REIMAGINING LGBT NIGHTLIFE: UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER PREFERENCES IN A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Recent trends suggest a decline in LGBT consumers' preference for exclusive LGBT bars and nightclubs, driven by increasing acceptance within mainstream leisure and entertainment venues. This shift has heightened competition among venues aiming to attract LGBT patrons. This study investigates the key factors influencing the success of LGBT bars and nightclubs in the 21st century, with a focus on understanding customer needs and preferences. A web-based survey with open-ended questions was conducted with 341 members of the LGBT nightclub target market in South Africa. The qualitative data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to identify emergent themes. The findings reveal specific attributes that enhance the appeal of LGBT bars and nightclubs. Within the context of a competitive and saturated nighttime economy (NTE), these insights provide strategic guidance for LGBT venues to strengthen their competitive positioning by aligning with customer needs.

Key Words: 21st century; competitive position; grounded theory approach; LGBT bars and nightclubs, LGBT consumers; nighttime economy.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades ago, Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely, and Jenkins (1998) argued that the distinction between Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) communities and heterosexual ('straight') society had become increasingly blurred. They suggested that younger LGBT individuals often share more commonalities with their heterosexual counterparts than with older generations of LGBT people. Sullivan (2005) supports this view, contending that the growing integration and fragmentation of LGBT and 'straight' cultures signal an irreversible shift that may ultimately lead to the dissolution of LGBT culture. Unlike previous generations, post-modern LGBT consumers no longer display a strong preference for exclusive LGBT leisure and entertainment venues, as mainstream establishments are becoming progressively more inclusive (Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020; Nash, 2013).

Villarreal (2017) further observed that post-modern LGBT individuals are more likely to socialize in diverse spaces rather than confining themselves to LGBT-specific environments such as gay bars. Today, social groupings are increasingly structured around shared interests—such as careers, music, lifestyle choices, and recreational activities—rather than sexual identity (Visser, 2003). According to Nash (2013), younger LGBT individuals have grown up in a cultural, political, and social landscape where homosexuality is more widely recognized and accepted within mainstream society. This shift has contributed to the growing presence of LGBT patrons in traditionally 'straight' or mainstream leisure and entertainment venues, including nightclubs, bars, and restaurants (Rink, 2013). Additionally, the temporary transformation of mainstream spaces into LGBT-friendly venues has become a notable trend among this generation (Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020). These events, often referred to as "pop-up parties" (Villarreal, 2017), present a challenge to the sustainability of permanent LGBT leisure and entertainment venues in cities worldwide, including Cape Town (Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020).

To attract a new generation of LGBT consumers, LGBT leisure and entertainment venues are increasingly facing competition from traditional 'straight' and mixed-audience venues, resulting in heightened market rivalry (Voss, 2015). To remain relevant and sustain a steady influx of patrons, leisure and entertainment venues must continuously innovate (Moss, Parfitt, & Skinner, 2008) and undergo regular upgrades (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003). Kubacki, Skinner, Parfitt, and Moss (2007) highlight that many nightclub owners operate their businesses reactively, assuming that success is self-sustaining—an approach that often leads to mismanagement and business failure. Moss et al. (2008) argue that alternative strategies are necessary for nightlife venues to effectively navigate increasingly competitive markets.

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Existing research within the night-time economy (NTE) suggests that gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage requires a deep understanding of consumer preferences (Miyakubo, 2009). However, there has been limited scholarly inquiry into the needs and preferences of LGBT nightclub patrons in South Africa from a social sciences perspective. This study seeks to address this gap by providing the first qualitative exploration of the key factors influencing the success of LGBT bars and nightclubs in South Africa in the 21st century, with a focus on the evolving preferences of post-modern LGBT consumers within a transforming social landscape.

