Queer consumption and commercial hospitality: Communitas, myths, and the production of liminoid space

Dr Peter Lugosi
School of Services Management
Bournemouth University
Fern Barrow
Poole
Dorset
BH12 5BB
plugosi@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

Purpose – This paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between sexual dissidence, gender transgression and commercial hospitality. It is argued that this can be used to examine how ideological assumptions about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) consumers are mobilised in the production and consumption of hospitality spaces.

Approach – The paper synthesises three theoretical strands: first, Turner's concepts of the liminoid and communitas; second, anthropological and socio-political conceptions of myth and myth-making; and third, Lefebvre's spatial dialectic in the production of material, abstract and symbolic space. It is argued that, when considered together, these theoretical approaches help to understand the consumer experience, the ideological assumptions that underpin the experience, and the processes through which the experience is constructed.

Research implications – The application of this framework in empirical research can enhance our understanding of the role of commercial hospitality spaces in reproducing and challenging particular ideological assumptions about LGBT consumers. It can inform the operational strategies of commercial organisations. Furthermore, it can underpin a critical perspective on management, which encourages practitioners to develop a sense of social responsibility towards the communities of consumers they target.

Originality/value – The holistic nature of this approach helps to analyse the relationship between consumption and community ideologies at the micro level of personal interaction, the meso level of group and organisational norms, and the macro level of

societal structures and agencies. Applying this framework to empirical research will also help to understand the nature of consumption and production within commercial hospitality.

Keywords: queer, consumption, hospitality, communitas, myth, space

Paper type: Conceptual paper

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Throughout history, bars, cafes and restaurants have been important focal points for queer consumers – lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals seeking to reject or resist heteronormativity and dominant gender norms (cf., David, 1997; Jivani, 1997; Kinsman, 1996). Commercial hospitality venues continue to function as private spaces, where consumers are shielded from surveillance (Brown, 2000; Quilley, 1997; Weightman, 1980). However, it is also increasingly evident that consumption in hospitality venues also has the potential to be a form of economic and political visibility (e.g., Binnie, 1995; Casey, 2004; Lewis, 1994).

Queer consumption in commercial hospitality spaces is often considered a manifestation of community values and identity (see Achilles, 1967; Hooker, 1967). Numerous studies have shown that consumption in bars provides opportunities for queer consumers to develop and articulate shared values and codes of conduct (Chauncey, 1994; Haslop *et al.*, 1998; Kennedy and Davies, 1993; Warren, 1974). For Taylor *et al.* (2002) such practices clearly reflect community spirit. Other works challenge the usefulness of the term community in discussions about queer subcultures or social networks. Newton (1979) suggests that discourses of community are reproduced through such informal institutions as bars. However, Newton also maintains that notions of community are reinterpreted or rejected at different times and in different contexts. Recent studies by Johnson and Samdahl (2005) and Pritchard *et al.* (2002) demonstrate that notions of community identity and interest are undermined as lesbians consumers are marginalised by gay male consumers in hospitality contexts. This highlights the limitations of employing the notion of community when examining queer consumption in hospitality

venues. Community is a useful collective term to describe a series of ideologies and the social and institutional practices that perpetuate them. The danger is that its use obscures the differences between people and the conflicts inherent in their consumer practices.

It is clear that consumption within hospitality venues can reinforce particular aspects of community practices. Paradoxically, the tenuous, ephemeral and discontinuous relations formed and articulated through patronage often challenge the idea of a queer community. Yet, as this paper maintains, discourses of community and ideological assumption about the needs and values of its members are fundamental to the existence of these venues. It is argued that in order to understand the relationship between such discourses and commercial hospitality venues, it is necessary to examine two sets of issues. First, the ideological assumptions about community interests that construct and are themselves constructed through the consumption experience. And second, the processes by which such assumptions are mobilised in the consumption and production of these spaces. This paper does not explore these issues in practice; instead, it develops a conceptual framework that can underpin future empirical studies of venues patronised by LGBT consumers.

The significance of the proposed approach lies in two areas. First, it considers the ways in which community values and aspirations are implicitly and explicitly tied to consumption behaviour, while avoiding the problematic assumption that the consumers are a coherent community. And second, it explores the relationships between the embodied, experiential aspects of patronage, and the broader political and commercial forces that shape consumption practices. Consequently, it helps to simultaneously analyse the relationship between sexual dissidence and gender transgression, consumption, and community ideologies at the micro level of personal interaction, the meso level of group and organisational norms, and the macro level of societal structures and agencies.

