



Tourism Geographies

An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment

ISSN: 1461-6688 (Print) 1470-1340 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rtxg20

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Laura Dixon

To cite this article: Laura Dixon (06 Oct 2026): Heteronormative cosmopolitanism: visibility and the state-of-the-art in LGBT+ tourism geographies, *Tourism Geographies*, DOI: [10.1080/14616688.2026.2744775](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2026.2744775)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2026.2744775>



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Published online: 06 Oct 2026.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Heteronormative cosmopolitanism: visibility and the state-of-the-art in LGBT+ tourism geographies

Laura Dixon

Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

Tourism geography has a substantial account of how sexual minorities make, inhabit, and are excluded from tourist places. Existing work also shows how others consume LGBT+ space as cosmopolitan distinction. This review asks how that conversion works spatially, and what it cannot register. It traces the development and contestation of ideas about sexuality, space, and sexual citizenship, the gay village and cosmopolitan consumption, and heteronormativity, homonormativity, and homonationalism. It then examines subsequent scholarship on dispersed sociality, resort spaces, digital mediation, destination branding and opposition to sexual inclusion, without treating these as universally successive stages. Ethnographic material gathered in Sitges, Catalonia, Spain, in 2010–2011 provides a historically bounded illustration. It documents how selected, locatable, and male-coded sexual difference was interpreted by predominantly heterosexual British lifestyle migrants. From this the article develops the concept of heteronormative cosmopolitanism, that is, a spatial and relational process through which recognisable forms of sexual difference provide evidence of both a cosmopolitan place *and* a cosmopolitan self, whilst the observer's position and the hierarchies organising the encounter remain substantially untroubled. Proximity-without-entry specifies how observers approach and narrate a sexual scene without participating in it. Within this relationship, its thresholds, rhythms, and forms of interpretative authority are examined, alongside a specifically *gendered* narratability wherein different sexualities have distinct capacities to become material for such place-narratives. The article closes with a research agenda for tourism geographies concerned with how visibility is converted into destination identity, whose belonging that conversion recognises, and the conditions under which claims to openness either persist or fail.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 June 2026
Accepted 27 September 2026

KEYWORDS

Catalonia;
cosmopolitanism;
destination image; gay
tourism; heteronormative
cosmopolitanism;
place-making; queer
tourism geographies;
Sitges; Spain; visibility

HANDLING EDITOR

Joseph Cheer

Introduction

One evening, soon after I arrived in Sitges, I went out for dinner with two gay British men I knew. Afterwards, we headed out along the seafront, following the wall that divides the promenade from the beach. As we talked and walked, I looked out across

CONTACT Laura Dixon ✉ L.J.Dixon@ljmu.ac.uk 📍 Liverpool John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool, L3 5UG, UK.

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the shoreline, but soon noticed that below us, in the dark, both on the beach and against the wall itself, men were having sex with each other. Some were paired off in the gaps created where the steps cut into the sand; others were standing, watching, waiting. From the lit promenade above, however, we could see them clearly. One of the men I was with laughed at my puzzled expression. He put an arm across my shoulders, and explained, as if introducing me to an otherwise unremarkable feature of the town, exactly what it was that I was looking at.

This vignette matters not as evidence of what gay men *do* in Sitges, but as evidence of how this stretch of seafront, at a particular hour, was read as a legible feature of cosmopolitan place. Whilst the wall divided promenade from beach, lit from unlit, observer from observed, the darker recesses organised a sexual sociality within the seafront's geometry, visible from above to anyone walking past. The laugh, the explanation, and the invitation to interpret what could be seen, constituted a shared spatial grammar through which Sitges was made legible as a tolerant, worldly, and thoroughly modern kind of place. Public sex between men was being seen then, but it was also being converted, in real time, into a story about the kind of place Sitges was.

Yet the people most given to narrating the town as cosmopolitan were not, for the most part, gay tourists themselves. They were British lifestyle migrants (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009), predominantly white, predominantly English, and predominantly heterosexual people, who consumed the town's visible sexualised geography from beside, outside, and overlooking it. Their story rested on easily identified locations; the seafront wall, the gay beach after sunset, the bar whose upstairs dark room was closed to them, the streets along which they walked after dinner. Crucially, it was out of the narrative linking these scenes together, that a *cosmopolitan* place was made. These were residents whose migration remained shaped by tourism, not least, because so many had first encountered Sitges as visitors, and continued to interpret it through the destination imagery that had helped draw them there in the first place.

That such consumption of sexualised space occurs is not a new observation. LGBT+ space has long been understood as a resource from which visitors and residents who are not themselves its subjects, gain urban 'distinction' (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Rushbrook, 2002), and its incorporation into destination marketing has been examined at length (Hartal, 2019; Waitt et al., 2008). Host-community research has also examined how residents might interpret gay tourists' sexual behaviour, including the limits of apparent acceptance, in a Mexican beach destination (Hughes et al., 2010). The question here extends that work: how do thresholds, sightlines, and rhythms within a destination, allow sexual difference to be approached and read as evidence of both a cosmopolitan place, *and* a cosmopolitan self? The term 'heteronormative cosmopolitanism' is used to name this particular form of place-making and the concept of 'proximity-without-entry' is used to describe the way that it functions, but crucially, it is the spatial operation of that conversion of place into identity, rather than the encounter of non-gay consumption, that establishes the contribution proposed here. This also directs attention to how destination programming and promotion shape whose presence becomes evidence of openness.

