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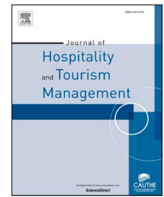

'A lot of gay energy in the city': An identity-based exploration of leisure travel to domestic cities for rural queer people in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Using identity-based motivation theory, this study explored the perceived role leisure travel to domestic cities played for rural queer people in Australia. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted and revealed that travelling to the City helped queer people construct their social identity by providing opportunities that may be restricted or limited at home. Further, those who were still defining their self-identity and/or lived in rural areas that were less tolerant of queer people, used travel to escape the rigours of self-regulation, uncompromising heterosexuality, intolerance, and hostility. Participants felt safer and more comfortable in cities as anonymity, a strong visible representation of the queer communities, and acceptance of queer people allowed them to be themselves and explore the depths of their identity. The results suggest there is an opportunity for queer spaces and experience providers in the City to target rural queer people based on their identity needs.

1. Introduction

Rural communities, rightly or wrongly, are perceived as conservative heteronormative spaces privileging stereotypical gender roles and identities (Pini, Mayes, & Boyer, 2013), and prejudiced against those who do not fit those ideologies (Bauer & Giles, 2019; Kirby & Hay, 1997). Such perceptions displace queer people who live or grow up in rural communities (Bell & Valentine, 2003), resulting in a greater sense of stress (Meyer, 1995). Consequently, rural queer people report higher levels of isolation, mental health challenges, self-harm, and suicidality than their urban peers (Boulden, 2001; McLaren, 2015; Swank, Frost, & Fahs, 2012; Whitehead, Shaver, & Stephenson, 2016). Travelling to the City provides an opportunity to escape prejudiced home environments (Annes & Redlin, 2012). Cities are considered welcoming with spaces like 'gay' districts where queer people can be part of the majority and access services designed for them (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018).

Travel provides queer people with access to spaces where they can experiment with and experience their orientation (Hughes, 1997). Although the tourism literature has explored the travel behaviours of different types of queer travellers – for instance, gay dads (Bauer & Giles, 2019), families (Lucena, Jarvis, & Weeden, 2015), older gay travellers (Hughes & Deutsch, 2010), and different orientations within the LGBTQIA + communities (e.g., Monterrubio, Madera, & Pérez, 2020; Reddy-Best & Olson, 2020), studies have typically been skewed to western populations living in cities (Ong, Vorobjovas-Pinta, & Lewis, 2020) paying limited attention to those from rural communities. For instance, studies on travel motivations have drawn on queer people in cities (Casey, 2009) or have defined their sample based on the country without distinguishing their geographic location (Clift & Forrest, 1999; Hattingh & Spencer, 2020; Lewis, Prayag, & Pour, 2021; Monterrubio & Barrios-Ayala, 2015; Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgley, Khan, & Jenkins, 2000). Given the actual and perceived hostilities rural queer people experience, including exclusion from social and family groups, intimidation, and physical harm (Pini et al., 2013), travel may play a different role compared to their peers from cities where such identities are more accepted. Citing similar reasoning, Herrera and Scott (2005) explored the role of leisure travel generally for gay men from a small city they named 'Soledad'. They found leisure travel helped gay men express their sexuality in a safe environment by enabling access to gay spaces, consequently helping them become more confident about their sexual orientation. However, noting limited literature, Herrera and Scott (2005) called for further studies to explore the role travelling to the City played in the lives of rural queer people. Given the changing rural landscapes towards queer identities and greater social acceptance

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(Kuhar & Svab, 2014; McKearney, 2022), this study responds to Herrera and Scott's (2005) call, taking a domestic tourism perspective. Domestic destinations can offer a means of escape for those unable to travel overseas (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015) and provide access to welcoming places close to home. The importance of domestic tourism was also made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel restrictions limited access to domestic locations (Scroggs, Love, & Torgerson, 2021).

This paper explores the City's position as a destination for leisure travel for rural queer people. Given the role of identity in influencing travel (Bond & Falk, 2013), this study specifically applies Oyserman's (2009) identity-based motivation theory (IBMT) to explore the role of identity in how domestic cities are perceived as a destination for leisure travel by rural queer people. An IBMT perspective was considered appropriate because of its focus on how co-existing identities can direct behaviour – considering the dissonance rural queer people may experience negotiating identities related to their sexual orientation and those based on their membership of their home community (Lewis, Prayag, & Pour, 2021). Identity and tourism have a reciprocal relationship with identity informing why people travel and concurrently travel, helping to "maintain, reconfirm, or establish" identity (Bond & Falk, 2013, p. 437). A similar relationship between identity and tourism has been shown in the queer context (Hughes, 1997; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). However, identity is a complex concept (Ponting, 2022), and despite acknowledging the role of identity in travel motivation, there has been scant empirical research considering this relationship (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Michael, Nyadzayo, Michael, & Balasubramanian, 2020). Understanding how identity can influence travel can help inform the development of travel experiences specifically targeting rural queer travellers, helping to support their unique needs. To this aim, this research adopts an interpretative narrative analysis approach drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with 11 participants to understand how their identity informed their motivations to travel to domestic cities. In this paper, while acknowledging the diversity encapsulated by the LGBTQIA + acronym, in line with the literature (e.g., Marlin, Lewis, & McLaren, 2022) we use the word queer to represent the sample recruited based on having a diverse sexual orientation.

