



## Sexual behavior in women's tourist experiences: Motivations, behaviors, and meanings

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### H I G H L I G H T S

- ▶ The study focused on sex in tourism as opposed to commercial sex tourism.
- ▶ Grounded theory of women's sexual behaviors, motivations and meanings was conducted.
- ▶ Taxonomy of women's sexual behaviors in various forms of tourism is offered.
- ▶ Sex is an important motivator for engaging in certain tourist experiences.
- ▶ Women's perceptions of time and space are at the core of understanding sexual behaviors.

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### A B S T R A C T

The research literature has traditionally focused on commercial sex tourism between tourists and locals but virtually ignored sexual behavior among tourists themselves. This exploratory study aspires to fill this gap by creating a taxonomy of non-commercial sex for women who engage in various forms of tourism. The analysis of in-depth interviews with Israeli self-defined heterosexual women reveals that different forms of tourism involve various types of sexual behavior as follows: (1) 'Practicing Sex' referring to sex on rest and relaxation vacations; (2) 'Must Have Sex' relating to sex on city break vacations; (3) 'Sexual Adventure' describing casual sex on backpacking trips; (4) 'Controlled Sexual Desire' referring to work related trips and vacations with children. The study findings are discussed in terms of their contribution to the research area of sex in tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

The Four S's – sun, sea, sand, and sex – are the hallmarks of the tourist experience both in academic literature and in the marketing material of tourist destinations (e.g., Crick, 1989; Hobson & Dietrich, 1994). The inclusion of sex in the “big four” demonstrates that sex is an integral and important part of the tourist experience. Since the 1990s, the complex links between sex and tourism became a subject of tourism studies (e.g., Bauer & McKercher, 2003; Carr & Poria, 2010; Clift & Carter, 2000; Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Hall, 2001; Ryan & Martin, 2001; Ryan, Robertson, Page, & Kearsley, 1996; Sánchez Taylor, 2001). Yet, further research attention is required to

shed light on the meanings of the nexus between sex and tourism, as well as to clarify its relevance to the conceptualization of tourism as a social phenomenon.

The literature on sex and tourism reveals three problematic issues. First, the literature has focused almost exclusively on commercial sex tourism and its undesirable nature as described by World Tourism Organization (Ryan, 2002), virtually ignoring consensual sex not involving financial transaction (Josiam, Hobson, Dietrich, & Smeaton, 1998; McKercher & Bauer, 2003). Second, most studies deal with the interactions between tourists and locals underlining the power relationships (e.g., Cabezas, 2004; Cohen, 1982; Sánchez Taylor, 2001, 2006), and studies of sexual behavior among tourists themselves are scarce. One exception is the study of casual sex among students during spring break (e.g., Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Yu, 2002; Litvin, 2010; Mewhinney, Herold, & Maticka-Tyndale, 1995). Additionally, research on sex in general, and in tourism and leisure contexts in particular, tends to focus on gay and lesbian people (e.g., Altman, 2008; López & Van

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Broeck, 2010; Visser, 2010; respectively) rather than on heterosexual people. This paucity of research is surprising, considering that much of the tourism industry is geared toward the idea of a romantic getaway for heterosexual couples (Hatvany, 2011).

Investigating sex between heterosexual tourists, where no commercial transaction is involved, offers a different perspective on the interpersonal sexual dynamic in tourism from the commercial sex tourism embedded in the power differential between tourists and locals. Additionally, none of the studies of sexual relations between tourists (e.g., Eiser & Ford, 1995; Thomas, 2005) focuses on sex in long-term relationships or on the meanings attached to sexual behavior in tourism vis-à-vis everyday life. Moreover, when tourism studies of sexual behavior do not center on the sex industry, they often focus on very specific groups of the population (i.e., students, gay and lesbian people). Also, the underlying assumption being that tourism is a leisure-based activity, ignoring, for example, business travelers.

In the present study, Israeli women's sexual behaviors in tourism were examined in the context of non-commercial, heterosexual encounters, both long-term and casual. The study goes beyond examining behavior and reveals associated motivations, meanings, and outcomes in various types of tourist experiences, and herein, lays its potential contribution to the understanding of tourism as a social phenomenon and its role in today's world (McKercher & Bauer, 2003). Specifically, the investigation of a mundane behavior highly affected by social control may provide insights into the place of tourism in people's lives and a richer understanding of the socially constructed gender roles. Furthermore, this study could be useful in challenging current research approaches that conceptualize tourism as a part of individual's daily life (Larsen, 2008; Urieli, 2010).

