Cape Town’s gay village: from “gaytrified” tourism Mecca to “heterosexualised” urban space

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to ascertain the factors that led to Cape Town’s gay village to transform from a “gaytrified” tourism mecca to a “heterosexualised” urban space, from a gay leisure space owner perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirical observations of the six remaining gay leisure space owners in De Waterkant (population) are taken into account by using semi-structured interviews. All narratives are analysed in Altas.ti – qualitative data analysis software – to identify applicable factors, which participants believe are contributing to the “de-gaying” of Cape Town’s gay village.

Findings – From the conducted analyses, it becomes apparent that Western theorisation of the “de-gaying” of gay villages is not universally applicable as certain factors contributing to De Waterkant’s demise appear to be location-specific, suggesting that Western theory is insufficient to explain gay spatial realities in non-Western contexts such as South Africa. The identified factors responsible for the “de-gaying” of De Waterkant adversely affect Cape Town’s status as a gay capital and its ability to market this gay neighbourhood to attract the gay tourism market. This may result in lost socio-economic opportunities considering the financial contribution of gay travellers to the local tourist economy.

Originality/value – This study is the first of its kind to use first-hand narratives of the six remaining gay business owners in De Waterkant and marks the first attempt to investigate the factors, from a non-Western perspective, which led to the “de-gaying” of Africa’s only gay village. Taking into account the socio-economic value added by gay tourism, the findings provide the first non-Western perspective on the demise of Africa’s and South Africa’s only gay neighbourhood from a gay leisure space owner perspective, including the possible repercussions on Cape Town’s local tourist economy. Some tactical considerations and recommendations are suggested to ensure the continuation of gay tourism in the city.

Keywords South Africa, Cape Town, De Waterkant, De-gaying, Gay neighbourhood, Gay traveller, Gay leisure space

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

When the Apartheid regime came to an end – an era where racial segregation and homosexual exclusion were regarded as ordinary – the new liberal and historic 1996 South African Constitution was signed into law (Kgosimore, 2000)[1]. This eliminated social risks to establish gay leisure spaces, resulting in both the emergence and flourishing of the gay tourism industry (Visser, 2002). Over the span of a few years, some South African cities have taken advantage of gay tourism; a term used to describe the tourism activity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) travellers (Visser, 2003a); one of which is Cape Town.

Cape Town is regarded as Africa’s gay capital and is home to De Waterkant (Davids and Matebeni, 2017), a gay neighbourhood or a gaybourhood as these neighbourhoods are colloquially called (Orne, 2020). This neighbourhood went through processes of
gentrification[2] and became a unique drawcard for gay travellers to assist with the establishment of Cape Town as a leading international “gay-friendly” tourism destination at the turn of the 21st century (Rink, 2013). In the marketing brochure of Cape Town Tourism, the for-profit agency that markets the city, De Waterkant is promoted as one of the top visitor attractions as it is “[…] affectionately known as the ‘pink district’ with its abundance of LGBT-friendly bars and restaurants […] internationally renowned for its open-minded attitude” (Cape Town Tourism, 2019).

Notwithstanding the above, research shows that a global trend of “heterosexualisation” or “de-gaying” has affected gay neighbourhoods, specifically across the Western world. According to Hattingh and Spencer (2017), one of the most salient factors attracting gay travellers to Cape Town is to experience the local gay culture, especially in De Waterkant. The “de-gaying” of one of Cape Town’s top “gay attractions” is of concern, particularly when considering gay tourism’s socio-economic contributions to the Cape Town economy. For instance, in the early-2010s it was estimated that 15% of Cape Town’s 1.5 m annual visitors were gay (The Australian, 2012) and contributed approximately R1.8bn (US$125m) to the Cape Town economy (Grove, 2014).

The dwindling number of gay leisure spaces in De Waterkant, albeit a salient attraction for gay travellers, may, thus, be detrimental to Cape Town’s reputation as a gay capital and its ability to attract the gay tourism market. Empirical research on the continuous changing dynamics of De Waterkant, mainly the factors leading to the decline and “de-gaying” of gay leisure spaces in a non-Western context, has not been widely documented. Although a number of existing research studies placing the emphasis on the “de-gaying” of gay villages in urban cities elsewhere (Doan and Higgins, 2011; Ghaziani, 2010; Lewis, 2013; Nash, 2013), especially in Western cities such as New York, Seattle, San Francisco, Paris, Berlin and Munich (O’Sullivan, 2016), few scholars make the gay leisure spaces their point of enquiry to understand the factors contributing to the demise of these villages. Furthermore, the reasons for the “de-gaying” of gay villages, as currently communicated in Western discourse, cannot equally apply to non-Western contexts such as South Africa. The Western theory is not only insufficient to explain gay spatial realities in the non-Western context, but it totally ignores the majority of the gay population located in very different and diverse settings elsewhere (Visser, 2013). Therefore, this study is the first of its kind to use first-hand narratives of the six remaining gay business owners in De Waterkant to investigate the factors that lead to the “de-gaying” of Africa’s only gay village.

Literature review

The tourism industry has grown at such an accelerated pace that it is now one of the most prosperous industries in the world; contributing 10.4% (US$8.8tn) to the global gross domestic product (GDP) and allowing for the creation of 319 m jobs, worldwide, in 2018 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). With the foregoing in mind, it is unsurprising that tourism destination competitors are increasingly aiming for a larger share of tourists (Zhou, 2005) by trying to understand the needs tourists are trying to fulfil through travelling, including why they choose a specific destination for travel (Oh et al., 1995). Furthermore, as travel and tourism marketing has adapted to the fourth industrial revolution, destinations have increasingly found themselves competing in a global marketplace (Rodríguez-Díaz and Pulido-Fernández, 2020). In responding to competitors, and to differentiate the destination, destination marketers seek to make their destinations attractive to new and/or emerging consumer markets or segments of a market that are “[…] perceived to travel more frequently and exhibit higher levels of spending than others” (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2017).