In a key sense then, the article looks backwards, in order to look forwards. This is a selective critical review, organised around particular concepts, rather than an

exhaustive inventory of gay tourism research. To do so, it brings foundational work on sexual citizenship, cosmopolitan consumption, and the production of space itself, into conversation with scholarship that sought to challenge the spatial assumptions and presumed subjects often implicit within these bodies of work. Research focusing on resorts, digital mediation, gendered visibility, and the political economy of inclusion, is selected for its importance in relation to that conceptual problem.

The account that results therefore, traces the origins of such scholarship, its contestation, and possible future directions; it makes no claim to systematic coverage. It is also important to note too, the emphasis on Anglophone and European scholarship, which is a key limitation, especially given critiques of the field's colonial and religious exclusions (Moufakkir, 2025; Puar, 2002). Nonetheless, ethnographic material gathered in Sitges in 2010–2011 provides a detailed account of one such spatial arrangement, which is then reconsidered through more recent scholarship. No comparable contemporary fieldwork has been undertaken there, and obviously, later studies that focus on other settings, cannot update this one by proxy. As a result, the material's age is a limit, but it can, nonetheless, usefully contribute to the conceptual discussion outlined here, despite neither establishing present-day conditions, nor demonstrating change over the intervening years.

Origins: how sexuality entered the geographies of tourism

The concepts that this article draws on, reached tourism geography from overlapping directions. Feminist and lesbian geography established that ordinary space is not sexually neutral, and that everyday environments are produced as heterosexual, through repeated and often unremarkable practices, so that it is the routinised nature of such practices, and not necessarily any explicit proscription, that makes other sexualities feel 'out of place' (Valentine, 1993). The collection that consolidated this position gave geographies of sexualities their own objects and methods, and helped to establish a vocabulary for studying the spatial organisation of sexual difference (Bell & Valentine, 1995). In particular, it was argued that sexuality is fundamentally spatial not least, because sexual citizenship is produced through the disparities in access to, and availability of, public space (Bell & Binnie, 2000). If belonging is granted spatially in this way, then movement between spaces is also movement between differing modes of belonging; a proposition that does, of course, have obvious consequences for tourism.

Tourism and leisure studies arrived at a similar place, by asking what holidays *actually do*. Travelling, it was argued, offered a release from the constraints of someone's everyday circumstances, so that a holiday could become a place in which a homosexual identity was rehearsed, validated, or even first embraced (Hughes, 1997). Work with gay and lesbian tourists then showed that destination choice was often structured by the anticipated safety a destination might offer, by the availability of recognisably LGBT+ friendly venues, and crucially, by markedly different calculations for men and women (Pritchard et al., 2000). The finding that mattered most for geography was not that such calculations existed in the first place, but that they were an attribute of destinations, as much as they were of the people choosing between them. It was argued then that tourism landscapes are, in other words, constructed *through* gender and sexuality, rather than

being merely marked by them (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). It is this specific argument, published in this same journal, that brings those two points together, and as a result, made sexuality a geographical question for tourism, rather than simply a behavioural one.

Importantly within this literature, critical examinations of 'the gay village' became a prominent spatial model through which these topics were explored. Districts such as Manchester's Gay Village, for example, made sexual difference commercially intelligible, allowing LGBT+ visibility to be claimed as political progress and made accessible to outsiders as evidence of the city's openness (Bell & Binnie, 2000). Yet LGBT+ identities were both legitimated and governed, despite the visibility that seemed to have been achieved, as the Gay Village became a district that could be branded, licensed, and policed (Bell & Binnie, 2004). At the same time, consumption of such spaces by non-gay visitors flourished, and was used to exemplify the kind of urban cosmopolitanism that cities during this period competed with one another to display (Rushbrook, 2002). Access to that claim of cosmopolitanism was, of course, unevenly distributed, so that the branding that made the village legible to (especially affluent) visitors, could at the same time, also exclude people according to categories of class and gender (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004). Crucially, this work already questioned the implicit biases underpinning the identifiable gay consumer, whose presence could be counted, marketed to, and fully seen.

Gay tourism scholarship brought these observations together, treating destinations as products of commercial routes, an annual calendar of events, embodied practices, political struggle, and differentiated mobilities, instead of as simply providing passive backdrops (Waitt & Markwell, 2006). Cruising encounters, for example, actively produce gay space, rather than simply occurring within it (Brown, 2008). Extending this focus on the production of place, Waitt et al. (2008) examined sexualised destinations through the interconnected scales of globalisation, the nation, the city, and the tourist body. Their framework allows us to consider residents as active participants in these processes, not least because everyday narratives and interactions help to make destinations meaningful and legible. Rather than asking whether residents sit outside of these scales, the more important question is how their influence is expressed across them. Puar's (2002) critique, however, revealed a different problem; the extant scholarship's attention to white gay capital, actually obscured women's mobilities and the colonial histories with their intersecting inequalities through which travel becomes possible, in the first place. Read together, these arguments show that enquiry in this area needs to focus not just on who can occupy sexualised space, but on who can make authoritative claims about it, too. Neither the bounded district, nor the affluent gay male alone, in other words, can stand for the field as a whole.