THE NTE: BARS AND NIGHTCLUBS AS LEISURE AND ENTERTAINMENT HUBS

The NTE refers to leisure and entertainment activities that occur in urban areas during the evening and early morning hours (Shaw, 2010). The Cape Town Central City Improvement District (CCID, 2022) defines this period as spanning from 18:00 to 06:00. Zmyslony and Pawlusiński (2020) describe the NTE as encompassing a diverse range of activities, including music clubs, theaters, cabarets, nightclubs, sex clubs, massage parlors, museums, galleries, shopping, festivals, events, restaurants, cafés, sports arenas, leisure spaces and night markets. The term "night-time economy" emerged in the 1990s as part of efforts to deregulate and expand the alcohol and leisure industries during evening hours (Shaw, 2014). This shift aimed to stimulate economic growth by extending business operating hours, fostering corporate entrepreneurship, and aligning nightlife with the hospitality and tourism sectors (Charman & Govender, 2020). Over time, various terms have been used to describe different facets of the NTE, including "night-time entertainment" (Roberts, 2006), "night-time alcohol and leisure industry" (Shaw, 2014), "city nightlife" (Nofre & Eldridge, 2018), "after-dark economic activities" (Zmyslony & Pawlusiński, 2020), and "the 24-hour city" (Charman & Govender, 2020; Roberts & Eldridge, 2012). Together, these terms highlight the breadth of the NTE, which includes a vast network of venues, service providers, and entertainment experiences (Zmyslony & Pawlusiński, 2020). This study, however, specifically focuses on bars and nightclubs as a central component within the broader NTE framework.

The body of research on nightclubs remains relatively limited, with the existing literature often situating nightclubs within a broader context rather than examining them as standalone subjects (Serra-Cantallops & Ramón-Cardona, 2017). Much of the academic discourse on the night-time alcohol and leisure industry tends to focus on its negative implications, including alcohol and drug abuse, accidents, health concerns (Ramón-Cardona, Álvarez-Bassi, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2021), excessive noise levels (Giritlioğlu & Türkmen, 2014), violence, crime, anti-social behavior, prostitution, human trafficking, gentrification, and environmental pollution (Zmyslony & Pawlusiński, 2020). According to Mintel (2002), nightclubs are defined as permanent venues primarily offering dance entertainment and requiring an entry fee. This definition has since evolved to encompass various nightlife establishments, including large youth-oriented town-center super pubs, pub-restaurants, late-night bars with nightclub-like features, and chameleon bars that adapt their atmosphere throughout their operating hours to attract different clientele (Mintel, 2003). Hollands (2002) differentiated nightclubs from traditional pubs and taverns based on the presence of a dance floor and a DJ booth for recorded music. Miyakubo (2009) classified nightlife venues into three distinct categories: mainstream nightlife, residual spaces, and alternative spaces. Mainstream nightlife consists of well-established venues commonly found in large urban centers, representing the dominant urban nightlife culture. Residual spaces include long-standing traditional establishments such as pubs and taverns. Alternative spaces, in contrast, cater to niche cultural preferences and identities, including specific music genres, ethnic communities, or sexual orientations (Miyakubo, 2009), such as LGBT bars and nightclubs. Additionally, nightclubs vary in their musical offerings, spanning genres such as hard rock, pop, hip hop, jazz, R&B, techno, trance, and more (Voss, 2015).

Cape Town is recognized as a 24-hour city (Charman & Govender, 2020), with its vibrant bars and nightclubs playing a central role in its nightlife, setting it apart from other South African cities. The city’s cosmopolitan atmosphere often draws comparisons to some of the world's most renowned urban destinations (CCID, 2022). According to the State of Cape Town Central City Report, the Cape Town central business district (CBD) housed 3,302 businesses in 2023, with 1,305 operating within the leisure and entertainment sector (CCID, 2023). In recent years, several Cape Town bars and nightclubs have gained international recognition, ranking among the top 100 globally (Peyper, 2022). The city's mainstream nightlife is concentrated in high-density leisure and entertainment hubs such as Victoria Road in Camps Bay, Kloof Street in Gardens, Long Street and Bree Street in the CBD, and Lower Main Road in Observatory (Charman & Govender, 2020). At the same time, alternative leisure and entertainment venues catering to the LGBT community are located in suburban areas such as Zonnebloem, De Waterkant, Sea Point, and Green Point (Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020; Hattingh & Spencer, 2017, 2020).