2. Literature review

Rasmussen (2004) suggests that for queer people developing one's self-identity and social identity based on their sexual orientation are critical and successive elements of the coming-out process. While self-identity explains how one sees and accepts themselves based on their characteristics (Snippe, Peters, & Kok, 2019), social identity is based on the groups one chooses to associate with and includes displaying traits and behaviours that signal association with that group (Tajfel, 1974). After self-identifying as queer, creating a social identity based on relations with similar others through social group membership and participation in queer experiences can help solidify one's self-identity (Kleine & Kleine, 2000). Such affiliations can enhance one's sense of belonging, helping to improve mental well-being (McLaren, 2009; McLaren, Jude, & McLachlan, 2008). However, a queer self-identity may not necessarily translate into a social identity – particularly in rural communities, due to the social stigma associated (Bond & Falk, 2013) and limited opportunities to form social connections (Kuhar & Svab, 2014). Stigma in this context contributes to discrediting one's social identity and encouraging avoidance (Goffman, 2009). Arguably, given the internalised homonegativity commonly reported by rural queer people (Davidson et al., 2017), the stigma associated with queer identities may inhibit in-groups based on orientation from being perceived as superior to out-groups. This notion contrasts with Tajfel (1974), who argues members of a group are likely to see that group as being better than other groups.

2.1. Rurality and queer lives

Rural communities have been described as having a "scary heterosexuality" (Pini et al., 2013) which defines local institutions, lifestyles, and spaces (Browne & Bakshi, 2016; Valentine, 1993), forcing queer people to escape or hide to avoid adverse consequences (Kuhar & Svab, 2014). While concealment protects oneself, it makes queer people invisible and fragmented (Boulden, 2001), feeding the spatial supremacy of heterosexuality (Valentine, 1993) and reducing opportunities to construct a queer social identity (Swank et al., 2012). The dissonance caused by an inability to develop a healthy social identity in rural communities, combined with narratives that perpetuate heteronormativity, contributes to queer people having a lived experience of poor mental health (Lyons, Hosking, & Rozbroj, 2015), particularly among younger queer people who are still constructing their self-identity (Swank et al., 2012). However, rural communities can also be supportive spaces for queer people. Given their population size, rural places can foster positive and nurturing relationships, which provide a sense of safety for queer people (Gorman-Murray, Waitt, & Gibson, 2008; Kazyak, 2011). The malleability of rural culture (Anderson et al., 2015) can contribute to a live-and-let-live approach (Kazyak, 2011). Similarly, both Oswald and Culton (2003) and Anderson et al. (2015), studying rural inclusion, concluded there was limited empirical evidence to support the hostility queer people perceived.

2.2. Queer travel

While queer people may travel for mainstream experiences (Monterrubio & Barrios-Ayala, 2015), including to escape from work, relax, pursue leisure activities like shopping, experience novelty, and learn/have new experiences (Hattingh & Spencer, 2020; Holcomb & Luongo, 1996; Lewis, Prayag, & Pour, 2021), travel uniquely provides queer people with an opportunity to compensate for identity and belonging needs unmet at home (Coon, 2012). In doing so, travel can help bridge the gap between having a queer self-identity and a social identity, helping to form a stronger sense of self (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). While individuals generally travel to escape, the way escape is conceptualised depends on the individual's environmental context (Michael et al., 2020). Travel can provide a temporary escape from prejudiced home environments and enable access to an alternative environment more supportive of queer people (Hughes, 1997, 2002; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). Such escape helps provide the mental and physical distance from home necessary to be comfortable with experimenting or displaying one's identity (Casey, 2009; Hughes & Deutsch, 2010). Holidays can provide an escape to behave in ways impermissible at home and take opportunities based on one's sexual orientation unavailable at home (Hattingh & Spencer, 2017; Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018). For these reasons, queer people may travel to experience gay social life (Clift & Forrest, 1999) and be pulled to visit destinations where they feel a sense of safety and belonging (Hattingh & Spencer, 2017; Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, & Araña, 2011; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). Agyeiwaah, Pratt, Iaquinto, and Suntikul (2020), similarly while studying backpackers, found that satisfaction with one's travel experience increases when individuals can act in ways that affirm their social identity. Given the role of identity in travel, literature on IBMT is now discussed.

2.3. Identity-based motivation theory (IBMT)

Tourism enables individuals to reinforce or develop their identity, and consequently, identity plays a role in tourism decision-making (Hibbert, Dickinson, Gössling, & Curtin, 2013). IBMT is a situated cognition theory of self-regulation (Oyserman et al., 2017) that links theories of self-conception and identity with theories of motivation (Oyserman, 2009, 2015). The theory proposes that individuals' actions and how they interpret the world around them depend on their congruence with their self-concept, which comprises multiple self and

social identities (Oyserman, 2009). Oyserman and Dawson (2020, p. 181) explain that individuals "prefer to make sense of situations and act in ways that feel congruent with their important social and personal identity", which includes current or desired identities. Lewis, Prayag, and Pour (2021) adapted IBMT to the context of tourism by integrating it with the push-pull motivation model (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977) to quantitatively segment the Australian queer travel market. They argued the push-pull motivation model failed to adequately consider the role of identity in travel motivation; and found social identity had a significant influence – with segments with a salient queer social identity being more likely to travel to access inclusive spaces and participate in queer activities.

Oyserman (2009) proposes IBMT has three components: dynamic construction, action readiness, and procedural readiness. Dynamic construction explains that individuals have multiple co-existing identities, and the context dictates which identities become salient and what they mean (Oyserman, 2015). The multifaceted view of identities does not preclude the presence of identities that are more important to the individual, including those based on their sexual orientation (Bond & Falk, 2013). Socially learnt responses towards an identity can moderate if and how that identity is cued within a context (Oyserman et al., 2017), with identities associated with in-groups being more likely to be cued to protect oneself (Oyserman & Dawson, 2020). Social identities, in particular, due to their visible expression, can significantly impact behaviour (Agyeiwaah et al., 2020). However, while in a rural context, queer social identities may be avoided because of their out-group status (Swank et al., 2012), travel can enable access to new spaces with different social environments. Arguably, the anonymity afforded by travelling to new places allows individuals to act out identities that may be deemed socially deviant at home (Ying, Wen, & Shan, 2019).