Cosmopolitanism and heteronormativity

One particularly important strand of critical scholarship challenged the conflation of visibility with progress by introducing concepts that revealed the power relations underpinning sexual identities and spaces. These concepts remain important to the argument developed here. Of particular relevance is heteronormativity, understood as a mode of organisation through which heterosexuality is unmarked and generalisable, whilst everything else is marked, definable, and locatable (Warner, 1991). Crucially, this arrangement is of course, fundamentally spatial, not least because

heterosexuality can remain an unmarked background to public life, whilst queer publics are made conspicuously sexual (Berlant & Warner, 1998). The argument is not simply then that sexual minorities should be granted better locations, but that the spatial organisation of sexual difference helps heterosexuality to secure its own apparent neutrality. A public that is understood to be everywhere, in other words, has no particular address, and nothing through which it can readily be pointed out.

For Duggan (2002), homonormativity describes the incorporation of certain lesbian and gay subjects through visibility, consumption, and privatised domesticity, without requiring any wider challenge to existing political or economic relations. What this offered, was a critical account of the terms on which recognition becomes possible, rather than simply a description of who becomes acceptable. Recognition and consumer belonging can in other words, demobilise wider sexual politics, so that inclusion itself, often comes at the expense of the demands it might otherwise pursue (Duggan, 2002). The affluent, domesticated, and commercially legible subject who emerges, is of course, also someone a destination can use to advertise itself, and who a passer-by can recognise, which gives the concept particular relevance for tourism geography. Puar (2007) extends this argument, showing how selected gay subjects can be incorporated into narratives of national liberalism and modernity, through comparison with places and populations imagined to be less tolerant, less modern. It is important to note, however, that homonationalism names an analytic of power and a condition of contemporary statecraft, rather than levelling an accusation against specific gay people (Puar, 2013). The focus of enquiry is based, therefore, on the relations through which inclusion is offered, rather than on classifying individual travellers.

Both concepts have since been shown to operate at scales well below the national level, and in ways that are themselves spatial, too. Gay tourism to Tel Aviv, for example, has been examined as an urban formation in which neoliberal decision-making, rather than questions of national belonging, drives the city's promotion (Hartal, 2019). This has been described as *economic* homonationalism, showing how LGBT+ residents become a marketed product, whilst the achievement of rights is confused with the specific recognition extended to LGBT+ people by government (Hartal, 2019). At the same time, it also draws on an Orientalist repertoire to distinguish it from the surrounding region and other Israeli cities, producing new ethnic hierarchies within its own gay population (Hartal & Sasson-Levy, 2021). This attention to the spatial production of sexual norms extends beyond debates about national identity. Homonormativity has likewise been understood through spatial normalisations with their own geographies, and as a structural and ideological formation, rather than simply a catalogue of images, or cultural norms (Browne et al., 2021; Burchiellaro, 2026). These concepts cannot, then, be confined to the national scale, or treated as indifferent to space, not least because it is precisely their spatial reach that the argument developed here draws upon.

At the same time, critical geographies caution against reading LGBT+ spaces as a simple map of resistance to heterosexual oppression, not least because sexual spaces are also produced through class, race, gender, mobility, and uneven access (Oswin, 2008). This matters for a resort like Sitges, whose reputation rests on visible gay presence, because what can be seen is already shaped by who can afford to be there, and by what the destination chooses to programme. The Tel Aviv work also raises a

methodological question: where a destination produces and circulates an account of its own openness, visitors' and residents' descriptions are already shaped by institutions with an interest in how the place is understood. Cosmopolitanism has been questioned in similar terms, since its openness can be ambivalent, selective, and focused on specific forms of difference that are the most easily accepted (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007). Brown's (2006) account of cosmopolitan camouflage, is particularly useful here too, showing as it does, the way that sexual difference becomes part of urban distinction without necessarily unsettling the hierarchies through which that distinction gains its value. The most direct antecedent to this article however, remains Binnie and Skeggs (2004) analysis of Manchester's gay village, where visible gay presence was consumed by non-gay observers as cosmopolitan social capital, through practices that were both inclusive, and simultaneously class-exclusionary.

Read together, this work establishes that the incorporation of sexual difference is selective, conditional, and productive of further exclusions, whilst being organised spatially across different scales, from the urban, inner-city district, right up to the nation state. What remains comparatively under-analysed, however, is the way that relationship takes shape in particular settings: how does the geometry of the brightly-lit promenade and the sparsely-lit beach, of the downstairs bar and the upstairs dark room, allow someone to claim interpretative authority over a scene they approach, and perhaps directly see, without ever actually entering? What does that authority offer them, and what does it leave unrecognised? The question is not, in other words, whether such consumption occurs, but how the spatial conditions both shape, and at the same time often limit, the claims that can be made about a destination.