METHODS

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This study adopts an empirical and exploratory approach, employing a qualitative methodology to examine the factors influencing the success of LGBT bars and nightclubs in South Africa in the 21st century. It forms part of a broader investigation into LGBT leisure and entertainment audiences (see Hattingh, 2023).

A self-administered online survey was conducted using SurveyPlanet and comprised three sections. The first section collected sociodemographic data from participants, while the second employed a 5-point Likert scale to assess individuals' motives for visiting LGBT bars and nightclubs. The third section consisted of open-ended questions, inviting participants to identify factors they believe contribute to the success of LGBT bars and nightclubs in the 21st century. The findings presented in this paper focus exclusively on the third section. To enhance reliability and validity, the variables were adapted from prior validated leisure studies, specifically Hattingh (2018, 2022) and Hattingh and Niekerk (2020, 2022). The survey was administered in English.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, non-probability sampling techniques were employed, including convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling involved distributing the survey link via the social media pages (Facebook, X [formerly Twitter], and Instagram) of various South African LGBT bars and nightclubs to reach LGBT nightclub visitors. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to extend the reach of the survey, as participants were encouraged to share the link with other South African LGBT nightclub visitors before submitting their responses. Data collection occurred over a three-month period, from June to August 2022, yielding a total sample of 341 respondents.

The qualitative data from the open-ended responses were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1977) to identify emerging themes. The application of grounded theory within hospitality research is well-documented (Mehmetoglu & Altinay, 2006), supporting its relevance to this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The typical respondent in this study was a single, gay, white male in his twenties or early thirties, holding a tertiary qualification and working either as a self-employed professional or in a management or executive position. Participants primarily visited LGBT leisure and entertainment venues with friends, typically in small groups, and were frequent patrons of LGBT bars and nightclubs in South Africa.

As discussed earlier, LGBT leisure and entertainment venues in a competitive postmodern society face increasing competition from traditional 'straight' and mixed-oriented venues in attracting a new generation of LGBT consumers. Understanding the preferences of both current and potential patrons is therefore crucial for sustaining these spaces (McCarthy & Jinnet, 2001). To effectively shape consumer behavior through strategic marketing, venue operators must first understand the factors influencing customers' choices, which in turn enhances their competitiveness in a crowded nightlife market (Swanson, Davis, and Zhao, 2008). In this study, respondents were asked to identify the key factors they believe contribute to the success of LGBT bars and nightclubs in the 21st century.

Most of the comments and suggestions received could be grouped into five factors: i) unique atmosphere and inclusive entertainment, ii) diverse experience representative of all in the LGBT community; iii) safe and inclusive spaces, iv) competitive prices, and v) efficient service from friendly and well-trained staff.

Factor 1: Unique atmosphere and inclusive entertainment

Respondents felt that in order to attract the post-modern consumer, LGBT bars and nightclubs would have to offer "… different music genre nights like Thursday's could be 80's music and Fridays could be a 90's night," which one respondent referred to as "old school classics" or "Golden oldies." He argued: "… If I walk into a gay bar, I want to feel the rhythm of the music and not like I'm listening to Kfm [a local radio station] on my way to work." Another respondent felt that some LGBT bars and nightclubs focused too much on the techno and deep-house genres, stating: "… a lot of the music is techno and deep-house. I want to hear classics like Beyonce, Taylor Swift, Rihanna and Madonna!" Similarly, another respondent commented: "Play more pop dance music, not always the hectic dance stuff [referring to electronic dance music (EDM)]."

Music seems to play a critical role in shaping the nightclub experience, fostering emotional and social connections among patrons. Buckland (2002) highlights the historical significance of music genres such as house, disco, and EDM in LGBT nightlife, which appear to differ from the above findings, while Kubacki et al. (2007) and Skinner, Moss, and Parfitt (2005) argue that carefully curated music contributes to a venue's distinct cultural identity.

