we are all equal" (Mentioned T). Queers do not recall campaigns but remember cruise lines targeted for this community. Indeed, gays and bisexuals mentioned campaigns from the U.S.A. and Spain. "I remember seeing some Discover Puerto Rico, but nothing memorable... when I think of brands well identified with the LGBTQI+ community, I remember Delta Airlines and Bud Light. Maybe because I have seen them sponsoring Pride festivities constantly" (Mentioned G2). Also, the one from Spain, "Madrid loves you no matter what" (Mentioned G3). One person remembered the one from TGI Fridays' "We Are Life," but "I think it is just a marketing strategy to expand their clientele by saying (for one day) they support the community" (Mentioned B).

Additionally, including more cross-cultural digital campaigns focused on the LGBTQI+ population was a subject they all agreed was necessary. They all think it will fight against discrimination and embrace inclusion, equality, safety, and visibility. These campaigns will also increase the travel demand. Companies need to include the representation of every sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, and gender identity of the community because "the very few campaigns I must remember seen in the past only show gay models and the same 'common' cultural prototypes. Other cultures and people in the LGBTQI+ community from around the world cannot identify" (Mentioned I). Along the same line of thinking, including cross-cultural marketing strategies, "travelers can find out what is offered to LGBTQI+ tourists in other cities, and perhaps one can be encouraged to visit countries beyond the United States. Besides, a campaign aimed at European travelers differs from one aimed at Latin Americans or American travelers. they should be in more than one language" (Mentioned G2). Furthermore, "tourism is not just for families; the LGBTQI+ community travels and often indulges in luxuries that others may not be able to" (Mentioned G3).

They were all passionate about the issue of being LGBTQI+ friendly or inclusive. Safety was the meaning they directly and indirectly mentioned when asked. Indeed, it "helps my security and helps me to be more relaxed knowing that I will not be discriminated against" (Mentioned Q1) and that "I can rest assured that I am in a place that respects me" (Mentioned I). Other meanings were "a place where you do not have to shy away" (Mentioned L1). Also, it "means that you are accepted as you are, and you can be yourself" (Mentioned B), and "it identifies me as a community" (Mentioned T). Curiously, one person said, "LGBTQI+ friendly is a marketing hook to attract customers from the LGBTQI+ community. For me, the destination must be inclusive. I have given up visiting non-inclusive places for various reasons, including safety issues. I would be concerned if a

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place was not inclusive. I would not visit" (Mentioned G2). Conversely, "the destinations I usually choose are progressive, and I do not stay long for those that do not; nevertheless, whether LGBTQI+ friendly determines whether I visit the destinations" (Mentioned G3).

This community shows real support for enterprises and organizations seeking and defending their rights. Businesses must be genuine when they say they are pro-LGBTQI+ because sometimes they "cannot figure out if it is just strategy or real" (Mentioned B). Entrepreneurs should include more inclusive campaigns because it will also help their economy and will help them gain more loyal customers. In fact, "companies should promote them as LGBTQI+ inclusive because this is a community with much purchasing power" (Mentioned G1). Not only that, but as one participant noted, "it seems that nowadays being LGBTQI+ inclusive should be a given, something common, normal without having to announce it as if it were a special case or community" (Mentioned G2). As well as, "companies should expand their programs for the gay population, not only during Pride month" (Mentioned G3). Also, countries that promote themselves on digital platforms as LGBTQI+ inclusive make them feel safe, identified, welcome, respected, and confident. Indeed, "there is more need, and I would add more digital campaigns" (Mentioned Q2). When they promote themselves as inclusive countries, "I like them, and they earn my patronage. Before I travel to a destination, I research it quite a bit. You must be careful about saying they are LGBTQI+ inclusive and leaving it in a vacuum. I always research what makes LGBTQI+ inclusive and read reviews" (Mentioned G2). According to the interviewees, service providers should improve their marketing campaigns on all digital platforms, "They should promote safe places where we can go without any fear" (Mentioned I). Even though most do not recall LGBTQI+ campaigns, they think organizations should expand within this market, add it as a search filter on their website, offer customized packages and activities for the community, be more explicit about their offer, and use digital platforms and all communication media. However, it "should clarify what their offering makes them LGBTQI+ inclusive. It cannot just be a label" (Mentioned G2). Also, target the whole members of the LGBTQI+ travel segment because "not everything is rainbows and color; the community is broad, and everyone must be reached" (Mentioned G3).