One such market is believed to be the gay traveller (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2017), born in the late 19th century when gay individuals sought “gay-friendly” destinations in mostly Mediterranean countries (De Waal, 2002). During this time, Greece and Italy were some of the most popular destinations for the gay male traveller as these societies
were much more accepting of homosexuality (Aldrich, 1993). In these liberal societies, gay individuals could, to some degree, escape intolerance (Hughes, 2006; Pritchard et al., 1998) because they were greatly unaccepted in their own societies, as they are often, to this day, tied to “disasters, misfortunes and general problems” (Verdugo, 2010). Gay men and women have long travelled the world but did so by remaining nearly invisible and by concealing their sexual orientation and relationships (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2012).

Up until two decades ago, gay travel remained separate from mainstream travel, as many tourism role-players were too sceptical to target these travellers; fearing boycotts from their mainstream markets (Southall and Fallon, 2011). The 1990s are often referred to as “[…] the golden age for gay tourism” after the Wall Street Journal announced that gays represented a “dream market” (Rigdon, 1991, as cited in Gudelunas, 2011). Since then, amidst potential boycotts, companies increasingly shown interest in targeting the gay traveller as “[…] the profits to be reaped from treating gays and lesbians as a trend-setting consumer group finally [outweighed] the financial risks of inflaming right-wing hate” (Gluckman and Reed, 1997). Consequently, tourism suppliers including that of tour operators, travel agents, accommodation establishments and airlines showed interest in targeting the gay traveller and have considered gay men especially (more so than lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people) to be a worthy market (Hughes, 2006), largely based on the myth that gay men represent an affluent market (Coon, 2012).

Since the publication of the Wall Street Journal article, an interest has developed in researching the relationship between tourism and especially gay men in both academic- and market research. Although most academic literature, by its own acknowledgement, lacks in various aspects, some studies have attempted to uncover the dynamics of gay tourism. A variety of dynamics have been explored and include, inter alia, issues of the economic importance (Hattingh et al., 2011; Hattingh and Spencer, 2017), gay traveller destination choices (Hughes, 2006; Hughes and Deutsch, 2010), gay destination marketing (Coon, 2012), gay men’s sexual behaviour while on holiday (Clift et al., 2002; Monterrubio et al., 2007), holiday motivations of gay men and to a much lesser extent gay women (Clift and Forrest, 1999; Hattingh and Spencer, 2017, 2020; Köllen and Lazar, 2012; Monterrubio and Barrios, 2016; Pritchard et al., 2000) and market segments of gay tourism (Hattingh and Spencer, 2020; Hughes, 2006; Pritchard et al., 1998).

Owing to the expansion of global gay rights and recognition, the visibility of gay tourism has significantly increased (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2017). This, together with the view on gays as a “dream market”, is shared by several researchers (Hughes, 2006; Oakenfull, 2013; Puar, 2002) and leads to an increasing number of destinations competing for the gay traveller (Guaracino, 2007). One such destination is Cape Town; a place where the significance of post-Apartheid gay tourism is outlined by various researchers including Beebe (2012), Hattingh et al. (2011), Hattingh (2017), Rink (2008, 2013, 2016) and Visser (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2014).

Post-Apartheid gay tourism: the case of Cape Town

The City of Cape Town was one of the main recipients of the “post-Apartheid tourist boom” (Rogerson and Visser, 2005), resulting in dramatic tourism growth in the mid-1990s after South Africa re-entered the global tourism industry (Pirie, 2007), but international arrivals started to decline towards the turn of the 21st century (Visser, 2002). As the local tourism industry matured, Cape Town Tourism responded in an attempt to stimulate visitor growth by diversifying the tourism products on offer (Rogerson and Visser, 2005) and refined their market segments through identifying various niche elements, which included gay tourism (City of Cape Town, 2002).

The gay niche marketing strategy proved to be particularly successful with the hosting of the popular gay event, the Mother City Queer Project (MCQP), which attracted thousands of
gay travellers during 2000 and injected approximately R50m (US$3.5m) into the local economy (Visser, 2002). This influx to the economy was equivalent to almost half that of Cape Town’s most iconic event, the Cape Town Cycle Tour, that generated R106m (US$7.5m) during the same year. According to Smetherham (2003), it was projected that the MCQP could eventually have a similar economic impact as Sydney’s R651m (US$45m) Mardi Gras, a highly successful gay festival in Australia. From these projections, no other city in South Africa (or in Africa) targeted gay travellers as aggressively as Cape Town did (The Australian, 2012).

Cape Town offers numerous cultural, historical and natural attractions in and around South Africa’s oldest city, with its fascinating history dating back to the 17th century (Biggs, 2000). Natural attractions include, for example, the wide variety of pristine blue-flag beaches, Cape Point and Table Mountain, which in 2012 became one of the new seven global wonders of nature (Times Live, 2012). Historical and cultural attractions include, for example, Robben Island, the Castle of Good Hope, the Bo-Kaap, the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, the winelands and a wide variety of museums (Shackley, 2001). Access to other attractions in the country such as the Kruger National Park and regional attractions such as the Victoria Falls, is fairly easy (City of Cape Town, 2002), which could serve as viable add-ons to travel itineraries. Cape Town is also a creative city and won the World Design Capital award in 2014 (Cape Town Tourism, 2015), which could lead to an increase in the “creative class” traveller, a significant number of these being gay travellers (Florida, 2002). Cape Town offers some specific facilities and services for these gay travellers located in its De Waterkant neighbourhood (Visser, 2003a).

The “gaytrification” of Cape Town’s De Waterkant neighbourhood

De Waterkant is a mixed-use commercial- and residential area of 0.4 km² located between the residential suburb of Green Point and Cape Town’s central business district (CBD) (Rink, 2016). The specific area, with its concentration of gay leisure spaces, is often referred to by locals as the “pink strip” and described as “where the hedonists, the diverse, the multi-cultural and the multi-sexual come out to play” (Cape Town Magazine, 2017).

De Waterkant was once a racially mixed neighbourhood before being declared a white group area, as enforced by the Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950 (Rink, 2016). Subsequently, this led to the racially mixed community being removed from De Waterkant between 1969 and 1973 to make way for whites (Visser, 2003b). Owing to the forced removals, De Waterkant’s property values drastically decreased and attracted many young white liberal professionals (Rink, 2016). Since the 1970s, De Waterkant was a “bohemian” neighbourhood with many residents involved in the Arts (Visser, 2003b). The bohemian character of De Waterkant continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and ultimately led to a “growing gay population of residents, businesses and visitors – the concentration of which altered the network of actors and eventually contributed to symbolically framing De Waterkant as a gay quarter” (Rink, 2016).