The paper begins by reviewing existing research on queer consumers and commercial hospitality, which is used to highlight the problematic relationship between consumption and community discourses in these contexts. The paper goes on to develop a framework that helps to understand this relationship. It does this by exploring three theoretical strands: first, Turner's (1969, 1982) work on communitas in helping to conceptualise how notions of shared interest are entangled within consumption practices; second, the concepts of myth and mythology, and the ways in which they can be used to understand the discourses that define consumption practices; and third, drawing on the work of Lefebvre (1991), the ways in which the construction of particular mythologies and communitas can be conceived as the production of symbolic, material and abstract spaces of capital accumulation and generation.

Hospitality spaces and the construction of queer community values

A number of studies explore the tentative relationship between commercial hospitality spaces and the discourses of community among queer patrons. Wolfe (1992), for

example, argues that:

> Lesbian bars, lesbians' experiences of bars and their uses of them, from their inception to the present, has always been framed in at least two ways: (1) by the profound experience of being able to be who we are and were in a social space shared by others like ourselves; and (2) by the ways in which we were and are viewed and treated within these places and by the larger society" (1992: 146-147).

This extract suggests that the production and articulation of community ideology in drinking places is transient and experiential. The notion of a communal space is produced through the collective occupation of hospitality venues, and the values attached to both the space and the experiences of patronage are therefore articulated through consumption. The sense of shared interest and shared fate is evident, but the nature of the bonds between consumers is inherently elusive and ill-defined.

Moran *et al.* (2001) use the concept of property to explain the processes by which hospitality venues become safer spaces – for some consumers at least. Their notion of property is developed from the earlier work of Davies (1998) for whom it is "a metaphor for an array of concepts centred on hierarchy, purity, and limitedness: exclusivity – property – sovereignty – self-identity – law – territory – boundaries – title – limits – unity" (1998: 147). The construction of property relations, therefore, represents a process of ordering in which particular social and spatial practices become both the basis for and methods of inclusion and exclusion. Moran *et al.* (2001) argue that the mobilisation and investment of various sorts of capital (social, cultural and economic), and the continued process of boundary formation provide opportunities for individuals to reconfigure the meanings of commercial hospitality spaces. This, in turn, allows them to articulate a shared sense of identity. Consumption is inextricably linked with the discourses of community, and consumption becomes a realisation of the hospitability of spaces. However, Moran *et al.*'s work suggests that consumption in hospitality venues does not make a community. Instead, community practices can be thought of as a series of ideological constructs, mobilised and contested through the production of space.

Skeggs (1999) demonstrates the ways in which consumption in hospitality venues reproduces particular community ideologies, and thus reifies the values that are fundamental to the construction of these consumer spaces. Queer consumers become visible through their patronage in commercial hospitality venues. Meanwhile, 'straight' women are shielded from predatory heterosexuality, and thus become invisible in these venues. Though not overtly concerned with the concept of community, the ideological assumptions about the queer community and their spaces of consumption are again central to Skeggs's argument. Her study suggests that the collective presence of LGBT patrons, and their ability to mobilise capital, transforms hospitality venues into safer spaces that offer liberation from heterosexual norms. However, she demonstrates that the hospitability of these spaces becomes contested as the ideological assumptions about the lesbian and gay community and their leisure spaces are appropriated by heterosexuals through their consumption in these venues. Consumption reproduces the values of an imagined community, and thus offers a sense of continuity for patrons.

Nevertheless, the shifting occupation of these spaces also highlights the ephemeralilty of the values entangled in the consumption experience.

These studies appear to implicitly acknowledge the problematical relationship between hospitality spaces, consumption and queer patronage. They also point to the difficulty in attempting to understand these relationships through the notion of community relations. What is needed is a conceptual framework that helps to understand the processes that reproduce ideological assumptions about the queer community within the context of commercial hospitality spaces. This paper seeks to develop such a framework. As a first step, the next section outlines Turner's concepts of communitas and the liminoid. It argues that they help to conceptualise the processes through which notions of shared interest and identity are constructed in hospitality spaces.