Oyserman (2009) explains procedural readiness as a motivation to make sense of the world in ways congruent with one's identity. Through such sense-making, individuals may make decisions about self-regulation by considering the ease or difficulty associated with an identity and drawing on learnt responses of how others may respond to it (Oyserman et al., 2017). Consequently, the social setting the individual is in dictates which identity becomes prominent (Hibbert et al., 2013). For instance, the perceived difficulty associated with having a rural queer social identity may result in self-regulation and behaviour moderation while at home (Swank et al., 2012). Once the individual interprets the situation, action readiness explains the willingness to act in ways congruent with cued identities (Oyserman & Dawson, 2020). Identities that are more socially acceptable in one's community are more likely to drive behaviours (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012). Actions selected will depend on what is constrained and afforded in a particular situation (Oyserman, 2015), with those perceived to be identity-congruent but difficult to engage in becoming important and meaningful to the individual (Oyserman & Dawson, 2020). Arguably, the limited potential for queer experiences in rural communities, combined with the difficulty in accessing such experiences, may constrain the actions of queer residents, leaving such needs unsatisfied yet important. Through travel, individuals can satisfy identity needs unmet at home by allowing the individual to choose holiday styles and experiences that align with their desired social identity (Hibbert et al., 2013).

3. Methods

3.1. Researcher positionality statement

This study was conducted by researchers who identified as part of the LGBTQ + communities and have lived experience negotiating our sexual orientation and identity within rural and regional environments. Accordingly, we recognised the role of our own experiences in the knowledge-creation process and the potential impact of our implicit biases and values on the research process. Consequently, we routinely included critical reflexivity approaches (Lewis & Mehmet, 2021), which included informal questioning and note-taking to ensure we balanced our own lived experiences with those of our participants.

3.2. Interpretative narrative analysis

Creswell and Poth (2016) argue narrative analysis is best suited for research that attempts to understand the lived experiences of one or more individuals. Accordingly, to understand the perceived role leisure travel to domestic cities played for rural queer people, we adopted a narrative analysis approach. Such an approach includes a dual layer of interpretation. First, the research participants interpret and communicate their own lives through narrative. After this, the researcher interprets the construction of that narrative to generate themes that represent similar and divergent experiences (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019). In doing so, narrative analysis can help uncover key ideologies and motivations driving behaviours within a particular situation (Tettegah & Garcia, 2016). This was essential within the context of this study, given the individualised and complex nature of one's experience negotiating their sexual orientation and identity and the role travel plays within it (Lewis, Prayag, & Pour, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews were used as they permitted a deeper exploration of the topic and enabled the questions to be adapted in line with the nuances of the participants' identity. Being semi-structured, the interviews were designed to explore: 1) how participants perceived their identity based on their sexual orientation and how comfortable they were with that identity, 2) their lived experience (both good and bad) of that identity within their rural community, 3) the role they believed travelling to domestic cities played in their lives, and 4) the experiences they participated in when visiting domestic cities.

3.3. Participants

A purposive sampling approach (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001) was applied to ensure participants self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and to achieve a variation based on gender, age, location, and how long participants had lived in a rural community. Initially, a convenience sampling approach was used, and participants were accessed through the various queer networks and organisations the researchers are affiliated with (e.g., ally networks and national queer advocacy organisations). After each interview, a snowballing approach was applied, and participants were asked to recommend others who may be suitable. This enabled access to a sample that is typically invisible in rural communities (Browne, 2005) while ensuring participants were suited to the objective of the study.

As summarised in Table 1, a total of eleven interviews were conducted. The final sample was determined once the themes emerging appeared repetitive. The sample size is comparable to other similar studies (e.g., Elouard & Essén, 2013; Herrera & Scott, 2005; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000) and aligns with Creswell and Poth (2016), who recommend a sample of 6–12 participants when using an interpretative narrative analysis approach. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an average of 32 min, ranging from 23 to 47 min. The interviews were conducted between June 2021 and November 2021, when travel restrictions were enforced in Australia in response to COVID-19. Though the pandemic was not the focus of this work, restrictions limited how far individuals could travel from their homes, thus providing a natural context to examine the focus of this study.

3.4. Analysis

In accordance with the narrative analysis approach, coding and analysis commenced during the interview process, where notes were maintained, capturing the 'narrative blocks' of lived experience from each interview and reflections relevant to that interview (Creswell & Poth, 2016). After fieldwork, the recordings were transcribed, and a team analysis approach was adopted. Following Pritchard, Morgan, and

Table 1
Participant profile.