Russell Shapiro, casually referred to as the “mayor of the gay village”, was one of the earliest pioneers and champions of the gay neighbourhood and the gay tourism market of Cape Town (Rink, 2016; Visser, 2003b). The first gay business in De Waterkant opened 1994; “Russell Shapiro’s Café Manhattan”, followed by “Bronx”, a gay bar, approximately six weeks later (Shapiro, 2017). A network of gay leisure spaces opened in succession as the property was inexpensive and the district bordered Green Point and Sea Point, which was close to an affluent target market – white gay men (Visser, 2003a).

In 1995, “Detour” and “Angels” (two mainstream nightclubs at the time) introduced gay party evenings, which resulted in a growing gay following (Visser, 2003b). By 1998 “Brunswick Tavern”, a gay bar located in the CBD, moved to De Waterkant and was renamed “55”. Owing to increasing demand for gay leisure spaces, a variety of other gay
businesses opened at approximately the same time. These comprised a dedicated leather bar (“Bar Code”), a pool bar (“Rosies”) and a sauna complex (“Hot House”) (Visser, 2003b). Numerous restaurants (e.g. “Village Café”, “Bar Soho” and “Dutch”) and a guest quarter with nearly three street blocks of short-term tourist accommodation developed close to the other facilities, mostly catering to the gay market (Rink, 2016). Most of these tourist accommodations are made up of former residences that were re-modelled into guesthouses, villas or self-catering apartments (Figure 1).

During the early-1990s, De Waterkant started to transform from a “bohemian urban place” into a “coincidental” and “self-styled” gay neighbourhood (Rink, 2013). This transition was not deliberately planned by the local gay community nor was it a move by the city to “capitalise on the potential commercial profitability of gay identity” (Lewis, 2013). Specifically, from 1994 onward, the clustering of gay leisure spaces, in De Waterkant, stimulated and expanded an urban renewal process as the area had previously been rundown and derelict (Rink, 2016). Many researchers (Kotze and Van Der Merwe, 2000; Visser, 2003a, 2003b, 2013, 2014), however, suggest that a process of gentrification occurred in De Waterkant in this timeframe.

Gentrification is “the process of converting working-class areas into middle-class neighbourhoods through the rehabilitation of the neighbourhood’s housing stock” (Smith, 1979). Markusen (1981) attributes gentrification to the fact that “households of gay people, singles and professional couples with CBD jobs increasingly find central locations attractive”. According to Kotze and Van der Merwe (2000), during gentrification, people of the middle-class with higher income invade working-class neighbourhoods in the inner-city. To test this view, Devocht (2004) examined the link between the gay community and the gentrification of inner-city neighbourhoods in San Francisco. His findings indicate that gay residential communities renovate houses and rundown urban spaces, and referred to the process of urban renovation, by gay people, as “gaytrification”, a variant of gentrification. Similarly, Udell (2011) investigated how Wilton Manors became the “third most concentrated city of gay people” in Florida in the US. Udell (2011) argues that a process of “gaytrification” resulted in Wilton Manors becoming a “city-sized gay and lesbian enclave”, and specifically uncovered its transformation from a “white, heterosexual family bedroom community” to its current status as a “gay mecca”.

**Figure 1** An example of re-modelled tourist accommodation in De Waterkant

Source: Authors’ own source
Gentrification by gay people seems to be an international trend as previous studies (Doan and Higgins, 2011; Ghaziani, 2010; Lewis, 2013; Nash, 2013; O’Sullivan, 2016) show that many once rundown urban spaces such as Chelsea in New York, West Hollywood in Los Angeles, the Castro in San Francisco, Boys Town in Chicago, the South End in Boston and Midtown in Atlanta were originally gentrified by gay individuals fleeing discrimination experienced in other areas. Once gentrified, these areas become increasingly attractive to heterosexual individuals in search of an urban lifestyle (Doan and Higgins, 2011). This correlates with the findings of Lees (2000) that “some recent gentrification is fuelled by the consumption patterns of “financiers”, that is, “super-gentrifiers” whose access to capital allows them to invest in previously gentrified areas and reinvent them according to their needs” (Doan and Higgins, 2011).

As early as 2007 concerns were raised that De Waterkant was being “invaded” by heterosexuals and that professional business developments were replacing the unique “gay charm” of the neighbourhood; signalling the second wave of gentrification (Bamford, 2007). This “super-gentrification” by wealthy investors uses urban designers and professional architects rather than “the traditional sweat equity of earlier, do-it-themselves pioneers” (Doan and Higgins, 2011) as seen in De Waterkant during the 1990s and early 2000s. As a result of resurgent gentrification, a variety of trendy developments started to appear in De Waterkant (Figure 2). Bensimon (2011) warns that the creation of trendy city areas also involves negative consequences for the inhabitants. Indeed, some researchers argue that the “gaytrification” of De Waterkant has been so successful that the middle- and lower-income gay person cannot afford to live in the area as property prices have increased well beyond the reach of many in the gay community (Visser, 2003b).

There has been an increasing interest in the transformation of urban gay villages, partially due to the changing dynamics of sexual and gender identities often referred to as the “de-gaying”; the decline of gay enclaves (Casey, 2004; Collins, 2004; Ghaziani, 2011; Gorman-Murray, 2006; Lewis, 2013; Nash, 2013; Ruting, 2008). The phenomenon of “de-gaying” also relates to post-modern homosexuality whereby individuals define themselves “by more than sexuality, to disentangle gayness from militancy and struggle and to enjoy sexually mixed company” (Warner, 1999). In a Western context and arguably a South African context too, the post-modern homosexual has grown up in a country that outlaws anti-gay
discrimination and constitutionally protects gay rights, allows same-sex marriage or civil unions, recognises gay families and accepts gay people in military services (Nash, 2013).

The transition to a “post-gay” era generates a particular attitude and corresponding behaviour whereby gays deselect traditional gay neighbourhoods and straights select such neighbourhoods as a place of residence and/or leisure (Ghaziani, 2010). According to Visser (2014), this phenomenon is the “processes of homo-normalisation in which middle-class gay men are increasingly absorbed into mainstream heterosexual lifeworlds that are located beyond consolidated gay neighbourhoods”. Some researchers argue that “queerness” has become normalised in the sense that the gay community have achieved greater acceptance in the ambient heterosexual world with a new generation of gays seeing no need to codify exclusionary gay spaces, resulting in heterosexual spaces increasingly attracting a mixed (gay and straight) following in the city’s cafés, bars, restaurants and popular nightclubs (Nash, 2013; Rink, 2013; Visser, 2014).