Liminality, the liminoid and communitas

The concept of the liminal emerged from van Gannep's (1960) studies of the sacred rites of passage ceremonies of pre-literate societies. Liminality is the stage in ceremonies where the participant has moved from one status, but has yet to move to the next: these are transitional phases or periods of anti-structure located between one structural state and another. Turner (1969, 1982, 1992) uses the notion of liminality to conceptualise periods of symbolic, emotional and political detachment from contemporary, western societal norms. He introduces the concept of the liminoid: anti-structural phenomena produced and consumed through profane leisure activities. According to Turner (1992, p.57), liminoid phenomena "develop most characteristically outside the central economic and political processes". They are "plural, fragmentary and experimental"; "they compete with one another in a cultural market and appeal to specific tastes"; and, more important, "they are often subversive, representing radical critiques of the central structures and proposing utopian models" (ibid.).

Central to Turner's work on liminoid phenomena are the forms of social organisation they engender. Within playful, liminoid leisure activities, participants become members of 'communitas' – social entities temporarily detached from social structures or institutions. Turner goes further and distinguishes between existential, normative and ideological communitas, each of which is briefly outlined below.

Existential or spontaneous communitas can be thought of as temporary states of affectual bonding created through direct interaction. During these moments participants "become totally absorbed into a single synchronised, fluid event" (Turner, 1982, p.48). Interaction is governed by a sense of "honesty, openness, and lack of pretentions or pretentiousness" (ibid.). Notions of individualism and individual identity are abandoned and replaced by a sense of collective being. Consequently, within these moments of interaction, the unity felt by those participating transcends differences in role, status, race, sex or class.

Existential communitas have been conceptualised as psychological constructs that are felt or imagined (cf., Turner, 1992, pp.61-65). However, physicality and materiality are

central to the experience for a number of reasons. First, the body becomes part of the process through which shared experiences are produced and mediated, and the body is also the site where these experiences are consumed. Second, the experiences of existential communitas are consumed in physical geographies, and are therefore inherently linked to the production of social spaces. Within hospitality venues catering for LGBT patrons, the material and corporeal aspects of consumption, including the physical presence of consumers, visible expressions of intimacy, convivial interaction, the act of dancing, and the consumption of food or drinks become key components in the experience of existential communitas. These help to create a liminoid space where such communitas *can* exist.

These moments of blissful togetherness apart from structure cannot be sustained indefinitely. Nevertheless, for actual and potential participants, the notion of existential communitas – a collectively experienced sense of liberated or liberating time-space – becomes an ideal to be recreated and relived over and over again. In order to recreate this sense of collective, existential abandonment, communitas emerge in two forms: as ideological and normative communitas.

For Turner (1969), the creation of ideological communitas is:

> once an attempt to describe the external and visible effects – the outward form, it might be said – of an inward experience of existential communitas, and to spell out the optimal social conditions under which such experiences might be expected to flourish and multiply (1969, p.132).

Ideological communitas are utopian models of social organisation based on existential communitas. However, as Malbon (1999) argues, the creation of ideological communitas should not be seen as attempts to create some ideal otherworld. The term utopia, meaning 'no-place', is effectively an unachievable, ideal state of being for a group of people. According to Dyer (1999), it is necessary to differentiate *models of utopian worlds* from *feelings of utopianism* associated with the hedonistic consumption of modern leisure. The construction of ideological communitas in commercial hospitality venues is an attempt to define the consumption process as a temporary, playful, utopian experience. As Malbon (1999) suggests, the consumers of such utopianism may be fully aware of the shallow and fragile nature of their connectedness, but continue to take pleasure from these ephemeral experiences.

Despite the playful nature of ideological communitas, their construction and maintenance relies on legislation and normalisation. Existential or ideological communitas morph into normative communitas in which participation is subject to conditions. Members begin to have roles, functions and obligations towards the communitas and the spaces in which they are constructed and maintained. Inside-outside dichotomies are imposed, which means that inclusion and exclusion is determined partly by individuals' ability to meet the conditions of membership, but also their willingness to fulfil their obligations towards the communitas.