Several respondents suggested "theme nights" to enhance the overall experience, as quoted: "… I would suggest embracing queer culture on a bigger scale, going beyond pure clubbing in order to create experiences and events that are fun but also encourage community and connection. I would suggest doing more to listen to the people who go there. As an example, look at Johannesburg's Babylon. They have a range of events that cater to different interests (pop night, hip hop night, karaoke, drag events etc.)," which relates to the comment made by another: "… they need

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to host different themed nights to cater for different sub-cultures." Baker (2018) and Hattingh and Niekerk (2022) highlight the centrality of drag entertainment in sustaining LGBT nightlife, while Lawrence (2004) found that themed nights enhance venue appeal by creating immersive, engaging experiences.

Successful LGBT bars and nightclubs can distinguish themselves by cultivating a unique atmosphere and offering diverse entertainment options that appeal to various subcultures within the LGBT community. Frohlick and Migliardi (2021) emphasize the importance of culturally relevant programming in attracting and retaining patrons. A significant contributor to this distinctive atmosphere is the venue's entertainment offering—particularly drag performances, themed nights, and carefully curated music of different genres—which together foster a sense of belonging and cultural resonance among attendees.

Factor 2: A diverse experience representative of all in the LGBT community

More than two decades ago, Sender (2002) described how marketers actively constructed the "ideal gay consumer"—a figure characterized by Coon (2012) and Kates (1998) as a young, white, muscular, attractive, and financially stable gay male. At the time, this "discerning gay man" was seen as the most marketable image for advertizers (Sender, 2002). Excluded from this ideal were individuals at the so-called "extremes" of the LGBT spectrum—such as "dykes on bikes," "drag queens," and "butch leather boys"—who were perceived as the "scary homosexuals" and often represented the stereotypical image of the LGBT community (Clarke, 2000; Hughes, 2006).

A large number of respondents in this study felt that some LGBT bars and nightclubs, perhaps unintentionally, failed to create inclusive spaces for people of all races, gender identities, and sexual orientations. Crew Bar, a well-known LGBT bar in Cape Town, was repeatedly cited in the qualitative feedback. One participant noted: "... we need to address the fact that the post-modern LGBT isn't white and isn't gender conforming. We need to remove these exclusive white cis homosexual spaces and invite more people of color. By inviting more people of color, we can start with this post-modern LGBT nightlife. If we take Crew Bar at any given night, there will be more white cis homosexual males than any other race group." Another echoed this concern: "... The concept of Crew Bar is for white patrons. The barmen are all white, the person standing at the door is white, and the music is aimed at the white gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight patrons. The pictures across the club were just of white people and you would hardly see people of color. The whole outlook is white. Crew to me is a very racist club, that's just what I think."

Other comments focused on diversity among staff. Several respondents suggested greater LGBT representation in staffing—particularly in terms of gender and race. One participant suggested: "... have women dancers as well," noting that most LGBT bars feature only male dancers. Another added: "... have more variety of go-go dancers in terms of race." Similarly, a respondent commented: "... I think representation is very important in our community, so I would like to see more LGBT staff members, specifically bartenders, working at the bar," implying that many staff members in LGBT venues are heterosexual and used as a form of attraction for gay male patrons.

Furthermore, several respondents expressed the need for LGBT venues to be more inclusive of identities beyond cisgender gay men. For instance, one participant stated that LGBT bars and nightclubs should be "... more representative of all the LGBT members and not just gay men," suggesting the inclusion of "... more transgender and female queer individuals, as it is very male orientated." These findings are consistent with the demographic profile of the study's respondents, most whom were white gay men.

As societal acceptance of LGBT individuals grows, many LGBT nightlife venues have shifted from being exclusively "gay" to more broadly "queer" spaces, catering to a wider range of identities (Nash, 2015). While this broader inclusivity can expand audience reach, it is essential that these venues maintain a distinct LGBT identity to ensure they remain affirming, culturally specific spaces. Their ability to adapt to evolving social and cultural dynamics is, therefore, a key factor in their continued success in the 21st century.