The global view that gay neighbourhoods are being “de-gayed” or “heterosexualised” and that gay people are increasingly welcomed in other areas and neighbourhoods has resonance in Cape Town where paranoia about the demise of gay neighbourhoods has received little attention in academic research, mainstream media and gay press (Bamford, 2007; Frost, 2007; Rink, 2008; Thomas-Burke, 2007; Visser, 2013). In the most recent coverage of “de-gaying” in De Waterkant, Visser (2014) found that “the ratio of heterosexual to homosexual in the larger De Waterkant has changed to be majority heterosexual” and the “once mainly gay tourists that resided in the tourism accommodation of De Waterkant have been replaced by heterosexuals from a range of European countries, along with domestic vacationers and local professionals”.

A little more than a decade ago Elder (2005) described De Waterkant as Africa’s and South Africa’s only gay neighbourhood, home to over 100 gay-dedicated urban spaces. With the second wave of gentrification that started in 2007, as led by the development community (as opposed to the gay community), the demand for property in De Waterkant grew, resulting in some of the smaller gay leisure spaces being “manoeuvred” out (Bamford, 2007). At present, almost all of the 100 gay-dedicated urban spaces have now disappeared, with Café Manhattan (Figure 3), an anchor institution, being one of the remaining six (Manhattan, 2019).

Only facades of the original gay leisure spaces remain (Figure 4) as these were incorporated into the design of the modern, upscale shopping complex, the Cape Quarter Retail Centre (Rink, 2016). This complex takes on a “trail of look-but-do not-touch furniture shops and overpriced coffee” (O’Sullivan, 2016), and is populated by mainly straight couples and their children; all very different from the once almost exclusively gay neighbourhood (Visser, 2014).

The Cape Quarter Retail Centre signalled the start of the second wave of gentrification; replacing many of the original gay leisure spaces. Some of the original gay leisure spaces were able to relocate to another area of De Waterkant (Rink, 2008). The continuous mixed-use developments at the lower end of De Waterkant have a strong “live, work and play” ethos, which is commonly referred to as a “neighbourhood-sized hotel” (SA Property News, 2015; Visser, 2014). An example of one of these mixed-use developments is depicted in Figure 5 and is designed to attract “financiers” (Lees, 2000) with access to substantial funds as six of the 19 units at another mixed-use development in Napier Street were sold within 48 h of the launch in February 2017 (SA Property News, 2017).

Cape Town’s gaybourhood, thus, appears to have followed the four-stage model of gay neighbourhood evolution as suggested by Collins (2004). The first stage begins in rundown urban spaces that have a gay leisure space, similar to the rundown and derelict area of De Waterkant during the 1990s when Café Manhattan opened in 1994. The gay leisure space acts as a drawcard for other gay leisure services, which, in turn, brings more gay customers
into the neighbourhood. As for De Waterkant, Café Manhattan served as the drawcard as a network of gay leisure spaces opened in succession. The second stage starts when these services expand in scope and size as the in-migration of gay residents continues. The third stage is initiated once the neighbourhood becomes a gay tourism destination. According to Waitt and Markwell (2006), gay neighbourhoods serve as culturally significant destinations for gay travellers and have become strategic marketing tools to attract tourists to “gay-friendly” cities. The work of Hattingh (2017) notes how the De Waterkant neighbourhood played a significant role in positioning Cape Town as Africa’s gay capital and a leading “gay-friendly” tourism destination at the turn of the 21st century when Cape Town Tourism
implemented their gay niche marketing strategy. Finally, during the last stage, the gaybourhood is “heterosexualised” or “de-gayed” as the area becomes appealing to heterosexual individuals in search of an urban lifestyle (Doan and Higgins, 2011). This results in the emigration of gays to other urban areas outside the borders of the gaybourhood. This was the reality for De Waterkant when the second wave of gentrification commenced in 2007.

Research design and methodology

This study incorporated an exploratory research design with the main intent to gain a better understanding surrounding a particular phenomenon, which has not been widely researched (Collis and Hussey, 2009). The main intent of this study was to ascertain the factors that led to Cape Town’s gay village to transform from a “gaytrified” tourism mecca to a “heterosexualised” urban space, from a gay leisure space owner perspective. This study was also empirical in nature and entailed the conducting of six semi-structured interviews, each of which were between 48 and 94 min in length. The conducted interviews were semi-structured to allow participants and the researchers the opportunity to expand on questions asked and/or answers received. According to Welman et al. (2005) using semi-structured interviews is advantageous, as it allows a researcher to probe to eliminate vague responses, while also permitting a researcher to ask a participant to elaborate on answers given should the interviewer find it necessary. Participants were asked about their respective businesses (e.g. when it opened and its history, their opinions regarding the “de-gaying” of gay leisure spaces in De Waterkant, and future perspectives of their business, e.g. whether they had any concerns about the sustainability of the business given the “demise” of De Waterkant and if they had any future plans for the business to maintain interest among gay/lesbian consumers and tourists). Each semi-structured interview was recorded and transcribed accordingly.

Due to the exploratory nature of the research, a non-probability sampling technique (judgemental sampling) was used to select business owners of the remaining six gay leisure spaces that target gay individuals in De Waterkant, all with the intent to obtain rich data. Judgemental sampling involves the researcher using his/her judgment when selecting
cases to be included in the sample (Malhotra and Birks, 2007); purposively selecting respondents as samples, according to particular delineation criteria, to answer specific research questions (Marshall, 1996). As an additional verification, respondents were asked whether they were aware of similar respondents in De Waterkant (related to snowball sampling).

The recordings made of the six semi-structured interviews were transcribed into text, manually coded and analysed for narrative themes. Outcomes were reviewed and matched against transcripts supported by Atlas.ti and were used to form the themes. Throughout this study, relevant ethical considerations were taken into account by starting each interview with an introductory statement that identified the relevant researcher and the university; stated the purpose of the research; provided advice on how to make a complaint to the university if needed; indicated that participation was voluntary; noted that no incentives were offered for taking part in the research – to avoid respondent bias; ensured anonymity and confirmed that responses would remain confidential and that their information provided would not passed on to a third party.