#	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Population size[a]	Description
P1	21	Cis-Male	Gay	Under 15,000	Just completed his university degree. Used to identify as Queer and Bi. Recently started identifying as Gay Cis-Male but appeared to be still defining his self-identity. Out to "quite a few" family and friends. Usually travels to the City every 2–3 months though sometimes limited by finances.
P2	27	Cis-Male	Gay	Under 15,000	Grew up in small rural communities. Sexuality is a small part of his life but is closely connected with his works in diversity and inclusion. Typically, would visit the City once every couple of months.
P3	27	Cis-Male	Gay	30,000–50,000	Lived in the same rural community all his life. Considers his orientation as only a small, almost insignificant part of his self-identity. Explains he has grown to be "comfortable and confident" in his sexual orientation. Came out at 21 to immediate family and friends. Travels to the City a few times a year based on social events.
P4	22	Cis-Male	Gay	30,000–50,000	Studying in a rural community after growing up in a regional centre. He has a partner who lives in a city he would typically visit every second week. Out to everyone.
P5	19	Cis-Female	Gay/ queer	30,000–50,000	She moved to her current community from a smaller rural community to attend university. Only came out to her immediate family three weeks before the interview, while her friends have known for about four years. Doesn't travel to the City often while she is a student but may visit a couple of times a year.
P6	45	Cis-Female	Bisexual	More than 100,000	Part of a same-sex couple with children. She noted her partner was very butch in appearance and got a lot of unwanted attention. Travelled to the City about once a month usually. Moved to a city two months following the interview, encouraged by her partner.
P7	47	Cis-Male	Gay	15,000–30,000	Works in LGBT + advocacy and is HIV positive. Lives with his same-sex partner. Moved to their current community from a city over 10 years ago. Has a public profile having appeared in TV shows. Travels to the City for work and HIV treatments every few months and stays a little longer for leisure.
P8	52	Cis-Male	Gay	15,000–30,000	Lives with his partner and works in law. Has lived in between City and rural communities. Believes his sexuality is "fairly central" to his self-identity.
P9	55	Cis-Female	Queer	15,000–30,000	A single mother with a teenage son. Currently in a relationship with a person who identifies as non-binary. Had lived in a city and moved to her community about 5 years ago. Doesn't "give a shit about what anybody thinks" about her orientation. Would usually visit the City every few months for events or social occasions.
P10	28	Cis-Female	Lesbian	30,000–50,000	A single mother with a young son living in the town centre. Currently studying for a university degree. Used to live in a smaller community before. She appeared comfortable with her self-identity and explained it was less important than other things in her life. Used to travel to the City more often when she was younger but limited now to once every six months because of her son.
P11	44	Queer	Queer	15,000–30,000	Grew up in a city and moved to her current location over 10 years ago. Identifies as "queer both ways".

[a] Based on the 2016 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Sedgley (2002), the transcripts were individually analysed by two of the authors. Burnard's (1991) approach to analysing interview data was applied by each, wherein the transcripts were examined, and codes were assigned using an open coding process, following which similar codes were combined into higher-order themes. Following Saldaña's (2015) team analysis approach, the two researchers then came together to discuss their findings. This helped ensure consistency in the analysis process and provided the opportunity to discuss differences in interpretation (Lewis, Nelson, & Black, 2021).

Multiple approaches were applied to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Firstly, the team had lived experience and were

experienced in researching queer people within rural communities, enabling an appreciation for the context of this study. Second, following Kitto, Chesters, and Grbich (2008), confirmatory questions were asked during the interview to confirm the interpretation of emerging narratives. Third, the team analysis approach generated discussion around the findings, helping to challenge and nuance interpretations (Saldaña, 2015). Finally, the preliminary findings were presented as part of a tourism research seminar, allowing the researchers to gain additional feedback from those external to the study to further nuance the conclusions drawn (Lewis, Nelson, & Black, 2021).

4. Findings

Overall, leisure travel to domestic cities appeared to compensate for identity needs not met at home. This was found to be the case regardless of whether the home environment was perceived as heteronormative or prejudiced. Those from environments that were queer-friendly and those who appeared more confident with their identity (typically older participants) travelled not to escape heteronormativity but instead to access a larger pool of queer people and the variety of mainstream and queer experiences the City could offer. In contrast, those who perceived their home environment as being prejudiced, or were still constructing their identity, travelled to seek affinity with a queer community and to experience and validate their self-identity. As summarised in Fig. 1, travel to the City was motivated by the limitations imposed by living within a rural community and perceptions of liberation in the city. The findings are now presented, beginning with a discussion of the participants' experiences living in rural communities to provide context.

4.1. Experience of rural living

Participants believed rural communities had a *"healing nature"* and *"slower pace"* (P7), which contributed to a better lifestyle, supporting Boulden (2001). Those interviewed expressed an appreciation for the values enculturated in rural life:

> [Rural] is a part of who I am, I understand, resilience and I understand, those general traits that are morality, you know, resilience and hard work and, yeah, I suppose kind of being down to earth, I guess. (P10)

4.1.1. Rural can be more inclusive

For some, who had lived in a city, rural communities seemed more inclusive. This contrasts with the literature that positions the City as a place of gay liberation (Binnie, 2004; Gorman-Murray et al., 2008, 2012; Kazyak, 2011). For instance, P11 noted:

> … the Northern Rivers [a small town] was actually really lovely and accepting. In Brisbane [a capital city] where we were, we felt afraid to put up a flag. Brisbane as a big city felt very unsafe, but when I was down in the Northern Rivers, it's a small community, it's a very peace-loving kind of lovely place.

Rural communities provided an *"intimate sense of community"* (P7), and a *"sincere"* connection (Annes & Redlin, 2012, p. 62), in contrast to cities where residents were typically *"very anonymous"* (P9). Consistent with Kuhar and Svab (2014), it appears some rural spaces are becoming less oppressive and evolving to attract queer residents. P9 explained:

> I feel as though every third person that you meet is a queer person. I mean, Lismore [small town] is very queer.