The reorganisation of LGBT+ tourism geographies since 2011

Subsequent scholarship has complicated the relationship between territorial concentration, visibility, and belonging, demonstrating that different spatial arrangements of LGBTQ life can co-exist within the same place, at the same time. Whilst these perspectives increase our understanding of how sexual communities are organised, they nonetheless do not establish a clear sequence of change in Sitges itself. The bounded gay district remains important, but it cannot, of course, stand for LGBT+ sociality as a whole. Ghaziani's (2019) cultural archipelagos describe a distribution of venues, events, and residential clusters, whilst Nash and Gorman-Murray (2014) show how mobilities reshape sexual and gendered urban landscapes. These arrangements are not universal stages through which destinations necessarily pass. Although listings cannot, of course, directly measure all openings, closures, or quantify social life, in the United States, gay bar listings during and after COVID-19 restrictions, showed a changing mix of male-oriented, mixed-gender, and lesbian venues (Mattson, 2023).

Similarly, Ghaziani's (2024) study of London club nights, shows how temporary events sustain LGBT+ nightlife beyond permanent premises, without establishing a general disappearance of the gay district. Destination research adds another dimension to this work. Vorobjovas-Pinta (2018), for example, examines how shared identity is performed, and space appropriated, through 'neo-tribal belonging', so that the resort becomes a place of participation and attachment, rather than just an enclave existing until the tourists leave again. Work in medium-sized Spanish cities also questions the

assumption that meaningful LGBT+ life belongs only to large metropolitan centres (Jubany et al., 2022). The geographical question is therefore not whether one arrangement replaces another, but how these various forms co-exist, and how their boundaries matter both to participants, and observers, alike. Understanding those arrangements also requires attention to the technologies through which LGBT+ spaces are accessed and interpreted.

Digital mediation, for example, clearly changes the way that encounters become visible in the first place, not least because location-aware apps actually function to bring digital and physical spaces together, rather than simply replacing one with the other (Miles, 2017, 2021). Apps can, as a result, often remain an important part of resort sociality, even where gay men already share a physical tourist setting, so that the resort and the platform cannot be understood as successive, or mutually exclusive, spaces (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Dalla-Fontana, 2019). Nor does the use of digital technology mean that public sexual practice has ended. Research on media representations of cruising in Maspalomas, for example, examines how disputes over gay sexual practice, can also become questions about what a tourist destination is actually for (Valcuende et al., 2023). Instagram provides another means through which a destination's LGBT+ visibility is produced and circulated (Neves & Silveira, 2024). Visibility to participants, to passers-by, and to mediated audiences must therefore, be analytically separated out. An app-mediated encounter, for example, may underpin an active social geography, whilst leaving little visible to a non-digitally-participating observer. Whether it does so, and whether a destination's reputation then depends on other forms of visibility, remains a question for investigation in each setting.

At the same time, the field's attention has widened, with LGBT+ women's place-making being more fully examined through sociality, activism, and temporary claims on space, as well as within commercial venues (Drysdale et al., 2024; Podmore, 2006), and through the communication technologies that sustain dispersed networks (Duguay et al., 2025). LGBT+ women's mobilities in destinations have also been considered on their own terms (Beeth & Schänzel, 2024), whilst race and religion intersect with these questions too, both in experiences of Pride as a predominantly white space for LGBT+ people of colour (Lewis et al., 2024), and in the near-absence of LGBT+ Muslim travellers from the field's account of itself (Moufakkir, 2025). Nonetheless, reviews continue to find attention unevenly distributed across these sub-groupings (Qiu et al., 2025), and the argument that gender is constitutive of tourism geographies has had to be re-stated (Yang & Schänzel, 2025). Crucially, what the field studies, determines what it can know, so that where destinations are understood chiefly through travellers' accounts, and especially those of gay men, the place-making of people who leave far fewer publicly recognisable traces of themselves, is likely to remain less fully described.

Two further developments matter for the endurance of a destination's claim to openness, the first of which concerns the continuing vulnerability of such claims to political contestation. Declarations against so-called LGBT+ ideology in Poland, for example, showed that European Union membership guarantees neither uniform rights, nor uniform safety, and that sexual exclusion can operate at precisely the level through which destinations themselves are governed (Žuk et al., 2021). In such places, organised hetero-activist opposition is itself understood as a spatial

formation with its own geographies, and as a counterpart to the normalisations it opposes, too (Browne et al., 2021). Similarly, Benson's (2020) work with British residents in France, for example, also shows how Brexit unsettled European belonging through classed bordering processes, rather than through a simple, uniform, loss of mobility.