Turner's concept of existential communitas can help to understand the immediate experiences of consumers in venues catering for LGBT patrons. It also foregrounds the role of embodied practices in producing and mediating the ideological assumptions that are fundamental to the experience. More important, perhaps, the notions of ideological and normative communitas help to conceptualise the *basis of association* and the *obligations of association* that enable individuals to experience existential communitas. Conceiving consumption in hospitality venues through the idea of communitas emphasises the ephemerality and creative vitality of the experience in which ideological assumptions are reified. It also helps to comprehend the processes of regulation and control that maintain both the ideological constructs and the mechanisms that reproduce them. However, to operationalise the concept of communitas it is necessary to develop a conceptual schema that captures both the ephemerality and continuity of the ideological constructs that are fundamental to communitas. The following section offers a brief discussion on anthropological and socio-political approaches to myth, and explores the uses and limitations of this body of work in understanding the relationship between community ideologies and consumption.

Myth, myth-making and queer hospitality

There are numerous definitions and uses of the term 'myth', and writers from various academic disciplines have attempted to explain their formation and understand their functions in cultures (cf., Von Hendy, 2001). For anthropologists, myths are a specific type of sacred narrative that pre-literate societies use to understand their cosmology and existence. Malinowski (1948) and Durkheim (1968) argue that myths form the fundamental basis for religious and political organisation, social distinction and cultural identification. Because of their sacred status, myths are an undisputable normative schema used instrumentally to define social structures, establish social hierarchies and prescribe moral codes. Malinowski (1948, 1962) goes further and argues that myths have to be considered in relation to their ritualistic embodiment: the study of myths should not be concerned with their narrative content, but should instead focus on how they are purposefully deployed in social contexts, and the ways in which they inform mundane social practices.

Drawing on this anthropological tradition helps to conceptualise myths as relatively stable sets of beliefs and understandings that have a normative function in shaping the actions and perceptions of a community's members. However, the narrow definition of myths as sacred stories of supernatural phenomena limits its usefulness in the current discussion. An alternative approach developed by Barthes (1977, 1993), which conceptualises myths as profane forms of knowledge and understanding, provides a more appropriate framework with which to examine the beliefs and values entangled in contemporary consumer culture.

Barthes's (1993) approach to myths draws on the work of Saussure (1974), who conceived language as a system of signs. According to Saussure, signs are constructed as particular concepts, actions or material objects (the signified) become tied to the words (the signifiers) used to identify those concepts, actions or objects. Meaning is thus

constructed through an ongoing process of signification in oral and written communication. For Barthes signs themselves are signifiers for a range of concepts and ideologies that circulate in everyday social practices. Myths are messages constructed through the process of signification: they are concepts that have taken form – not simply as narratives, but as objects, actions, images, speech acts, texts or music, which become signifiers filled with meaning as they are encountered and interpreted.

By approaching myths as a semiological system in which objects and actions operate as signifiers that can be deconstructed and interrogated, the concepts they signify can be interpreted. Following Barthes, myth-making should therefore be thought of as a ubiquitous interpretative process in which the meanings attached to objects or actions are continually consumed and produced. Myths can thus be defined as more or less stable sets of conceptions or 'concept-chains' (Fiske, 1990). These conceptions draw upon, and reflect, people's cultural environment, and shape the actions and perceptions of those who accept or challenge them.

Myth-making is a continuous process of interpretation, and no single person, group or organization can fix the meaning of any myth. Nevertheless, the interaction of various social and institutional practices can determine the trajectory of certain myths. Myths thus begin to be increasingly perpetuated, but only remain perceptible or coherent if they are consistently transmitted and interpreted in the same way. These conceptions may remain the mental constructs of specific individuals. However, they may subsequently be rendered perceptible through speech acts, texts, physical actions, or the manipulation of images, objects or sounds, and myths thus become part of a shared reality.

Myths, conceived as more or less stable, frequently circulated conceptions about venues and their patrons, shape the consumer experience. The connotations attached to venues help to position them on a perceptual map, and myths are thus used in marketing strategies. They also shape expectations about the types or levels of service, behavioural norms and dress codes (e.g., Johns and Gyimóthy, 2002). Myth-making, conceived as a continuous process of signification and interpretation, takes place as consumers engage in the production and consumption experience, but also as hospitality operators construct that experience.