4.1.2. Close ties enforced conformity

Participants (P10, P5) described how the population size contributed to making rural places close-knit, where *"everyone knows everyone's business"* (P10):

> You can't do a five-minute trip to the supermarket. You have to budget half an hour because everyone wants to know how you are and how your dog is and how your mum is. (P5)

However, this sense of connection with the local community contributed to making queer people compliant with prevailing heteronormative expectations. Such compliance, functioning akin to action readiness (Oyserman et al., 2017), resulted from a fear of social exclusion, demonstrating societal influence on how one experienced and displayed their identity. P5, who emphasised she came from a peace-loving and close family, explained:

> When I was younger and not so confident – in that everybody needs to approve of me, that was really tough. It's hard to change the way people perceive you because it feels like once you do something, it's set in stone … because everyone knows about it. If something's

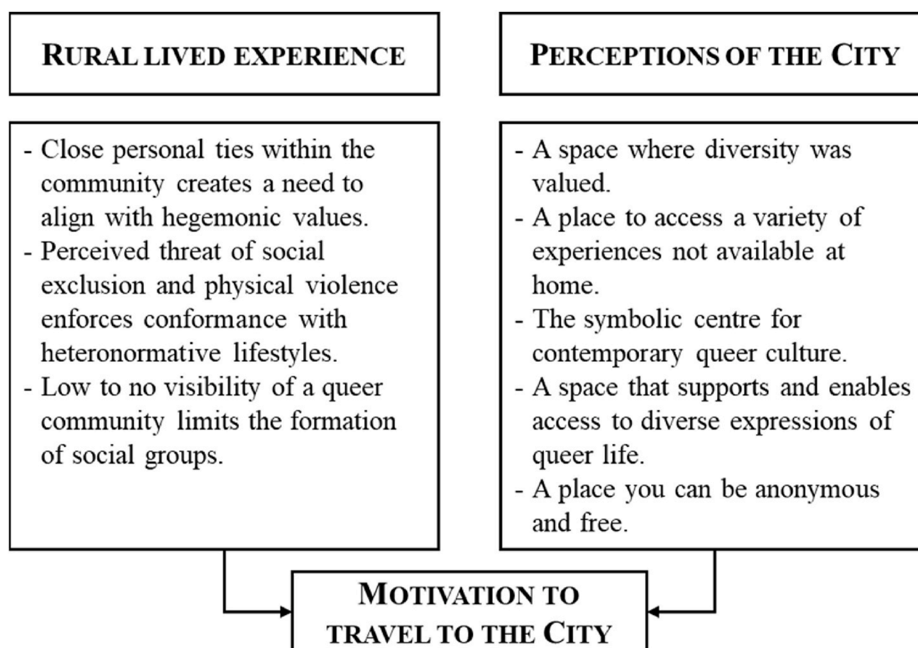

Fig. 1. Rural lived experiences combined with perceptions of the city motivate visitation.

> happened, everyone knows about it, and that changes how they look at you. If someone comes out, that's who that person is in the community, and they're not anything else.

Imahori and Cupach (2005) explain P5's sentiment of being seen as *"not anything else"* as identity freezing and note that concerns about having a stigmatised identity frozen can cause individuals to regulate how they present themselves to avoid such associations. Participants explained how displaying a queer social identity could cause them to *"stick out"* (P7, P6), which was emotionally draining and a constant reminder of being different:

> You walk in, and it's like that classic thing in [the movie] Priscilla; they walk in, and everyone's heads all just fucking turn. (P7)

4.1.3. Threats real and perceived

The fear of social exclusion appeared to be a response to discourses internalised growing up through stories (P7) or actual experiences that created a negative association with one's sexual orientation (Gottschalk & Newton, 2009) and moderated if and how queer identities were cued (Oyserman et al., 2017). Participants explained *"feeling like an outsider"* (P3) in a social environment where topics related to sexuality were *"something we just don't talk about"* (P5) and where queerness was constructed as inferior:

> I remember quite distinctly my uncle drilling into me that that's how fags look, so you shouldn't walk like that. (P2)

> 'That's so gay' … sort of used in a negative connotation, and so I probably directed that as gay people being a bad thing. (P3)

> For some, their orientation was weaponised as a point of attack:

> I [had] graffiti in the parks about me saying I was a paedophile, saying that I was a faggot, and all sorts of stuff. I was getting death threats online. I was getting mail sent to my house. My parents were getting mail sent to them. It was really serious, [and] it had a really damaging effect on my mental health. (P1)

Others expected intolerance based on profiling those around them (Lewis & Markwell, 2020). P10, acknowledging the generalisation, explained she avoided parts of her community that were *"socioeconomically rough"* because that was associated with *"lower education, lower progression"*. Similarly, P7 explained how *"country yokels"*, who were typically *"white, old-school Australians"*, made his community scary for those who were different.

4.1.4. Lack of queer visibility

Perceptions of prejudice and negative discourse dominated in an environment where queer people lacked visibility. One participant even expressed she did not know any queer people in the rural community where she grew up, and the only exposure to the queer community came from the media (P5). This lack of representation confronted younger queers, in particular, who were still defining their self-identity (Swank et al., 2012):

> You feel very invisible … you don't tend to see your identity or identities reflected back to you, and it can be a very isolating experience. I think it's particularly difficult for younger queers because, it's really hard for them to find their people. We don't have our own bars; we don't have our own areas; we don't have a necessarily gay night in a bar. We struggle to find each other … (P11)

Even in rural communities perceived as inclusive, as in the case of P11 above, the lack of visibility combined with limited queer populations impeded the development of social groups (Annes & Redlin, 2012). Aligning with Marlin et al. (2022) this limited visibility made queer people reluctant to even search for a local queer community (P4), ultimately reducing access to structures required to construct and experience one's social identity (P10). P4, for instance, explained the importance of having access to a queer community noting it gave *"you the* support *network; and people who you can relate to on aspects"*. P1 similarly explained:

> … romantically and sexually, I still feel very isolated and very out of touch, just because being in a rural community, there isn't too much of a community for me here … it really has been a lonely experience.