## 2. Literature review

This study focuses on the individuals' perceptions of their tourism experiences and their sexual behaviors. To understand the link between tourism and sexual behavior, we begin by clarifying both terms. A conceptual pluralistic framework with technical elements (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003) was adopted to define tourism. Accordingly, in order to capture the tourist experience, scholars should refer to aspects such as "activity" (recreation activity vs. non recreation activity); "space" (the residence area vs. the tourist destination, regardless of the geographical distance between them); and "time" (free time vs. non-free time and leisure time vs. non-leisure time), as well as the interaction between them. Hence, the individual's subjective perception of her/his activity, the time frame s/he acts in, and her/his home environment are underlined. The aforementioned framework reflects this study's focus on the individuals' perceptions of their experiences.

Following Oppermann (1999), the present research applied a broad perspective to the definition of sexual behavior. Oppermann claims that defining sex as penile-vaginal intercourse limits and narrows (in an artificial manner) the research of sex in tourism, ignoring activities like oral sex, anal sex, masturbation as well as activities with sexual overtones (e.g., voyeurism and exhibitionism) which should be referred to as sexual activities (Oppermann, 1999; Ryan & Martin, 2001). In this exploratory study, the term sex includes sexual intercourse (i.e., penetration), but also "fooling around in a sexual way" (Maticka-Tyndale & Herold, 1997, p. 319), petting (sexual touching), and hugging and kissing (Eiser & Ford, 1995). In this study, casual sex was conceptualized drawing upon "hookup," defined by Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) as a sexual encounter with or without sexual intercourse between brief acquaintances or strangers, typically occurring once, and not involving expectations of a further relationship.

### 2.1. Tourism and sexual behavior

The rationale for exploring sex in tourism as opposed to everyday life stems from Freudian and Kinseyian traditions that share the prevailing image of the sexual drive as a basic mandate that is oppressed and controlled by cultural and social mores (Gagnon & Simon, 1973); when constraints are relaxed (as might happen during the tourist experience), a change in sexual behavior may occur. Tourism scholars also claim that the distinctive features of tourism time and space, may affect an individual's sexual behavior. McKercher and Bauer (2003), for example, suggest that when people travel they leave behind part of their social baggage, some of which may affect their sexual behavior. The concept of liminality provides meaningful insights as to why tourism and sex are closely linked (Black, 2000). Turner (1974, p. 53) suggests the term "liminoid" – quasiliminal, as a way to refer to the stage in leisure or tourism that resembles the liminal phase. Tourism can be observed as a liminoid phenomenon in that it is "a temporarily constrained, socially tolerated period of wish fulfillment, a form of fantasy enactment that is normally denied to people" in their everyday environments (Ryan & Kinder, 1996, p. 507). According to Selännemi (2003) the liminoid nature of the tourist experience can be understood as a fourfold transgression, starting with transitions in terms of place and time that in turn enable mental and sensual transitions. In line with this perspective, other scholars claim that tourism constitutes a special social reality that is reflected in people's sexual behavior (Bloor, 1995; Eiser & Ford, 1995; Shields, 1990; Wickens, 1997).

Tourism studies provide several reasons and rationales for the increased sexual permissiveness in terms of the choice of the sexual partners and the accelerated temporal progression of the sexual relations during the tourist experience. Apostolopoulos et al. (2002, p. 733) define different forms of pleasure travel as the "contra-normative settings," conducive to the mixture of sex, alcohol and drugs, as they encourage the suspension, rejection, and contradiction of everyday social norms and inhibitions. Shields (1990, p. 40) associates seaside resorts with "dirty weekend" destinations and liminality, and views seaside resorts as a setting for a temporary loss of social bearings, where the primary aim is obtaining pleasure. Similarly, Pritchard and Morgan (2006, p. 764) present the idea of a "dirty weekend" as reflecting the concept of "out-of-time," "out-of-place," and "out-of-mind" that contributes to the transgression of everyday norms. Mewhinney et al. (1995) cite the sense of anonymity, also emphasizing the feeling of freedom from everyday constraints and responsibilities as contributing to the approval of casual sex on vacation, especially for women. Further, Poria (2006) describes anonymity, which characterizes the tourist environment, as enabling gay and lesbian people to feel free of social pressure and experience sex outside their place of residence. Finally, the general attitude reflected in the following slogan: "What happens in Vegas/Daytona/Tenerife, stays in Vegas/Daytona/Tenerife (Yeoman, 2008, p. 119; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998, p. 262; Thomas, 2005, p. 571; respectively) illustrates the supposed tolerance among tourists toward sexual permissiveness.

Most studies that focus on non-commercial sex in tourism center on the narrow topic of casual sex among college students on spring break. Drawing upon the spring break college vacation, researchers cite feelings of situational disinhibition, sense of anonymity, and liminality to explain sexual promiscuity and increased rates of casual sex (Apostolopoulos et al., 2002; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Oppermann, 2003). Eiser and Ford (1995, p. 323) explored the relationship between the sexual activity of young tourists (16–29 years) visiting a seaside resort in Southwest England and what the authors described as "situational disinhibition" – feeling free and less responsible. The feeling of disinhibition

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