When asked about their travel planning and interests in options and places that cater specifically to the LGBTQI+ community, only gay people mentioned that it is essential for them. Indeed, they are looking for "activities for my generation... businesses should ask you directly about your interests" (Mentioned G1). Indeed, "nothing like someone who knows the destination to plan it. If I can get LGBTQI+ or LGBTQI+ inclusive suppliers, I select them. There is a

chain of hotels called Axel Hotels that call themselves "hetero friendly," and I had the opportunity to stay in one of them, and I felt comfortable because they are 100% targeted to the LGBTQI+ community. The hotel brand, including the website and the bathroom shampoo label, was well-marketed, cared for, and identified with the LGBTQI+ community" (Mentioned G2). Finally, when asked about the effect of increasing LGBTQI+ digital marketing campaigns on their loyalty, only gay interviewees mentioned it as attractive. One said, "Only if they offer something different from what I have seen regarding experiences targeted specifically to the LGBTQI+ community. Do not make it a hollow campaign" (Mentioned G2).

Table 1 summarizes key perspectives gathered from LGBTQI+ travelers who participated in in-depth interviews conducted as part of this study. The table encapsulates the nuanced experiences, concerns, and expectations of individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex within the context of their travel behavior and decision-making. These insights offer a multidimensional understanding of how identity intersects with tourism practices, and they contribute to the growing body of literature that seeks to foreground inclusivity, safety, and representation in the travel industry. The data highlighted in this figure serve as a foundation for analyzing broader patterns and informing more equitable marketing and policy strategies aimed at serving LGBTQI+ travelers.

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Table 1

Summary of Perspectives from LGBTQI+ Travelers

Table 1 *Summary of Perspectives from LGBTQI+ Travelers*

	Lesbians	Gays	Bisexuals	Transgender
Digital platforms for planning and search	Google, Expedia, Gay Travel, TripAdvisor.	Expedia, Gay Travel, Momondo, Booking.com, Travel bloggers, Pinterest, Airbnb, Google Flights.	Travel blogs, Airbnb, Airline websites.	Facebook.
Areas of interest when travelling	Specials, LGBTQ+ activities, Cancelation Policies.	Hotels, nightlife, gay-friendly tourist guides, location, amenities, LGBTQI+ bars / clubs, all destination details.	Tourist environment, Inclusion.	Touristic places employment opportunities, ar professional development.
LGBTQI+ campaigns remembered	Do not recall.	Puerto Rico: Discover Puerto Rico, but nothing memorable. U.S.A.: Delta Airlines and Bud Light. Spain: "Madrid loves you no matter what".	U.S.A.: TGI Fridays "We Are Live".	Do not recall.
Importance of cross-cultural campaigns on digital platforms	Yes. *Reasons:* Discrimination, inclusion, and increase of travel demand.	Yes. *Reasons:* Difference in languages, cultures, lifestyles and values.	Yes. *Reasons:* Visibility of their difficulties.	Yes. *Reasons*: Equality.
Contact prior visit with service providers	Rarely, only via digital platforms.	Rarely, only via reservation platforms and text messages.	No.	Rarely, via cellphone.
Meaning of LGBTQI+ friendly / inclusive	Inclusion, something legal, and safety.	Respect, interaction, empathy, and safety.	Acceptance.	Community identification.
Support for pro-LGBTQI+ companies	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
Opinion about LGBTQI+ inclusive country image	Make me feel safe.	Make me feel safe, identified, and earn my patronage.	Not important.	Make me feel saf

Improvements to LGBTQI+ marketing campaigns	Companies should expand within this market, add it as a search filter, offer packages and activities for the community, be more explicit about their offer, and use digital platforms and all communication media.	Companies should clarify what about their offering makes them LGBTIQ+ inclusive. The community is broad, and everyone must be reached.	Not important. Real experiences from others are more important.	Not important
Interests in LGBTQI+ places and accommodations	Not a priority.	Yes, availability of LGBTIQ+ or LGBTIQ+ inclusive suppliers, hotels, entertainment, and nightlife.	No.	No.
Effect of LGBTQI+ campaigns on loyalty	None.	High.	None.	None.

Source: Own creation.

Own creation.

Discussion

Based on the results of this research and after carefully reviewing the literature, our study finds that the LGBTQI+ real-life challenges, fears, and worries in the year 2023 are still consonant with the literature. LGBTQI+ tourists are considered one of the most profitable and, at the same time, vulnerable and discriminated-against segments of the industry (Usai et al., 2022). Through the cross-cultural nature of the industry, acceptance of the LGBTQI+ lifestyle is exposed to additional limitations, which in certain cultures are often absent in daily life. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, and queer tourists mentioned their fear of being discriminated against, even breaking the law, and getting in conflict with legal authorities when traveling overseas.