Secondly, the incorporation of LGBT+ inclusion into national and more localised tourist offerings, has been examined as a form of 'homo-capitalist' politics (Burchiellaro, 2024). A globally mobile entrepreneurial set, can sell sexual liberation directly through partnerships with tourism authorities and private companies, whilst the consequences for those unable (or, perhaps, *unwilling*) to do so remain much more ambivalent, especially in the nightlife venues where local and visiting sexualities so often meet (Burchiellaro, 2024). Read alongside the argument that homonormativity is a structural and ideological formation, rather than simply a set of representations (Burchiellaro, 2026), this work asks how investment and partnerships produce openness, and how the capacity to convert it into value is (often unequally) distributed. This shifts attention from what destinations are to how they are continually made and remade through the relationships, narratives, and investments that sustain them. Tourism geography has, meanwhile, begun formally to reflect on its own development as a sub-discipline (Cheer & Mostafanezhad, 2025), whilst continuing to emphasise the relational production of place (Córdoba Azcárate, 2025).

A historical example: Sitges, 2010–2011

The case study offered here, draws on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Sitges in 2010–2011. Walking along the seafront, spending time in cafés and bars, sailing, playing padel, volunteering backstage at a multilingual pantomime, and working in a bar during the town's first Gay Pride festival, allowed me to follow British migrants through their lives within the town. Initial contacts made during a two-week pilot study supported snowball recruitment across business, leisure, school, gay nightlife, and resident networks. The British focus came from a doctoral study of a national group whose relationship to the town was shaped by leisure and consumption. More than 200 British migrants, alongside a small number of long-stay returning visitors with property or business interests, were encountered through sustained or repeated interaction, and just over 100 took part in interviews, whilst short-stay holidaymakers were excluded. Interviewees were predominantly white and English, approximately 60 per cent female and 40 per cent male, and all over 18; around a fifth described themselves as gay or lesbian. Gay and lesbian participants were included by design, since heteronormativity concerns a spatial order whose effects become clearer through accounts from people differently positioned within it.

Unstructured interviews began with general questions about coming to Sitges and living there, whilst gay visibility was never introduced by me, but arose unprompted as participants explained the town's cosmopolitanism. Attempts to audio-record produced stilted talk, so I took shorthand notes and typed them up in full immediately afterwards. Quotations therefore come from those notes, rather than verbatim transcripts, and square brackets mark my editorial insertions. No photographs or other

visual material were collected. Interview notes were read alongside field diaries of observation, informal conversation, and participation, then coded manually through an iterative movement between recurrent themes and theoretical interpretation, with repetition considered across social settings, whilst discrepant accounts were retained. Notes cannot, of course, be replayed, and depend on what the researcher noticed at the time (Tessier, 2012). Two participants quoted extensively in the thesis checked their interview notes for factual accuracy and were subsequently re-interviewed, although this provided only a limited check, rather than validation of every quotation or interpretation. The claim is therefore one of transferability, rather than statistical generalisability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), based on recurrence within this group, in this place, and at this time.

The research received ethical approval from the author's doctoral institution, in accordance with the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics, before data collection, although the approval reference predates the institution's ten-year retention period and is no longer available. All interview participants gave verbal informed consent, all participant names are pseudonyms, and the material of one participant who later withdrew was deleted, with consent treated as ongoing within ethnographic relationships. People observed in public sexualised spaces were not treated as research participants, are not described as identifiable individuals, and venues are described generically. As a white, British woman who lived in Sitges throughout the fieldwork, I was excluded from cruising grounds, dark rooms, and much of the directly sexual life of the town's gay tourism economy. What I could access, however, was the rich and often candid discourse about that sexual life, so that I too was near these spaces without entering them, and dependent on others' accounts of what they contained. Studying how non-LGBT+ people narrate LGBT+ space risks making gay life appear legitimate only through heterosexuals' descriptions. I have tried to keep that limitation in view, by treating participants' statements as evidence of their interpretations, rather than of gay men's lives, and by including gay and lesbian accounts that contest the dominant framing. The asymmetry between gay male and lesbian visibility only became apparent to me when a British lesbian participant pointed it out. That interview sent me back through earlier material, where the pattern had been present but unread, and prompted me to test it with others.

Sitges was already legible as gay-friendly before these migrants arrived, and was marketed as cosmopolitan in no small part on the strength of a reputation that gay communities had produced through venues, events, and repeat mobilities (Author B). The rights claims and political achievements of LGBT+ movements in Spain also helped to establish the conditions in which that reputation could be sustained (Calvo & Trujillo, 2011). British migrants, however, tended to describe these conditions through an unmarked European liberal modernity, recasting Spanish and Catalan political achievements as a kind of Pan-Western European liberalism. This was a homonationalist logic running through 'Europeanness', rather than through any one nation (Puar, 2007). Within the town, gay bars, beaches, saunas, festivals, cafés, residential streets, and cruising areas formed an interconnected constellation, rather than a single quarter, so that this dispersal placed visible sexual difference alongside the routes through which people already moved.