Factor 3: Safe and inclusive spaces

Research by Mattson (2023) highlights the historical significance of LGBT bars as sites of community-building and resistance, while Brown (2017) emphasizes that these venues thrive when they foster a sense of belonging among patrons who share similar lived experiences and cultural references. LGBT leisure and entertainment venues have traditionally served as safe havens, enabling individuals to express themselves freely without fear of discrimination or harassment (Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020). A key determinant of success for these venues is the presence of a like-minded community that nurtures belonging, shared cultural expression, and mutual support. Several studies point to

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the importance of "the right people" in the decision to visit a bar or nightclub (Kubacki et al., 2007; Skinner et al., 2008).

A number of respondents in this study identified safety as a critical factor for a successful LGBT bar or nightclub. One participant stated that a successful venue is "where the security will make sure by all means you are safe and do not get in harm's way." Another respondent emphasized the importance of a safe space for diversity and inclusivity: "create an environment where people feel completely safe and secure to be themselves and express their identity in whatever way they feel." It appears that, for an LGBT bar or nightclub to be truly successful, safety must extend beyond the physical boundaries of the venue itself. One participant commented, "… once you leave the front door it's like the wild west," while another recalled being "… mugged several times outside the bar."

Many scholars argue that, beyond physical space, the social fabric of LGBT venues plays a crucial role in their sustainability (Hilderbrand, 2023). Unlike mainstream nightlife, LGBT venues often function as sites of collective identity formation and affirmation. Moreover, research by Casey (2020) found that LGBT nightlife venues that actively implement anti-harassment policies are more successful in retaining patrons. Ensuring safety through strict security measures, zero-tolerance policies, and comprehensive staff training is therefore essential for maintaining a welcoming and inclusive environment.

Factor 4: Competitive prices

There is evidence in the literature indicating that LGBT bars and nightclubs have historically charged higher prices compared to mainstream venues, often due to external pressures such as gentrification. As neighborhoods gentrify, rents and operational expenses for venues rise, resulting in higher prices for consumers. This escalation can make these spaces less accessible, particularly to marginalized members of the community, effectively pricing them out and altering the social fabric of these venues (Mérida, 2024). Hattingh and Bruwer (2020) discuss how the De Waterkant gay village in Cape Town has experienced gentrification, contributing to such price increases.

Respondents in this study emphasized that in order to attract and retain the post-modern LGBT consumer and compete effectively with mainstream bars and nightclubs, attention must be paid to the pricing structure at LGBT venues. This factor was one of the most frequently raised in the feedback. A number of respondents expressed concern over both beverage prices and entrance fees. One respondent noted, "… beverages are ridiculously expensive and so is the entrance, so those tariffs need to be lowered." Another suggested that bars and nightclubs should "… go into a partnership with other clubs and bars in the area where one can buy a pass that gives one access to all participating clubs/bars on the night, because a lot of people do club hopping, and this will bring more feet to the establishments." One respondent mentioned that, "… prices often seem inconsistent and fluctuated throughout the night," while another echoed this sentiment, stating: "… a set price list with a working till system is needed so customers don't pay whatever the bartender wants." A final comment regarding pricing noted that charging "… a cover charge when the club is empty does not sit well," and that "… student discounts would help a lot with entrance and drinks" to attract the post-modern LGBT consumer.

Price is a key determinant of theoretical demand (Mankiw, 2018). In the food and beverage literature, studies have shown that a reasonable perceived price can enhance customer satisfaction across multiple dimensions, including food quality, service quality, and the overall physical environment. These factors, in turn, significantly and indirectly influence customers' purchase intentions (Ryu & Han, 2009). As such, implementing a competitive pricing strategy emerges as a critical factor that can influence the success or failure of LGBT bars and nightclubs.

Factor 5: Efficient service from friendly and well-trained staff

Recent literature highlights the importance of efficient service in LGBT nightclubs, emphasizing that LGBT-friendly practices enhance customer perceptions and increase patrons' likelihood of returning. Several respondents made reference to the importance of well-trained and representative staff. While specific studies focusing exclusively on bartenders in LGBT nightclubs are limited, broader hospitality literature underscores the crucial role of frontline staff in shaping customer experiences (Duque et al., 2020).