Findings and discussion

Participants were first asked to describe their gay leisure space and indicate how long it has been in operation. A summary of the results is shown in Table 1.

Following this, participants were asked to provide their opinions on the “de-gaying” of gay leisure spaces in De Waterkant. Eight major factors emerged, which business owners believed contributed to transforming Cape Town’s gay village from a “gaytrified” tourism mecca to a “heterosexualised” urban space, namely, technology and dating applications, resurgent gentrification, change in the gay lifestyle and “age factor”, progressive attitudes and mixed leisure spaces, resistance from the De Waterkant Civic Association (DWCA) and new local residents, home entertaining and “chemsex” culture, temporary “gaying” of straight spaces and a lack of cohesion among gay businesses. Throughout, findings and discussions are covered per theme and, where applicable, verbatim quotations from transcribed recordings are used as validation.

**Factor 1: technology and dating applications**

The following narratives were received from participants:

**Participant B**: “Over the past 10 years we saw an increase in the use of dating apps such as Grindr and Scruff where people meet each other online, which eliminates the need to go to places such as Barcode or Hothouse [gay leisure spaces in De Waterkant offering sexual services]. Many people used to go out just to meet other people with the intention of having sex. This is much easier now with new technology”.

**Participant F**: “People do not really see bars or clubs as meeting places anymore to the extent they did 10 years ago. In my time, we had no choice. We had to go to a bar or a club to meet likeminded people”.

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<th>Gay leisure space</th>
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Table 1 Description of targeted gay leisure spaces
These narratives illustrate the significance that a gay neighbourhood or gay dedicated leisure space played in the lives of the gay community of De Waterkant; for socialising, and indeed, for finding potential partners. Despite this, the following narrative was provided:

*Participant C.* “I believe that dating apps have some effect but I’m not sure as I have seen guys inside clubs on apps”.

As supported by Villarreal (2017), many gay men enjoy “cruising” in person and using apps inside gay bars, which increases one’s chances of meeting someone. Villarreal (2017) is of the opinion that it is unreasonable to blame dating apps as the single-handed “Grim Reaper” and argues that “lots of queer people continue to go to gay bars to “cruise” and many others go for reasons other than sex – to see friends, to dance, to drink, to enjoy a drag show, to enjoy go-go boys, plus many other delights that apps and the digital world just cannot offer”.

Furthermore, the influence of gay dating applications and technology on gay villages seems to support various researchers who argued that dedicated virtual spaces such as chatrooms, websites, social media including gay dating apps, provide a cyberspace “in which identity can be built, re-affirmed and developed”, which eliminates the need for physical gay spaces (Rink, 2008; Ruting, 2008; Visser, 2003b). However, it appears that virtual spaces are only partly contributing to the decline of gay spaces as many gay individuals continue to consume gay spaces for socialisation and not necessarily for seeking sexual encounters.

**Factor 2: resurgent gentrification**

Scant evidence exists on how resurgent gentrification affected the gay businesses in De Waterkant. Higher demand for property in previously gentrified neighbourhoods has resulted in steep rises in rents, frequent conversion of rental properties to apartment buildings and competition for commercial space, which make it difficult for less affluent gay individuals and businesses targeted to this community to remain in these neighbourhoods (Doan and Higgins, 2011).

Most participants shared the view that resurgent gentrification led to a significant increase in property prices in De Waterkant, which not only displaced many local gay residents but also gay businesses as many had been forced to cease operations or were forced to move their businesses to more affordable urban areas. The following narrative directly supports this view:

*Participant E.* “The property value has overpowered the gay business market in this area. If you take what the gay community would have loved to have done here vs the power of many of these large companies, it is outrun”.

From this narration, it becomes apparent that the remaining gay leisure spaces are in danger of being displaced and disappearing under a resurgent wave of gentrification. While some closures of gay leisure spaces can be attributed to the fickle world of bars and nightclubs in general (linked to the economic environment of a country), most closures and displacements appear to be linked to the second wave of gentrification led by the development community and not entirely due to a lesser need for gay leisure spaces. The increasing property prices also explain why some recent gay leisure spaces are opening up outside the geographic borders of De Waterkant. A similar view was also shared by another participant:

*Participant B.* “The high prices of renting a space in De Waterkant also led to only a few gay places remaining. De Waterkant has become one of the areas with the highest property prices on the Atlantic Seaboard [the geographic area that stretches from the V and A Waterfront to Houtbay – including the gay neighbourhood and is widely regarded as the most ‘gay-friendly’ area of the larger Cape Town] per square metre. This deters many new businesses from opening in the area”.


Although gentrification is a means of destroying heritage and history, there is still scope for new gay leisure spaces to emerge in the gay neighbourhood. This is justified by the recent opening of a large gay nightclub in De Waterkant, as shared by one participant:

*Participant C.* “It is certainly not what it used to be but things change all the time. Past week I went to a new club in De Waterkant, ‘Pink Panther’, and it is the first proper disco in the neighbourhood in many years”.

New gay leisure spaces are being priced out and, due to high demand for rental space, are moving and operating outside the geographic borders of the gay neighbourhood, which suggests that there remains a need for safe spaces in non-Western contexts such as South Africa. This view is supported by observations made by the researchers that adjacent to De Waterkant in the suburbs of Sea Point and Zonnebloem, a gay pub, “Heartache and Vine” and another gay nightclub, “Babylon” opened in October and November 2017, respectively. In addition, two drag cabaret theatres, “Club69” and “021 Lounge” opened their doors in September 2016 in the CBD and Zonnebloem, respectively.

**Factor 3: change in the gay lifestyle and the “age factor”**

One of the participants suggested that a change in the gay lifestyle impacted the gay neighbourhood:

*Participant A.* “I think when gay marriages were legalised people’s minds opened up. Gays started adopting kids and things became ‘normalised’ in a way”.