During the fieldwork, a low concrete and stone wall separated the raised promenade from the sand below, forming a threshold after dark between observers above and men below. The lit promenade and comparatively dark beach produced what can be read, through Anderson (2009), as an atmospheric edge. Someone walking past could see sexual activity without descending to join it, so that proximity-without-entry was made possible through this particular spatial arrangement. The wall did not prevent movement, but distinguished ordinary passersby, from those approaching a sexual encounter, and its effect depended on lighting, timing, gendered expectations, and the purposes for which people used either side, rather than on explicit rules of permission. As described above, walking by after dinner made proximity possible, whilst pointing the scene out to a newcomer converted that proximity into a claim to cosmopolitan knowledge, so that explaining what the space contained was, in this sense, also to claim authority over it. As Lucy put it:

'I think that there is a lot of gay sex, it's obvious, I mean, all you have to do is walk along the beach at night! So, I think it's like the gay community being here gives you a sense that anything goes in Sitges, you really do feel like anything goes here... everyone knows that they're [gay men] promiscuous and so you just feel like anything goes, like it gives the green light to do whatever you want!' (Lucy, heterosexual woman, teacher)

It was a green light that Lucy, a heterosexual woman, claimed for herself: what she saw were men on a beach, but crucially, what she narrated was the gay community. Nothing here does, of course, establish that the men observed identified as gay, that they were visitors rather than residents or workers, that they shared an age, nationality, or economic position, or, of course, that money never changed hands. I claim none of these things, and the observers established none of them either, but in a key sense, they did not need to. Unfamiliar men at a distance became 'gay tourism' through the narrative itself, confirming Sitges as a destination, rather than simply a town where people lived and worked. The gay subject most readily incorporated into these accounts was imagined as male, white, affluent, and consumer-oriented (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Duggan, 2002). The permissiveness attributed to him rested on an oft-repeated generalisation about what men want when women are not present to restrain them. In Berlant and Warner (1998) terms, heteronormativity is therefore recalibrated, rather than unsettled, as non-heterosexual lives are made to confirm the gender order through which they become subordinate elsewhere.

A related arrangement occurred indoors, although here sexual activity was known through accounts, rather than directly seen. From the street, the bar I have in mind appeared part of the general evening economy, whilst a staircase at the back led to an upstairs dark room understood as a space for anonymous sexual encounters between men. The staircase was visible, without signage or apparent gatekeeping, but access was differentiated through gender, presumed sexuality, and intention, so that its openness did not make it equally available to everyone, including me.

A British migrant could drink downstairs, know or be told about the room above, and point it out as evidence of Sitges' permissiveness without climbing the stairs, making entry to the bar distinct from entering its sexual space. Bars also mixed in the early evening, becoming more clearly demarcated as the night wore on. Such

distinctions need not depend on a locked door, since sexual publics can be organised through ordinary, taken-for-granted arrangements (Warner, 2000). The tolerance participants described was conditional in this specific sense: it required little of the observer whilst sexual difference remained where, and when, it was expected. What happened when those boundaries were crossed cannot be established from these data. What this arrangement could not accommodate does, of course, matter too. Whilst strong claims about lesbians' actual experiences in Sitges would require a different sample and design (Podmore, 2006; Valentine, 1993), lesbian-coded spatial scenes were largely absent from the British migrant place-narratives examined here. Within the gender-essentialist repertoire through which those narratives were organised, lesbian sexuality was difficult to recognise at all:

'When I was in my twenties, you seriously, you're a hostage to your cock! ... when you're old enough to get pussy whenever you want it, you stop wanting it anyway! For gay guys I think it's different, they can have it all the time... But it does make you wonder, when you think of two women, whether they ever do anything at all!' (Pierre, heterosexual man, salesman)

Within Pierre's account, which understands sex through male desire, lesbian sexuality became unintelligible. His comparison between youth and later life also made age part of how desire and belonging were narrated, although it cannot establish the age profile of the sexual scene itself. The question is therefore one of narratability, rather than relative visibility alone, and lesbian participants identified this asymmetry themselves, locating it both in migrants' talk and in the town's programming:

'They pay lip service to us [lesbians], I suppose because they think they have to, but let's be honest, there was hardly anything for women at all, a BBQ in someone's garden, a meal in a restaurant... They basically gave us the crap left over after the boys had had their fun!' (Jo, lesbian, lecturer)

Jo located the imbalance beyond the narratives considered here, suggesting that the town organised its gay visibility around men before any migrant described it. Another participant questioned Pride's commercial priorities and provision for disabled spectators, although these were criticisms of programming and access, rather than an accessibility audit (Author A). Class also shaped the wider accounts, as imagined affluent gay consumers distinguished Sitges from the working-class British tourism participants disparaged, so that the stereotype helped to make the place meaningful, without establishing gay men's actual wealth (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004). Race, age, and physical access, therefore, complicate claims of general inclusion, even though the retained material cannot establish their distribution across the town.