One respondent shared a recent experience at an LGBT bar, stating: "Some barmen are very off-putting. There appears to be a lack of interest in serving people (unless they are women), inconsistent drinks (the ratio of vodka to Red Bull vastly differs), and prices charged are often inconsistent." Another respondent suggested that LGBT bars need "hot barmen from all races that flirt even if they are not gay." Bartenders, often serving as the primary point of contact, play a critical role in establishing an inclusive and welcoming environment. Their ability to engage positively with patrons can significantly influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Mitchum, 2017).

Additionally, one respondent stated: "Stop using the straight bartenders to woo the gay men. It's degrading to the bartenders because they are straight, and all the ladies then come to try to get with the bartenders." This highlights the perception that, for an LGBT bar to be successful, it should employ gay or, at the very least, gay-friendly staff. Taylor (2024) explores the role of LGBT hospitality workers in cultivating inclusive and welcoming environments, noting

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that these employees often draw on their own lived experiences to foster a positive atmosphere—an essential element for customer satisfaction and loyalty. Gay or gay-friendly bartenders are therefore integral to maintaining safe, inclusive, and enjoyable LGBT nightlife spaces. Where heterosexual staff are employed, comprehensive LGBT awareness training is critical to ensure that these venues remain inclusive and affirming, particularly as patron demographics and expectations continue to evolve.

CONCLUSION

LGBT bars and nightclubs have long served as crucial social and cultural hubs for LGBT communities, offering safe spaces for self-expression, socialization, and activism (Mattson, 2023). However, in the 21st century, these venues face increasing challenges, including the growing acceptance of LGBT identities in mainstream nightlife, shifting consumer preferences, and external pressures such as gentrification (Nash, 2015). The decline of dedicated LGBT venues in many cities has raised concerns about the loss of LGBT-specific spaces, prompting an examination of the factors that contribute to their sustained success.

Despite the significance of LGBT nightlife, limited academic literature explores the specific success factors for LGBT bars and nightclubs in South Africa. From a social sciences perspective, this study's exploration of the key factors influencing the success of LGBT bars and nightclubs in South Africa contributes to the broader hospitality and leisure literature. Although there is a growing body of services marketing research on the NTE, including marketing to LGBT patrons, there remains a significant gap in scholarship regarding the needs and preferences of LGBT nightclub patrons in South Africa. This paper helps to address this gap by identifying the core drivers of LGBT venue success in a South African context. Understanding these elements can provide valuable insights for venue operators seeking to enhance their competitive positioning and maintain relevance in an increasingly fragmented LGBT nightlife landscape.

In practical terms, the success of LGBT nightlife venues in the 21st century depends on their ability to balance tradition with innovation. These venues must adapt to the evolving social dynamics while preserving their role as inclusive and affirming spaces. By maintaining safety and inclusivity, offering a unique atmosphere and diverse entertainment, ensuring fair pricing, fostering representation across the LGBT spectrum, and providing efficient, friendly service, these establishments can remain viable and competitive in a changing nightlife landscape.

Understanding these success factors is essential for ensuring that LGBT nightlife continues to serve as a vital site of LGBT cultural expression and identity formation, while also distinguishing itself from mainstream alternatives. Although the findings presented in this study are not universally representative of all LGBT patrons, the empirical evidence points to a shifting South African landscape—one that requires a reimagined LGBT nightlife offering capable of attracting the post-modern LGBT consumer and securing the future of these important cultural spaces.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

A key limitation of this study lies in its reliance on a convenience sample, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to broader LGBT bars and nightclubs. While the research provides meaningful insight into the evolving bar and nightclub preferences of the post-modern LGBT patron, it does not fully capture the nuanced experiences and identities within this diverse community. Therefore, future research is encouraged to delve deeper into these complexities, particularly by employing more representative sampling techniques. Additionally, comparative studies across different socio-economic and cultural contexts within the Global South would offer valuable perspectives. Exploring LGBT nightlife through multidisciplinary lenses—such as management, economics, and marketing—could further enrich understanding and support the development of sustainable, inclusive, and competitive nightlife offerings in other emerging LGBT urban scenes.

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