Myths and myth-making is central to production and consumption in all commercial hospitality venues. However, the operation of venues catering for LGBT patrons is inseparably tied to several distinct myths. Consumption is underpinned by three pervading notions:

1) the patrons in the venue are, to some extent, part of a collective entity in which members have a shared interest in maintaining their social space;

2) patrons who invest various sorts of capital (social, economic, cultural, aesthetic and temporal) in reproducing the values associated with that space are protected from harm; and

3) patrons of the venue are able to express their queer identity, and engage in activities that are subject to sanction outside of that space.

These commonly circulated conceptions about the hospitability of queer space will be referred to hereafter as the myths of commonality, safety and liberated play. These myths reveal the contradictory nature of commercial hospitality venues, and the limits of these spaces in creating communities. Constructing hospitality space as a site of or for commonality is an attempt to obscure differences among consumers. Such venues help to produce a discourse of inclusion by perpetuating such community values as safety through mutual visibility. However, hospitality venues exist because of capitalistic modes of production that reinforce inequalities. The commercial, market-driven agendas pursued by owners and operators simultaneously challenge notions of community. For LGBT consumers, inclusion and exclusion is no longer determined by their shared fate or sense of collective identity, but by their ability and willingness to mobilise capital.

Nevertheless the myths of commonality, safety and play remain central to the existence of hospitable spaces for LGBT consumers. To understand the relationship between these myths and commercial hospitality, it is necessary, first, to identify the processes through which myths are constructed and regulated, and second, to examine the relationship between particular societal structures and agencies that determine the way these myths are produced. The next section, therefore, explores the work of Lefebvre (1991), and uses his notion of the spatial dialectic to draw together the concepts of communitas and myths discussed so far.

Myths, communitas and the production of liminoid space

Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is an unstable, dynamic entity produced through the interaction of three elements: 'spatial practices', 'representations of space' and 'representational spaces'. Spatial practices refer to the organisational practices of societies as they delineate particular sites for specific forms of human activity. This process of designation involves the purposeful organisation and deployment of human labour and capital in production relationships, which ensures that social relations and the dominant modes of production are continually reproduced. Actions are thus institutionalized and ritualized in particular locations, which then come to simultaneously define the location, the activity, and the identities of those involved.

Commercial hospitality venues are thus produced as various agencies, including drinks manufacturers, distributors, operating companies, marketing agencies and licensing authorities, interact to delineate specific sites as work and play spaces. Within these sites, workers and customers are located within organisational regimes, and thus have duties and responsibilities towards such institutions. It is also through such spatial practices that the consumers' roles become redefined: the division between workers and customers are blurred and patrons begin to participate in the production process (cf., Lugosi, 2006, 2007).

The spatial practices of societies also determine the sexualised and gendered ordering of

space. The sexual and gender norms of everyday space, reproduced through such institutional practices as marriage or open displays of heterosexual desire, displace and marginalise queers (Kirby and Hay, 1997; Kitchin and Lysaght, 2003; Valentine, 1993). The commercial hospitality environment is transformed into a liminoid space in which such norms can be challenged or, at the very least, temporarily suspended. Both the consumers and operators reproduce the myths of commonality, safety and play by maintaining these venues as social and economic enterprises.

The dominant spatial practices in society also shape the ideological and normative dimensions of the consumer experience. The establishment of the venue as a commercial entity is entangled with the myths of commonality, safety and play. The venue is transformed into an ideologically loaded signifier, the meaning of which is reified through consumption. The continued presence of LGBT consumers, the mobilisation of capital, the visible and audible expressions of queer identity, and the exclusion of homophobic aggression are fundamental to the spatial practices of hospitality venues. Moreover, the perpetuation of these traditions helps to prescribe the normative obligations for those who wish to operate these businesses, and for those who wish to consume in these spaces.

Spatial practices are tied to representational acts that reaffirm both the existence of consumer experiences and the significance of the sites in which such activities take place. Shields (1991) argues that all spatial locations begin to have specific images associated with them, which form through misrecognition, stereotyping and oversimplification in the representational and interpretative process. Particular images are increasingly circulated, and the more frequently repeated interpretations converge to form more or less stable 'place myths'. For Shields, such place-myths are inherently distorted or exaggerated conceptions that simultaneously reflect and prescribe the spatial practices of particular geographical locations.