According to scholars and LGBTQI+ travelers' perceptions, designing an LGBTQI+ inclusive marketing campaign plays a massive role in attracting these tourists and getting the destination on the map as an LGBTQI+ inclusive tourism place (Liberato et al., 2018; Tourism Marketing and Management, 2020; Tombleson & Wolf, 2017). Some actual entrepreneur decisions, e.g., displaying rainbow flags on their websites or stores to create value and to

develop loyal LGBTQI+ travelers, do not mean they are inclusive, genuine, and reliable enough. According to Tourism Marketing and Management (2020), using a small rainbow or inclusive visuals on websites or advertisements could help welcome this segment of tourists, but that is not the whole story. That would not solve the tolerance, acceptance, and inclusiveness issue, but it would help locals to open their minds and respect new customers and visitors. Also, attention must be paid to forming universal intercultural communication competence (Shafazhinskaya et al., 2019). To succeed and secure loyalty, strategists must understand the community's diversity and complexity, respect and use inclusive language, and incorporate innovation and technology in their marketing strategies.

LGBTQI+ travelers' perceptions of digital platforms and value creation are deficient. Travelers did not remember local or even recent LGBTQI+ inclusive marketing initiatives, meaning entrepreneurs must create, evolve, and innovate how they target the community. They must learn to market to different LGBTQI+ audiences, backgrounds, ethnicities, languages, cultures, and experiences. Marketing to cross-cultural LGBTQI+ effectively and co-create value requires understanding their interests and distinctive needs (Sapene, 2023). This need for deeper understanding aligns with the findings of Garmendia-Mora (2019), who emphasizes the importance of cultural and contextual nuances in customer satisfaction and loyalty within specific sectors. Similarly, Nieves-Rodríguez et al. (2024) argue that recognizing the role of culture in shaping consumer behavior is crucial for marketers targeting diverse populations, including LGBTQI+ communities.

Comparing the results of this study with previous LGBTQI+ tourism-related studies, we observed that the hospitality technology platforms, marketing strategies, and emotions driving LGBTQI+ and non-LGBTQI+ tourists to revisit (loyalty) a destination are not the same (Lai et al., 2022). Over the years, the LGBTQI+ community has become increasingly diverse (Sapene, 2023). Following Lai et al. (2022), LGBTQI+ tourists seek local people and entrepreneurs to move closer to them, not just to feel accepted or welcomed. They want to co-create experiences before, during, and after their journey. This behavior responds to the fact that hospitality technology platforms and cross-cultural marketing communication can be considered more accurate and credible when LGBTQI+ tourist interests are also considered. Thus, cross-cultural marketing communications are essential in their desire to create value.

In the same way, the results confirm that innovation is essential (Hossain et al., 2020) in addressing this kind of issue (e.g., more digital platforms campaigns) and that the dominance of the leisure journals is unsurprising as LGBTQI+ leisure geographies encompass the nature and extent of LGBTQI+ recreation space development

and are linked to tourism consumption (Ong et al., 2022). Therefore, the information received sometimes causes people to change their purchasing behavior, affecting repurchasing behavior (Sheth, 2020).

The economic benefits from the LGBTQI+ community, their market segment, and the increasing social benefits result from the associated brand image tolerance, inclusiveness, and diversity. Numerous cities around the world are considered "LGBTQI+ friendly." There are also websites. Many LGBTQI+ tourists seek to protect themselves when traveling and are interested in countries where this tourism segment's inclusion, acceptance, tolerance marketing campaigns, and country image are safe. Therefore, according to Liberato et al. (2018), destination publicists have sought to make their destination and online platforms attractive to this segment due to the continued growth of the LGBTQI+ world tourism activity.

Conclusions

Marketing digitally to different LGBTQI+ audiences, including gender identity and sexual orientation, cannot be a canned or generic strategy. It is essential to know the unique needs, interests, complexities, and characteristics of the members that identify with each of the LGBTQI+ letters (Ciszek, 2020). They come from different ethnicities, backgrounds, cultures, generations, and experiences.

Indeed, there are some recommendations LGBTQI+ travelers and entrepreneurs should take into consideration when creating value and designing cross-cultural marketing campaigns on digital hospitality platforms. In agreement with Sapene (2023), first, they need to understand that there is considerable diversity in the LGBTQI+ community (generations, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity). All members of the community are entirely different. The one-size-fits-all strategy is unlikely to be effective. Second, it is essential to use inclusive language and include representation from each community member because every member needs to feel identified. Third, partner with professionals with experience in the industry, like respected LGBTQI+ associations and organizations. This alliance will leverage the integrity of its brand. Fourth, companies need to be more open and transparent in explaining what makes their business LGBTQI+ inclusive. Inclusiveness is not necessarily about putting up a rainbow flag and supporting during Pride month. Fifth, use all digital platforms for marketing their LGBTQI+ inclusive business, creating memorable digital marketing campaigns; this could include influencers, respected YouTubers / TikTokers, and all social media platforms. This way, the company can appeal to all generations, including the younger ones.