4.1.5. Vigilance and self-regulation

The perceived threat contributed to participants demonstrating a form of procedural readiness (Oyserman, 2009) by vigilantly assessing and making sense of their environment, with P4 noting he constantly *"kept an eye out on certain people"* when socialising and P7 explaining, *"if it feels like you're the only gay in the village, you're a bit hypervigilant"*. Participants expressed having to self-regulate their identities to 'pass' as heterosexual in their home environment to fit in. Passing in this context acts as a form of self-regulation (Oyserman et al., 2017), helping fulfil social expectations in a rural community (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008). This included having relationships with people of the opposite sex (P2, P10) and being cautious about how one expressed themselves because, as P5 explained, *"it's not a secret but I don't think I can show it"*.

4.3. The perceived role of domestic cities as a destination for leisure travel

In contrast to rural places, the City was perceived largely as a queer space where there was *"a lot of gay energy"* (P5) and you *"belong just because you're queer"* (P9). This came from the City's association with large-scale pride events (P2), the variety of queer spaces and activities (P9), experiences of visiting the City growing up and seeing *"openly queer"* people (P2), and the perceived attitude of city people who *"don't give a fuck"* (P7) because diversity was valued compared to rural where there was *"very little"* (P7). In this context, the City not only provides a way out of oppressive environments (Annes & Redlin, 2012) but also a reprieve from both the heteronormativity and the sociocultural homogeneity that pervades rural communities. This image of the City ultimately attracts rural visitors aligning with Dann (1977), who argues both the destination's real and imagined attributes work together to pull visitation. For some participants, the City was romanticised as a place of anonymity and diversity:

> Say we're walking down Oxford Street [gay precinct in Sydney]. There are shops left, right, and centre, all tailored to gay people as opposed to walking down the street in Bathurst [a small town] … I look into those shops and I can have a higher chance of assuming that those people are gay, and I'd be correct. Walking past Target [a departmental store] in Bathurst, I already know who's gay in Bathurst by being on Grinder. There are not that many. I walk through the City, and there's the notion that the City is so vast and so huge. And then, looking into stores and seeing a bunch of people and not knowing if they're gay or not is more calming to me … (P1)

In the case of P1, the City was fantasised as a place where he could find a part of himself, aligning with Ponting (2022), who found that visiting one's birth country was fantasised as a place to find others who were similar and seek acceptance for being part of the norm. In this context, the City not only provided an escape from heteronormativity (Swank et al., 2012) but also from the queer communities in his rural home environment, allowing him to experience different queer cultures in a place where queer people were generally welcomed. The diversity represented in the City signalled inclusion and freedom, which appeared in contrast to the homogeneity at home (Annes & Redlin, 2012) and reduced the sense of *"sticking out"*:

> … cultural diversity, sexuality diversity, the diversity of the huge spectrum of complex diversities that a big city has. It feels like this organism, and I love it because it's like you can blend in and you have more freedom, and I feel happy. I love it; I love seeing the

diversity, I love seeing different things because it says to me that we're not a mono fucking culture. (P7)

4.3.1. The city provides a variety of experiences not available at home

Consistent with the literature (Hughes, 2002; Lewis, Prayag, & Pour, 2021), rural queer people were motivated to travel to the City for both mainstream and queer-specific reasons aligning with the multiple identities they embody (Chiang, Xu, Kim, Tang, & Manthiou, 2017). P9 explains:

> really just want to be me, so I definitely want to just go do some straight things and I want to go do some totally, utterly queer things.

Participants visited the City to socialise with friends (P7, P6, P2), seek medical treatment (P7), and access a variety of mainstream experiences not available at home and not necessarily related to their sexual orientation. This included visiting *"quirky shops"* (P3), branded shopping outlets, and restaurants (P4, P1):

> It's sort of just access to everything really. You can go anywhere and you can do whatever you really feel like doing whereas in areas, like in rural areas you don't have that opportunity. (P4)

Cultural experiences (Clift & Forrest, 1999) such as visiting art galleries, music performances, and theatres were also considered important since such opportunities were either absent at home or unavailable to the same degree. Art symbolised diversity and freedom of expression and provided an opportunity to experience a *"different perspective"* (P1) which contrasted with what was permissible within one's rural home community. Similarly, when asked what she liked to do when visiting the City, P10 explained:

> I feel good when I'm in an art gallery, or I'm seeing a play, or I'm seeing something that allows freedom of thought and expression. That goes beyond identity and sexuality. It's about being free to think and be who you are through the lens of art as well. (P10)

4.3.2. The city as the centre for queer culture

Participants also reported travelling to the City for pride events (P2, P9, P6), to visit gay bars, clubs, and spaces (P9, P2, P11), as well as for sexual encounters (P1, P2, P7). The City was seen as the symbolic centre of queer culture (P6, P4) and visiting provided a connection with the broader queer communities. While Kivel and Kleiber (2000) argued that travel helped queer people construct their self-identity, for those who already self-identified as queer, aligning with Ponting (2022), the City provided temporary access to experiences and social groups essential to pioneering one's social identity. In this context, the domestic nature of the travel compensated for social identity needs unmet at home (Lewis, Prayag, & Pour, 2021) by providing an accessible opportunity – geographically and financially, close to home. Even P9, who lived in a diverse and accepting rural community, explained visiting the City helped her stay up to date on queer culture because it took time to reach rural communities:

> … touching base with the evolution of my queer culture because I feel as though we get it kind of a year later or something in the country.

For older participants (P8, P9), travelling to the City provided a sense of nostalgia, and visiting helped relive old memories. Lamenting the changing queer landscape in the City, P8 expressed how visiting the City was a way of revisiting the past:

> You're revisiting the past in a sense too. It's funny because a lot of what I miss doesn't exist down there anymore.