Lefebvre (1991) emphasizes the role of cartographers, scientists and urban planners as they envision the organization of space, although it is also essential to recognize the representations of writers, journalists, marketing agents and the narratives of consumers in reproducing conceptions of space. As Lugosi (2006) argues, consumers' representations of the hospitality of venues are central to the continuing existence of these social and commercial spaces. Ideological assumptions about the liminoid status of space and the liminal quality of the consumption experience therefore shape the representations of space. Moreover, the perpetuation of the myths of commonality, safety and play through representation is again part of the obligations for prospective consumers and commercial agencies.

The final element in Lefebvre's dialectic, representational spaces, refers to "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (1991, p.39). According to Lefebvre, spatial practices and their representations produce a delineated and codified space, but the notion of representational spaces highlights the transformative nature of lived experience. These experiences of space are disruptive because they involve the appropriation and

adaptation of existing cultural practices. However, these experiences are also constructive because they become a form of living memory that reproduces cultural norms. The notion of representational space also reinforces the need to avoid reducing the myths of commonality, safety and play to a series of narratives. Such myths are produced through existing spatial practices, representational acts and the direct experiences of places.

The notion of representational space helps to understand the formation of existential, ideological and normative communitas. As Lefebvre (1991, p.216) argues, "organized gestures, which is to say ritualized and codified gestures, are not simply performed in 'physical' space, in the space of bodies. Bodies themselves generate spaces, which are produced by and for their gestures". The embodied performance of sexual dissidence and gender transgression is central to the production of liminoid spaces. The routinisation of specific performances of queer identity reproduces the discourses of hospitality for LGBT patrons. Therefore the visibility and audibility of queerness is part of the normative dimension of patronage.

The usefulness of Lefebvre's approach to the study of commercial hospitality venues lies in two areas. First, rather than focusing exclusively on either the abstract social, political and economic conditions that shape consumer behaviour, or the consumption and production of hospitality in particular geographical locations, his spatial framework considers the relationships between them. This, in turn, forces us to consider the social conditions that a) determine the location of these venues in relation to other hospitality spaces, b) shape the operating policies of venues targeting LGBT consumers, and c) influence the experiences of consumers in these venues.

Second, space is treated as a dynamic process as opposed to a fixed entity. This is important because it helps to understand both the nature of myths and the processes by which they are produced. Consequently, the emphasis of inquiry shifts to three sets of issues: a) the ideological assumptions about 'the community' that underpin consumption experiences, for example, the myths of commonality, safety and liberated play; b) the consumption practices that reproduce these assumptions, which may involve convivial interaction, the embodied expression of queer identity and the exchange of food and/or drink; and c) the normative dimensions of consumption that shape consumer behaviour, including the observance of specific codes of conduct and the mobilisation of capital.

Conclusion

It is problematic to think of consumers of hospitality venues as a community. Nevertheless, ideological assumptions about the needs and values of a queer community are fundamental to the existence of such spaces. The framework developed in this paper helps to understand how such assumptions are produced and consumed in hospitality venues. The communitas model of social organisation offers a way to conceptualise the consumption experience for patrons. Moreover, it helps to understand the ideological and normative dimensions of social organisation that underpin those experiences. The notions of myth and myth-making offer a method for understanding the form and

processes by which certain ideological assumptions about queer communities and their spaces are produced and mediated. Lastly, considering the spatial dimensions of consumption locates the processes of production and consumption in abstract and material geographies. By doing so, it maps the relationship between the abstract political and economic practices that determine the operational realities for hospitality venues, and it helps to appreciate the consumer practices that maintain these social and economic enterprises.

The implementation of this conceptual framework in empirical research relies on ethnographic methodologies and epistemologies. Several recent ethnographic studies of have begun to address the issues identified here (e.g., Johnson and Samdahl, 2005; Skeggs, 1999). However, these studies have focused on the consumers, with little consideration of the operational aspects of hospitality venues (cf., Moran *et al.*, 2001). The challenge is to produce nuanced, context-specific accounts that simultaneously explore the management practices that sustain these consumer spaces. Such research would provide insights into how consumer behaviour produces, mediates and challenges the myths surrounding such venues. More important, it would help to understand the ways in which operators of these venues mobilise and regulate particular myths about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender consumers.

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