This narrative suggests that some gays were now leading “normal” lives and no longer supported the gay spaces in the gay neighbourhood as they had done in the past. The latest statistics show that the number of civil partnerships registered in South Africa increased by 3.6% from 1,144 in 2014 to 1,185 in 2015, while the median age of spouses was 36 years ([Statistics South Africa, 2015](#)). The legalisation of same-sex marriages and child adoption in South Africa (and elsewhere) could, therefore, possibly impact business at gay bars and nightclubs. As per the research conducted by [Villarreal (2017)](#), raising a child can “kill your nightlife itch”.

It is also possible that older gay residents of De Waterkant, who bought “bargain” property before the second wave of gentrification that increased property prices, realised their profits gained and sold their properties. This probably may have resulted in a substantial decrease in demand for gay leisure spaces as only a handful of gay residents remain in the gay neighbourhood, as suggested by a participant:

*Participant F.* “Perhaps it has to do with the gay people who lived here during the 1990s now preferring more peace and quiet, as they are now older; maybe they now prefer a farmhouse instead of city living. Many gay homeowners sold their property because of the great financial return. They are able to buy much larger houses in the suburbs with large gardens for their dogs and lots of parking, as these are the limitations of De Waterkant”.

This narrative seems to support the finding of [Doan and Higgins (2011)](#) in their research on Atlanta’s Midtown in that some gay residents, realising their profits gained through gentrification, sold their houses, which resulted in “white upper-middle-class households to consume the accumulated neighbourhood capital built with sweat and grit”.

**Factor 4: progressive attitudes and mixed leisure spaces**

Two decades ago, [Pritchard et al. (1998)](#) argued that “the blurring of the boundaries between gay and straight culture has been so complete that many young gay men now have far more in common with young straight men than they do with older gay men”. [Sullivan (2005)](#) shares these sentiments when stating that the world is witnessing “an inexorable evolution towards the end of gay culture”, where “the distinction between gay
and straight culture has become blurred, fractured and intermingled”. The post-modern homosexual does not seem to support dedicated gay leisure spaces as in the recent past, as they are increasingly accepted and tolerated in ‘straight’ leisure spaces (Nash, 2013; Visser, 2014). Also, Villarreal (2017) avers that post-modern homosexuals are likelier to bond with other groups and do not mind socialising elsewhere with co-workers “rather than commiserating with queer pals at the gay watering hole”. It is believed that social groupings nowadays form around specific interests such as music genres, recreational drugs, professions and lifestyle with the individuals’ sexual orientation increasingly becoming less significant (Visser, 2003b). This view was validated by a participant:

Participant B: “I have a feeling the young gay guys are not into gay events anymore. They feel they do not need the gay scene. They will just go to Bree Street [often referred to as the most vibrant street in Cape Town offering several leisure spaces outside the gay neighbourhood] and have a good time there with their ‘besties’, which could include a group of more straight people than gay”.

Nash (2013) states “a new generation of men, arguably, white, middle class and technologically savvy, are experiencing themselves as sexual and gendered beings in historical and geographical circumstances that are completely different from the gay generations that went before”. This generation grew up in a different social, cultural and political setting where homosexuality is increasingly visible and tolerated by mainstream society, in part due to openly gay individuals on radio and television; openly gay athletes, musicians and politicians; celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Madonna and Cher supporting gay rights (Nash, 2013); mainstream media often positively portraying gay people; businesses in many industries capitalising on the apparent spending power of gay consumers; and anti-gay discriminatory laws being reversed and replaced by new laws of equality (Brown, 2012). These assertions ring true as most participants agreed that due to progressive attitudes, the advent of gay rights and a new generation of gay individuals, there is a lesser need for a gay neighbourhood or gay-dedicated spaces:

Participant D. “In this luckily progressive city that we live in, it is ok to be gay now everywhere. Due to the new constitution, people became slightly more open-minded. It is now quite socially acceptable for gay boys to go to ‘straight’ bars, which means the need for the gay neighbourhood got smaller. People enjoy going out to new places and have a variety. They do not want to go to the same gay bar every night. Now with the gay rights and the wide variety of open-minded venues, the world is their oyster. No gay neighbourhood can compete with that”.

According to Lewis (2013), it is mostly gay media outlets arguing that gay neighbourhoods “are less culturally relevant among a younger generation of post-modern homosexuals with established rights and more flexible identities”. In non-Western contexts such as South Africa, claims such as those made by Participant D that gay neighbourhoods are unnecessary in a “post-gay” era of gay rights seems parochial. This logic not only obscures the day-to-day experiences of insecurity or discrimination but appeals to a “metronormative” vision of gay lives that presumes widespread social acceptance and a broad array of social options; village-based or otherwise (Lewis, 2013).

The reality is that the progressive new government and constitution of South Africa are in contrast with the beliefs of many South Africans, who still overwhelmingly oppose gay rights, often described as “a deeply conservative, hetero-normative country in spite of its progressive politics” (Thoreson, 2008). In June 2013, over 60% of South Africans said that homosexuality should not be tolerated by society in a Pew Research Centre survey (Grove, 2014). Sexual orientation-based violence or homophobia, including so-called corrective rape, where the perpetrators intend to enforce conformity and to “cure” those who challenge the dominant heterosexual identity remains rampant in South Africa (Hennig, 2014). Although the Martin Prosperity Institute (2012) scores Cape Town above average regarding its progressiveness
towards the gay community, homophobic acts and discrimination towards the gay population occasionally do occur in the so-called gay capital of South Africa.

It is, therefore, possible that some local gay “Capetonians” residing in environments where discrimination and marginalisation are still strong are attracted to the gay neighbourhood in search of a safe space in which to socialise. Furthermore, gay travellers from other provinces in South Africa and non-Western countries who live in conservative environments with limited or no gay life and spaces feel a need to escape from disapproving societies to freely express their gay identities, compared with those travelling from and living in liberal home environments. This freedom is likely more possible in De Waterkant than in their heteronormative home environments (Hattingh and Spencer, 2017). This could explain why the De Waterkant gay neighbourhood was markedly more important in the holiday decision-making processes of domestic gay travellers to Cape Town and especially gay travellers from non-Western countries and those concealing their sexualities – more than half of all gay travellers regarded the gay neighbourhood as an important attribute that attracted them to Cape Town (Hattingh and Spencer, 2017).