Given the importance of one's sexual orientation to their identity (Bond & Falk, 2013), those with a minority identity in their home community are more likely to experience that identity as chronically salient and act to compensate for that identity (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Oyserman, 2009). Accordingly, travelling to the City compensated for absent or limited queer spaces and activities (Hughes, 1997, 2002) at home by enabling access to various queer experiences not permissible or even feasible in rural communities. Participants explained travelling to the City provided access to a "large pool" of queer people (P10). For P1, this pool of people provided a sense of affinity, which helped validate his self-identity and have experiences like *"straight people do"*, signalling a sense of normalcy and alleviating displacement felt at home:

> In terms of finding a community and finding security and validation, I have travelled a lot to Sydney and surrounding to find people who are more like me … I went to a concert in the City once, and I met a guy. We made out, and that was pretty fun. Like two people in the crowd just picking up on each other's vibes, the way that straight people do, in movies and in real life, and it was a really great experience for me, emotionally, to know that it's possible, because I don't have that in the country whenever I go out with my friends …

4.3.3. The city enabled access to diverse expressions of queer lives

The bigger pool in the City meant there were more diverse types of queer people to meet compared to rural communities where being queer was often the only commonality (P4). In this way, the City provided access to different expressions of queer identities enabling rural queer people to socialise with others who reflect similar identities in aspects beyond one's sexual orientation (Ponting, 2022). This is particularly important for developing one's unique queer identity as opposed to versions of queer lives represented in media, which may not resonate with how the individual sees themselves. P6, for instance, found it hard to meet other queer families she could identify with, forcing her to seek out such groups in the City:

> There aren't very many families like ours … even the lesbian families that are near us. I find here, with the rainbow family community, I'm still explaining myself because of my class, to be honest. I think it is a class background, my trajectory, my employment, and all of those things are quite different.

P6's comment indicates a need to socialise with queer people who are similar beyond just sexuality, nuancing Gorman-Murray et al. (2008), who note social exclusion at home results in rural queer people having a heightened need and longing to belong. Indeed, the City provided this sense of belonging with groups that shared similarities in addition to one's sexuality. Similarly, the larger queer population in the City meant there was a greater variety of queer experiences to choose from (P1) compared to rural communities where *"what you get is what you get"* (P11).

4.3.4. The city provided anonymity to be who you are

Consistent with the literature (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Hughes, 2002), the City provided a place rural queer people could escape and be anonymous. While this escape largely helped *"avoid judgement"* (P4) within close-knit rural communities, it played a different role depending on the individual's context (Michael et al., 2020). For those comfortable with their sexual identity, this escape allowed them to pursue activities they may not be able to do within the close-knit home community where they are well-known. P2, who was a public advocate for inclusion, believed he had to protect his image at home:

> [In Sydney] I could be anonymous and do outrageous things and just not have eyes on me if that makes sense … So, Sydney is a bit of an escape to let my hair down …

Even in the context of P2, who was public about his identity, the fear of judgement, and the consequence of that judgement on undermining his capacity to be a public voice for queer inclusion, impeded his ability to be himself in his home community. On the other hand, those who perceived their home environment as hostile perceived this escape as the

only opportunity to display their sexual orientation without inhibition and, in doing so, develop their "possible selves" (Hibbert et al., 2013, p. 1002). While socially learnt responses limited if and how sexual identities are dynamically cued within the rural context, they facilitate them within the city environment (Oyserman et al., 2017). For instance, P5, who had previously explained how the sense of belonging she experienced in her home community restricted her from being herself, noted:

> I could be out and not care. I could dress however I wanted [event if] that didn't necessarily agree with the clothes that my mum had bought for me, and not care. I could be exactly precisely who I was to the fullness and richness of whoever that is and not be worried about what people are thinking because they don't know me, so I don't care.

This change in social context enabled the implementation of actions one may not consider viable in their home environment because of the out-group status of queer identities (Oyserman, 2015). The escape allowed participants the freedom to be themselves and *"reinvent"* their identity (P9) in ways not permissible at home (Laing & Frost, 2017), providing a moment of transformation based on how they experience their identity (Ponting, 2022). Even P3, who explained his sexuality was not a large part of his self-identity, noted how being in the City made him feel free:

> I feel like a new person, like a completely different person to myself back here. And I think being in Newtown [a queer suburb in Sydney] sort of lends to that, not so much a change of character. I don't necessarily change who I am, but I guess I just feel a bit more free.

The experience of being *"a bit more free"* suggests that comfort and confidence with one's self-identity in their home environment may not preclude the need to self-regulate and manage their social identity to some degree.

4.3.5. The city during COVID-19

Given this fieldwork was conducted during COVID-19, participants acknowledged how the associated travel restrictions limited domestic travel opportunities. These restrictions impeded the possibility of accessing the pool of queer people in the City, reducing the chance of meeting others or pursuing romantic relationships (P10). For instance, P1 noted feeling *"a little trapped"* in a community that had *"nothing really related to my identity as a gay man"*. Similarly, P4, who perceived his community as relatively *"close-minded"*, felt he could not escape to the City to get away from those attitudes:

> I'm definitely missing a lot right now about the City. In rural areas, you are just confined to a little bubble, and it's very restricting. Sort of just trying to get away from certain people really; their close-mindedness; their attitudes and just wanting to just go to the City; have fun; let go, but yeah, it's kind of like you are stuck where you are and just have to deal with it really.

Both P1 and P4's comments support the importance of domestic cities in functioning as an accessible respite by providing a cost-effective and geographically accessible destination to escape heteronormative home environments or immerse in a queer environment. Arguably, domestic cities offer a more pragmatic alternative to overseas travel, enabling rural queer people to have positive experiences relating to their sexual orientation and helping to construct and maintain their social identities while building resilience against prejudice at home (Lyons et al., 2015).