The spaces that heterosexual migrants narrated from outside were also lived by gay male participants from within, and not always in the same way. For some, the town's dispersed sexual geography was an explicit attraction, offering pleasure, anonymity, community, and belonging (Waitt & Markwell, 2006). Anonymity can matter for men who are not out elsewhere, although these spaces are not equally open or safe for everyone. Other participants, however, found that the circuit's public dominance narrowed the terms through which they could be recognised:

'I don't know why they want that to be what represents us, it makes me so angry! I mean, all the cruising grounds, all that stuff, I know it's common knowledge, but it shouldn't be all that defines the gay scene, it shouldn't be the only thing the public knows us for!' (Antony, gay man, stylist)

Antony's anger shows how the sexualised visibility through which heterosexual British migrants experienced Sitges as permissive could also constrain gay men's public recognition. His account identifies a possible cost of heteronormative cosmopolitanism, not least because what provides a permissive backdrop for one observer can narrow the identity available to someone associated with it. That possibility does not, of course, establish that all gay participants experienced visibility in the same way.

Heteronormative cosmopolitanism: its distinctiveness and limits

Heteronormative cosmopolitanism names a spatial and relational process through which selected, recognisable, and locatable forms of sexual difference become evidence of both a cosmopolitan place and a cosmopolitan self, whilst the observer's position and the hierarchies organising the encounter remain substantially untroubled. A cosmopolitan place, in the sense used here, is not simply diverse, but one whose openness has become a legible attribute of the destination, through comparison with places understood to be less tolerant. This draws on Massey's (2005) relational account of place, without equating relationality itself with tolerance. Cosmopolitan self-image, on the other hand, concerns the sense of oneself as someone who recognises and enjoys difference (Author A). The concept therefore brings these two claims together, asking how particular spatial arrangements allow an account of the place to become an account of the self.

Proximity-without-entry describes how that conversion takes place. 'Entry' means joining the sexual scene or participating in its practices, rather than simply crossing the door of a gay venue, since physical access and social belonging are not interchangeable. On the beach, activity could be seen from the promenade, whilst in the bar, the staircase located activity understood to occur beyond it, without making the activity itself visible. A pre-existing gay reputation provided a frame through which both could be interpreted (Author B), although reputation alone is not an encounter with a locatable scene. For the mechanism to operate, a perceptible practice or spatial cue must be associated with sexual difference, the observer must be able to approach and narrate it without participating, and that narration must make both place and observer appear open to difference. Boundaries organise this relation even where nobody visibly polices them, and tolerance remains conditional, in that observers can value difference whilst leaving unquestioned the terms on which others occupy the space.

The concept extends the accounts of cosmopolitan distinction developed by Binnie and Skeggs (2004) and Rushbrook (2002), by focusing on the relation between spatial differentiation and narrative authority. A view from above, knowledge of an upstairs room, or an evening rhythm can provide material through which claims about a destination and a self are made. Host-community research has already shown how residents' responses to gay tourism can turn on interpretations of sexual behaviour

(Hughes et al., 2010), but the question here is how those interpretations become claims to cosmopolitanism, and how spatial arrangements allow such claims without participation. Homonormativity and homonationalism remain necessary for understanding the incorporation of particular sexual subjects, including at urban and municipal scales (Browne et al., 2021; Burchiellaro, 2026; Hartal, 2019; Hartal & Sasson-Levy, 2021). Heteronormative cosmopolitanism therefore examines the observer's position within those relations, drawing on their spatial understanding of power, rather than proposing an account detached from it.

Work on the political economy of LGBT+ tourism helps clarify this distinction. Homocapitalist analysis follows those able to sell liberation, tracing partnerships between activists, entrepreneurs, corporations, and tourism authorities, alongside the zones of encounter these produce between local and visiting sexualities (Burchiellaro, 2024). Pinkwashing describes the reputational uses of sexual liberalism, although Ritchie (2015) argues that totalising accounts explain less than close attention to how bodies are regulated as they move through space and time. The relation considered here belongs to that second register, and depends on neither a campaign nor promotional intent. It also speaks to work on destination image, but with an emphasis on how an observer assembles that image whilst walking through a place. The question is therefore less about the image a destination projects than about the conditions through which a resident comes to claim one for themselves. Crucially, the concept asks how this happens on the ground: what can be seen, from where, at what hour, and through whose authority, and what that interpretation offers the person making it.

It is important to be clear about the limits of this account too, since the concept concerns an observer's relation to sexualised space, rather than the lives of the people observed, and provides no measure of prejudice. Nor does every nearby observer make a cosmopolitan claim. The mechanism may fail where sexual difference is not legible, where approaching it threatens the observer's social position, or where an encounter unsettles the anticipated distinction between observer and observed. Private or networked sociality may leave few cues for this kind of narration, although that limits the account, rather than diminishing the sociality itself. Visible LGBT+ women's or mixed-gender spaces could equally support different narratives, so that their exclusion is not inevitable. Where reputation persists without a locatable encounter, it needs to be considered as an inherited or mediated claim, rather than evidence of proximity-without-entry. These are propositions for comparison, and cannot establish changes in Sitges.

A future agenda for tourism geographies

The concept raises a question about what happens to a destination's claim to openness, when the visibility on which it depends is actively re-distributed. The evidence considered here, actually points towards several possibilities, since encounters can be arranged through apps that a passer-by cannot see (Miles, 2017, 2021), whilst public practice persists and is contested, now substantially through digital media (Valcuende et al., 2023). Destination visibility can also be produced for circulation beyond what is encountered in person, on foot (Neves & Silveira, 2024). A reputation may, therefore, persist as a legacy, detached from anything immediately observable, so that destination identities might actually *outlive* their material grounds.