Furthermore, just as gay people are now welcomed in mixed leisure spaces, so too are straight people welcomed in gay spaces that are ‘hetero-friendly’. Ironically, this deters many gay individuals from supporting the gay neighbourhood:

Participant C: “I no longer go to certain clubs in the area. I am tired of being ‘molested’ by straight girls and by that I mean being stomped on, them spilling drinks all over me (by mistake). I don’t care that they are straight, but this is our space so they need to behave themselves”.

Villarreal (2017) related this phenomenon to a recent trend where straight women hosting bachelorette parties “overpopulate” gay bars – they turn “quiet parlours into screeching shot bars, jumping onstage to interrupt drag performances, outnumbering gay men and forcing them into kissing and vampy photographs”. Some “gay spaces” are, therefore undergoing a process of “touristification” or “commercialisation”, which seem to indicate a heterosexual acceptance (Doan and Higgins, 2011; Pritchard et al., 1998), but Hughes (2006) warns that there are some negative aspects to it as gays and their lifestyle “[…] become objects for the tourist gaze”.

Considering the above narratives, it can be suggested that because of progressive attitudes and a new generation of homosexuals preferring mixed leisure spaces, the future of the gay neighbourhood is uncertain due to a decrease in demand for gay leisure spaces.

**Factor 5: resistance from the De Waterkant civic association and new local residents**

Resistance from the DWCA (the local ratepayer’s association) and new local residents of the area also seem to lead to new gay leisure spaces opening up in areas outside the geographic borders of De Waterkant:

Participant C: “You have the De Waterkant Ratepayers Association that you have to deal with. When the Backroom bar was opened, they received endless complaints from the association. For example, one complaint was that the outside sign was too big, then it was too bright and then they complained that the sign had a naked man on it. The local residents were not happy either, constantly complaining about the noise. It is like people knew when they moved into De Waterkant the area had many bars and restaurants. If you do not like “calls to prayer” you would not go and live in Bo-Kaap [predominantly Muslim community]. So why then move to De Waterkant”?

This narrative suggests that De Waterkant’s “gay identity” is also threatened by decreasing tolerance for gay nightlife activities due to the mostly heterosexual residents moving into the neighbourhood with the second wave of gentrification.
Factor 6: home entertaining and “chemsex” culture

Participants believed that a further but a rather serious threat to the gay neighbourhood relates to home entertaining and chemsex culture, understood to revolve around “mainly people chilling out, some having sex, some taking drugs, listening to music and laughing [...] it is like any party, but with an accent on drugs and people having sex with strangers in the corner of the room” (Daly, 2017). This view was supported by two participants:

Participant E: “House parties are a big thing on the Atlantic Seaboard. People, therefore, do not go to the gay neighbourhood, which means you have fewer people going out to gay dedicated venues”.

Participant C: “I am aware of the ‘crystal meth’ epidemic in Cape Town, which is not limited to gay people, but it is a particular health issue affecting gay men. Many of these men that do crystal meth do not go out, they have parties at home as it is not a social drug. It is not like ecstasy that makes you want to dance. There are also many organised sex parties in Cape Town so many gay men rather go to these parties instead of the bars and clubs in De Waterkant. Crystal meth is a very aggressive and addictive drug. It makes you not want to interact and see people. You are comfortable in your own limited environment wherever that may be, but it is not a club. Some recreational drugs of today are different from the ones from the 1990s and 2000s that made you want to dance and party”.

Hibbitts (2015) seems to support Participant C’s statement regarding the changing type of recreational drug usage: “The type of drugs has changed. People used to be out on ecstasy, cocaine and ketamine. The mood in the clubs was one of sexy fun, euphoria and an appreciation of music. Nowadays people are into different drugs, crystal meth and GHB [Gamma-Hydroxybutyrate] being the main two. The atmosphere can feel a lot darker. It is almost emotionless with a heavier sexually charged energy”. This narrative suggests that some people are choosing ‘chemsex parties’ over ‘actual parties’ and may, therefore, significantly contribute to the “de-gaying” of the gay neighbourhood.

From the above, the inference can be made that the gay neighbourhood has suffered “at the hands of home-based chill-out and recreational drugs” (Villarreal, 2017). Hibbitts (2015), however, argues that this is a typical generalisation as not all gay individuals are into the chemsex culture, but he agreed that it is harder to fill gay leisure spaces than before.

Factor 7: temporary “gaying” of straight spaces

The temporary “gaying” of straight venues is a common occurrence in Cape Town and is what Visser (2003b) describes as “transient leisure spaces”. Villarreal (2017) refers to the phenomenon as ‘pop-up parties’ or ‘guerrilla gay bar nights’ where “sudden droves of gay men dance and kiss in heterosexual spaces”. These increasingly popular “pop-up parties” may threaten the existence of the permanent gay leisure spaces in De Waterkant which, according to Visser (2003b), could result in “de-gaying” of the gay neighbourhood even further. The idea behind temporarily transforming “straight/alternative space” is to resist heteronormativity, the belief that heterosexuality is the norm and all other sexual orientations are outside of the norm and deviant (Beebe, 2012; Visser, 2013). One participant seemed to not regard the temporary ‘gaying’ of straight venues as a threat to his business:

Participant C: “There is an event called ‘Thursgays’ where drinks evenings are held in a wide variety of bars outside the gay neighbourhood. It is a different scene, more diverse in music and crowd but they are very popular because it is different from the same old stuff. They might go to these parties but at 01:00 a.m. they will say ‘let’s go and see what is happening at the village’, for example. It is only once-off and not permanent”.

On the contrary, another participant had a different view:
Participant D: “Take, for example, New York, where some straight bars would go gay for one night. It might be something we see more in future here in Cape Town. It offers variety to the gay community and they like new things. Then yes, it will then affect the gay bars and clubs in the gay neighbourhood because it is drawing people away from the area”.

Factor 8: a lack of cohesion among gay businesses

Another possible contributor to the “de-gaying” of the gay neighbourhood is the lack of cohesion among gay businesses in De Waterkant. This may be attributed to greed and competing for the same gay consumer:

Participant C: “There’s also quite a bit of greed and lack of cooperation among the venue owners in De Waterkant that caused some venues to fail. When I say greed, I’m referring to the kind of prices that some venues would charge for drinks. Then you would ask yourself why you are paying so much for the privilege of being in a place that is theoretically gay but it is not even that [due to most gay spaces now being hetero-friendly]. The jealousy, feuding and competition among the gay business owners are quite bad”.