5. Implications

5.1. Implications to theory

This paper makes a unique contribution by applying IBMT to explore the role travelling to domestic cities played in the lives of rural queer people. Rural queer travel provided a unique context to apply IBMT given the oppressive social environment associated with rural communities and the liberation perceived in the City. The findings suggest that context played a role in self-regulating (McKearney, 2022; Oyserman, 2009, 2015), which identities were displayed, and the actions adopted. Travelling to the City inverted the social context (Hughes, 1997, 2002), reducing the need for vigilance and self-regulation, enabling individuals to temporarily demonstrate a social identity consistent with their orientation. Arguably, such self-regulation may also be undertaken by those who feel confident with their self-identity and comfortable with it in their rural community, resulting in a greater sense of freedom in the City. The findings of this study build on IBMT by suggesting it is not just the context that plays a role in directing how identities motivate behaviour (Oyserman, 2009, 2015) but also the degree of confidence one has in an identity – particularly if it is socially stigmatised. Those who appeared less confident with their self-identity – that is, were still constructing it, travelled to the City to socialise and participate in queer experiences to seek affirmation and validation of their self-identity. Tourism in this context provides a platform to act out a "hoped-for self" (Hibbert et al., 2013) based on the freedom to display one's identity publicly. This aligns with Hsieh and Wu (2011), who, in a marketing context, found that the individual's stage of identity development influenced the consumption patterns of gay men and the products they sought.

Consistent with Kivel and Kleiber (2000), travel appeared to provide an opportunity to align one's self and social identity. Participants in this study self-identified as queer and appeared to see travel to the City as an opportunity to satisfy social identity needs unmet at home. By applying IBMT to rural queer travel, the findings suggest that actions may be motivated not just based on congruence with one's self-concept (Oyserman, 2009), but also by the need to reconcile one's self and social identities to form a holistic sense of self (Hibbert et al., 2013). Arguably this dissonance between one's self and social identities within rural communities, and the conflicting needs to be one's self and fit in, may contribute to making queer identities chronically saliant (Oyserman, 2009) and a driver of behaviour when the opportunity arises. Further, how identity needs motivated behaviour differed based on how prejudiced the home environment was perceived. The findings suggest that not all rural queer travellers visit the City to escape from prejudiced home environments. Those from communities considered hostile travelled to the City to form an affiliation with other queer people, publicly display a queer social identity, and validate their self-identity. On the other hand, participants from communities that were seen as inclusive travelled to experience the diverse aspects and representations of the queer culture made possible within the mass populations of the City. While small rural populations limited the queer experiences they could feasibly offer, the pool of queer people in the City and the associated diversity in queer experiences allowed one to align their social identity based on groups and experiences that represented how the individual experienced their queerness and their interest beyond sexuality. This is essential considering the diverse nature of the queer community and how queer lives can be lived (Lewis & Hermann, 2022), and this diversity may not be visible nor available in rural communities (McKearney, 2022) but is still essential to forming one's self-identity.

5.2. Implications for practice

The findings illustrate the heterogeneity in the rural queer traveller market based on prejudice perceived at home and the individual's stage in identity development, which needs to be considered when marketing to this segment. The results suggest there is an opportunity for queer spaces and experience providers in the City to target rural queer people based on their identity needs. Such targeting could employ social media marketing techniques to deliver unique messages to queer people from different rural communities – based on how diverse, and inclusive those communities are. Given the propensity to travel to the City, developing

and publicising experiences in the City that target individuals with different types of queer identities or at different stages of identity construction could also support the identity needs of rural queer people. This could include social gatherings or events based on age or life stage, that are publicised in rural communities. In this regard, there may be the potential to create online spaces that allow interaction, enabling a form of escapism between travel experiences. The findings renew support for the need to develop opportunities for rural queer people to construct one's social identity within or closer to their home environment. This can range from social gatherings to local pride events, which can help create visibility for the queer community and provide an opportunity to gather – reducing the invisibility rural queer people experience (Lewis & Markwell, 2020). Indeed, such events though potentially challenging to organise, can in the long term contribute to an out-side in change wherein the culture of the environment reduces the prejudice individuals hold (McFarland, 2013) while helping construct a positive and aligned sense of self for rural queer people (Lewis & Markwell, 2020).

6. Limitations and future work

The limitations of this study are acknowledged. First, it only focused on identity as a motivator but did not consider the role of other factors in driving travel to domestic cities, which can be the topic for future work. Second, this study was conducted within an Australian context – where queer people enjoy greater social acceptance and legal protections than many other countries. While the findings may be relevant within other countries with a similar social-cultural context, they may not extend to countries where queer identities are predominantly stigmatised or illegal, providing an opportunity for future work. Third, this study focused on individuals with a diverse sexual orientation and did not include all identities encapsulated by the LGBTQIA + acronym. Future research may consider rural people who identify with a diverse gender identity. Fourth, through the study, it became apparent that the individual's stage of identity development influenced the role they perceived travelling to the City played in their life. Future research may aim to sample participants based on their stage of identity development to explore further the findings uncovered in this work. Fifth, this study only focused on participants' perceptions of their travel and not their actual travel experiences. Future work may consider adopting a go-along approach to understand the actual experiences of participants when they visit domestic cities. Finally, it is acknowledged that this research did not explore how prejudiced rural communities are. Participants in this study recounted experiences that informed their perception of rural communities and their experience of living their sexuality within them. Future work may seek to quantify the level of prejudice perceived to exist in rural communities.

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