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Sixth, digital campaigns should be created in different languages, consider others' cultures and values, and respect government restrictions. Seventh, when creating campaigns on digital platforms, highlight the importance of safety for tourists in the company's country. Be honest and mention some tips and precautions the LGBTQI+ community should follow in the company's country. Eight, consider addressing LGBTQI+ rights in your marketing. Ninth, be transparent and authentic about your commitment to the LGBTQI+ community. Tenth, travel destinations should ensure that all staff members understand, respect, and value all customers equally. Eleventh, include a section or calendar on digital platforms focusing on LGBTQI+ tourists. Twelfth, survey all customers. Speak and hear LGBTQI+ travelers constantly; this way, entrepreneurs know firsthand what they think and need, and will create value by giving them participation and inclusion. Allowing them to talk to entrepreneurs directly or to write reviews will provide valuable information and ways to innovate and be inclusive in creating marketing campaigns. Overall, entrepreneurs must be original and show their true colors through marketing.

As mentioned, entrepreneurs now have some points of view from the LGBTQI+ community. This study provides the basis for companies to achieve success. Now, they must consider the recommendations provided to gain more trust and loyalty from LGBTQI+ travelers. This community understands that more marketing campaigns and companies must appeal to their tastes, needs, and concerns. Destinations should develop innovative tourism products and services that are authentically LGBTQI+ inclusive.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This LGBTQI+ subject is a taboo that people and entrepreneurs do not dare to discuss openly. With this research, we are providing knowledge by understanding the preferences and interests of the LGBTQI+ community so that they can contribute to the co-creation of marketing. This study will contribute to understanding customer value and its relationship to cross-cultural marketing communication, specifically in the LGBTQI+ tourism sector. Firstly, to the researchers' knowledge, this is the first investigation to empirically examine the impact of digital hospitality platforms and cross-cultural marketing communication in the LGBTQI+ tourism sector. This study will further contribute to the academic enhancement of the present level of knowledge in the current literature on value co-creation in the tourism sector. This was achieved by doing an extensive literature review and bridging some gaps through in-depth interviews. Secondly, while value co-creation has received much attention in the hospitality literature, value co-creation dimensions and the relation to digital platforms and cross-cultural marketing

communication in the LGBTQI+ tourism sector have not been adequately investigated.

Regarding its practical contribution, the study's findings suggest specific strategic recommendations for improving service and marketing campaigns as a destination for LGBTQI+ tourists. Also, provides practical implications for DMOs and decision-makers that can be generalized beyond geographical borders. Finally, the research findings indicate that gay friendliness, inclusiveness, and tolerance can contribute to the growth, satisfaction, and loyalty of LGBTQI+ tourists. It also contributes to the issue of inclusion in this community.

Limitations and Future Studies

The findings of this study need to be viewed considering their limitations. Since this is a qualitative research, the sample is small, so it is impossible to generalize the data. The sample should have been determined by equitable quotas so that there would be representation in quantity from each member, i.e., the acronym used for this community. However, the study allows us to understand the relationship between the factors and see some tendencies that stimulate future studies.

The study is empirically based on a literature review; it should be replicated using a larger sample, a larger audience, and more advanced technology platforms to provide more robust findings. Furthermore, there are other limitations related to the sample distribution regarding sexual orientation and age. We only interviewed twelve members of the community. Most participants were over 21 and had at least an associate's degree. It would be ideal to include more representation of participants with all levels of education, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Individuals aged 21 and over have different perceptions, maturity, and experiences. Moreover, existing literature has primarily concentrated on gay and lesbian tourism—particularly gay male travel—while largely neglecting the experiences and perspectives of bisexual, non-binary, intersex, and transgender individuals (Hughes, 2006). This gap highlights the need for research that explicitly includes these underrepresented groups. Additionally, replicating such studies in diverse geographic contexts, such as the United Kingdom, France, and countries in Latin America, could reveal relevant patterns, similarities, or differences across regions that may share certain linguistic traits (e.g., Romance languages) but differ significantly in terms of cultural and social norms.

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Marcos-Armando Rodríguez-Negrón
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Más allá de la amabilidad: estrategias auténticas de marketing para viajeros LGBTQI+

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