Alternatively, interpretative authority may move towards those who are most able to produce and optimise circulating images, changing what observers on the ground can contribute. The two could also co-exist unevenly within a destination, with observation remaining significant in some sites, but doing no such work in others. Each possibility implies a different distribution of authority over what a place is understood to be, and fieldwork could establish which of those most usefully applies. Resort destinations in particular, offer a useful comparison, both with urban, inner-city districts, and with resort studies centred on participants themselves (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018), particularly in relation to the question of how the same setting might sustain belonging for those participating, whilst also allowing outsiders to claim it as evidence of openness.

To explore these questions, research needs to include people occupying different positions within the destination, so that although the wider literature remains uneven in whose experiences it represents (Qiu et al., 2025), host-community research could nonetheless offer an important starting point (Hughes et al., 2010). Similarly, a geography of the observer would bring residents, service workers, event organisers, and destination staff into conversation with those whose lives are being narrated, whilst avoiding the assumption that LGBT+ life becomes legitimate or validated primarily through descriptions of outsiders. In this vein, participatory interpretation and comparison between accounts, could help to identify disagreements that observation alone cannot resolve. So too can historical ethnography contribute, provided its value as a record of a particular period is distinguished from any claim about current conditions, as has been outlined above. Contemporary research could revisit the sites and relations considered here, but only new evidence could establish what had persisted, and what had changed.

Comparison would also allow the concept's reach to be examined, by asking whether, and under what conditions, this specific arrangement can be identified elsewhere. Where visibility is more tightly enclosed, more thoroughly commercialised, or more evenly distributed between men and women, the conversion might operate completely differently, or perhaps even fail. Settings in which sexual citizenship is contracting do also, of course, pose a further challenge, since visibility that supports a cosmopolitan claim in one place, might just as easily become evidence of danger in another (Browne et al., 2021; Žuk et al., 2021). Benson's (2020) account of classed bordering raises a related question for British migrants, not least because contemporarily unequal conditions of mobility and residence following the 2016 Brexit referendum, may ultimately determine who can claim a cosmopolitan self through the kinds of proximity described above, too.

Gendered narratability also matters for whose geographies are studied in the first place, since where LGBT+ women's place-making is organised through networks and communication technologies (Beeth & Schänzel, 2024; Duguay et al., 2025), a focus on publicly recognisable venues alone, will inevitably leave an important part of it completely unexamined. Future work, therefore, needs to ask what a destination's openness towards (especially sexuality-based) difference actually means, when the scenes through which it is narrated make only some constituencies recognisable, and not others. This has practical consequences too, since destinations' decisions about which visibilities to advertise, where to locate them, and who can access them, determine the terms of belonging in the first place (Author A).

Conclusion

Tourism geography has established how sexual minorities produce tourist places, how their access remains uneven, and how destinations turn sexual tolerance into a marketable attribute. This review brings these arguments together to specify how proximity to sexual difference becomes evidence of both a cosmopolitan destination and a cosmopolitan self. Heteronormative cosmopolitanism names that relation, whilst proximity-without-entry identifies the spatial conditions through which it operates. Crucially, observers can claim openness through an encounter without joining the sexual scene, and without questioning the hierarchies through which it becomes available to them. The contribution lies in showing how thresholds, sight-lines, and temporal rhythms make this conversion possible, connecting the material organisation of sexualised space to the authority through which both places and selves are narrated.

This matters because the visibility that sustains a destination's cosmopolitan reputation can also narrow the terms on which sexual difference is recognised within it. The same arrangement may allow one person to claim tolerance whilst leaving another recognisable chiefly through the sexual practices attributed to them. Destination reputation and social inclusion are therefore distinct questions, even where they draw on the same visible scenes. For tourism geography, the analytical task extends beyond identifying whose presence makes a place appear diverse, to examining who can interpret that presence, whose accounts become authoritative, and which lives remain difficult to narrate at all. It also raises a question about the durability of cosmopolitan place-making: how far can a claim to openness endure when the scenes that made it credible are redistributed, become less publicly perceptible, or are interpreted by different people?

The Sitges material records one historical arrangement, and cannot establish whether that arrangement persists in the town today. Reconsidered through subsequent scholarship, however, it helps specify a relation whose conditions and consequences can be investigated elsewhere. Its significance lies in showing how claims to openness can be produced through spatial arrangements that leave unequal relations of authority substantially intact. Heteronormative cosmopolitanism makes those relations part of the explanation of how a destination becomes legible as tolerant. The enduring geographical question is therefore how openness becomes credible as an attribute of place, who gains authority by narrating it, and whose lives remain only partially recognised through the claims it sustains.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests.

Funding

This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/G014604/1.

Data availability statement

No new data were collected for this review. The historical interview notes and field diaries informing the article are not publicly available because they contain sensitive information and disclosure could compromise participants' privacy and confidentiality. The published sources reviewed are identified in the reference list.

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