Recommendations and conclusions

The acknowledgement of tourism as an important economic sector that contributes majorly towards a city’s GDP has led to many urban cities investing in the sector. This study’s focus is on one of the local tourism industry’s most lucrative markets under threat, namely, gay tourism. The findings suggest that the gay village is under siege from both external and internal factors. While certain factors contributing to the decline of Western gay neighbourhoods are comparable to this study’s findings (e.g. technology and dating applications; progressive attitudes and mixed leisure spaces; the temporary “gaying” of straight spaces; a change in the gay lifestyle due to legalisation of same-sex marriages and child adoption and resurgent gentrification) there appears to be a number of location-specific factors, in addition to the above-mentioned global factors, contributing to De Waterkant’s demise. These include resistance from the DWCA, decreasing tolerance for gay nightlife among the new local residents, a growing chemsex culture and a lack of cohesion among gay businesses. Therefore, the most important contribution of this paper lies in the new insights gleaned, from a non-Western perspective, regarding the demise of Africa’s only gay village and possible repercussions on Cape Town’s local tourist economy.

In a non-Western context, the “de-gaying” of Africa’s only gay neighbourhood is not entirely due to a lesser need for gay-dedicated spaces in a “post-gay” era as currently communicated in Western discourse. Quite the contrary, there appears to be a need for gay leisure spaces (whether gay-exclusive or “gay-friendly”) in non-Western settings such as South Africa, evident in the gay spaces opening outside the geographic borders of the gay neighbourhood. The need for gay leisure spaces is also evident in the popularity of the remaining six gay leisure spaces (those gay businesses that can financially afford to remain in the gay neighbourhood), in the resurgence of new gay nightclubs such as “Pink Panther” and the fact that more than half of all gay travellers holidaying in Cape Town regard its gay village as an important attribute in their holiday decision-making processes. As the gay neighbourhood is a first for both South Africa and the African continent it “does not, would not and could not exist in any other country on this continent, the majority of which outlaw homosexuality” (McConnell, 2014). Therefore, in an ostensibly “post-gay” landscape, De Waterkant remains a safe escape in a largely conservative country and continent and is especially important in the lives of the most marginalised LGBT individuals, especially those individuals who do not “fit” heterosexual views of normality, i.e. the extremes such as “dykes on bikes”, “drag queens” and “butch leather boys” (Hughes, 2006), the “scary homosexuals”, historically comprising the stereotypical image of the gay community (Clarke, 2000).

Although difficult to predict, the longevity of De Waterkant as a gay neighbourhood and top gay traveller attraction does seem threatened by continuous development pressures.
Perhaps, as Ghaziani (2010) states, it is quixotic to reason that gay neighbourhoods will never change as these neighbourhoods and the cities that surround them, are “organic, continuously evolving places”. Nevertheless, the ever “de-gaying” of De Waterkant does not only strip the gay community of its safe space, but also strips the area of its rich history, its way of life and a unique visitor attraction that exists nowhere else in Africa. It is highly likely that if De Waterkant continues to lose its remaining gay leisure spaces (including newly established gay leisure spaces), Africa will lose its only gay neighbourhood. This may be detrimental to Cape Town’s reputation as a gay capital and its ability to market this gay neighbourhood to attract the gay tourism market, in particular, those gay travellers concealing their sexualities travelling from non-Western countries and heteronormative South African provinces. These travellers regard the gay neighbourhood as a safe space in which they can be themselves, even if only temporarily, which may result in a lost opportunity considering their financial contribution to the local tourist economy.

Despite claims emerging over a decade ago about the “de-gaying” of De Waterkant and narratives suggesting that the remaining gay leisure spaces are in danger of being displaced and disappearing under a resurgent wave of gentrification, there is no compelling evidence to suggest the definitive end of this neighbourhood as a gay neighbourhood yet but gay leisure spaces and LGBT community groups need to take a more active role to preserve it. There is a need for innovative strategies to counter the exorbitant pricing of properties that leads to the demise of facilities that have the drawing power to inject over a billion rand into Cape Town’s economy annually. Perhaps local government officials and tourism planners can lobby with property owners and homeowner’s associations to consider anti-gentrification efforts by, for instance, regulating rent prices for businesses and local residents. International best-practice examples are already evident in the cities of New York, Barcelona, Paris and Stockholm that have all implemented methods to curb rising rental costs in urban neighbourhoods (Kinniburgh, 2017). This could result in rejuvenating the gay village as those gay businesses that were “forced” to move and those that opened outside the borders of the gay village will be able to return to the area. A product development strategy will be needed such as the creation of a “pink light district” (as opposed to a “red light district”) to benefit all businesses, rather than these businesses competing against one another.

However, without a product development strategy, it should be carefully considered how this neighbourhood will be used to attract tourists in the immediate future. Although a limited number of gay leisure spaces remain, it can no longer be regarded as a top gay traveller attraction comparable with gay villages such as New York’s Greenwich Village, San Francisco’s Castro or London’s Soho and should, therefore, not be promoted as such. Cape Town can remain popular among gay travellers; however, a thorough marketing strategy is needed to ensure the continuation of gay tourism in the City. Cape Town Tourism could instead promote the City as welcoming, open-minded and “gay-friendly” with several mixed entertainment facilities in a variety of urban areas instead of promoting De Waterkant as a gay village as this could result in creating certain expectations among gay travellers, which may lead to visitor dissatisfaction once they arrive at the destination considering the limited gay leisure facilities on offer.

While this study aimed to uncover the reasons for De Waterkant’s transformation from a “gaytrified” tourism mecca to a “heterosexualised” urban space, from a business owner perspective (supply-side), future empirical investigations could approach this phenomenon from a different angle. In particular, empirical testing of the reasons for LGBT consumers to avoid consolidated gay leisure spaces is vital, therefore, a demand-side analysis is suggested. The combined feedback from business owners (supply-side) and LGBT consumers (demand-side) could significantly add to the debates concerning the “de-gaying” of gay leisure spaces in South Africa and elsewhere.
Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2nd International Conference on Tourism Research, Porto, Portugal 14-15 March 2019.

2. The De Waterkant neighbourhood evolved from being a slum into Africa’s first and only, gay village (Ilyayambwa, 2012).

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