Revisiting the Ghetto: How the Meanings of Gay Districts Are Shaped By the Meanings of the City.

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How The Meanings of Gay Districts Are Shaped by The Meanings of The City

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores how LGBT consumers’ understandings of their local LGBT district are negotiated alongside their understandings of the broader urban context. The data include 31 in-depth interviews. This paper contributes to the LGBT literature but also broader academic discussions about the meaning of place and space in consumer lives.

INTRODUCTION
This paper explores how Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) consumers interpret their local LGBT district in relation to other places in the city. Existing research has provided two competing understandings of LGBT districts, framing them as ‘gay villages’ (Haslop, Hill, & Schmidt, 1998) or ‘gay ghettos’ (Kates, 2002). The gay ghetto understanding has been cited more frequently, and is arguably the most influential of the two perspectives. However, it assumes that LGBT districts are embedded into cities where LGBT identities are not accepted. Drawing on data from 31 interviews with LGBT consumers in Manchester, UK, this paper argues that the gay village perspective may provide a more useful understanding. The gay village perspective frames LGBT districts as commercial service spaces, rather than subcultural places of resistance and community. This paper contributes to the literature by exploring how recent social changes have transformed LGBT consumers’ understandings of place, and how marketing and consumer researchers should adjust their own understandings accordingly. It also takes into account the experiences of lesbian and transgender consumers, who are often overlooked in existing accounts. Finally, this paper also contributes to the consumer research literature on place and space, exploring how the meanings of a place are negotiated in conjunction with the meanings of the broader context.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The original ghetto was a district of Venice where Jewish people were forcibly confined in the 1500s, but the term has since been adopted by sociologists to refer to any urban district dominated by a particular minority group (Ghaziani, 2015, p. 314). In the twentieth century LGBT ‘ghettos’ began to emerge in many Western cities (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). Following on from Soja’s (1980) notion of the sociospatial dialectic, it could be argued that ghettos are the materialisation of “a conspicuous and locally dominant subculture that is socially isolated from the larger community” (Levine, 1979, p. 1739). One of the most famous, San Francisco’s Castro district, was described by an LGBT activist as a “refugee camp for homosexuals [sic]... a ghetto, out of self-protection.” (Wittman, 1970, pp. 67-68) This emic definition suggests that, in the LGBT context at least, the term ghetto is associated with segregation and stigmatisation, but also community and safety (Hubbard, Gorman-Murray, & Nash, 2015).

In marketing and consumer research, Steven Kates (1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004) is the key author for those interested in understanding the ‘gay subculture of consumption’ (Kates, 2002). He adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection, immersing himself in “the downtown gay ghetto” of a Canadian city to generate insights about the gay subculture (Kates, 2002, p. 385). This LGBT district features prominently in his understanding, and his choice of the term ‘ghetto’ was deliberate. Kates (2002, p. 386) argued that “homosexuality was still somewhat stigmatized” in the Canadian city that he studied, so the gay ghetto was a place of “community” where LGBT consumers “felt safe and secure to walk, talk, behave, and consume in as open a way as they wished”. Gay ghettos could be understood as heterotopian places, “where alternative forms of social organisation take place” (Chatzidakis, Maclean, & Bradshaw, 2012, p. 497). It is within the ghetto that LGBT consumers re-learn how to consume, use consumption to express subcultural affiliations, and resist the heteronormative mainstream market (Kates, 2001, 2002, 2004).

In many cities local residents and tourist marketers adopt the term ‘gay village’ rather than gay ghetto (e.g. Collier, 2014; Nash, 2006, 2013; Simpson, 2012). The term village suggests geographical concentration without invoking the connotations of segregation or stigmatisation that come with the word ghetto (Hubbard et al., 2015, p. 290). Haslop et al. (1998, p. 318) studied the gay village of Manchester, a city in the North West of England. They noted how their participants did not express feelings of ‘community’ or ‘safety’ when discussing the gay village. These participants experienced far less homophobia in the rest of Manchester, and thus “did not feel compelled to visit a bar purely on its homosexual status” (Haslop et al., 1998, p. 322). Instead, Haslop et al. (1998) argued that Manchester’s gay village should be understood as a service space because it was more like a tourist destination than a subcultural refugee camp (see also Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Simpson, 2012). Gay villages are commercial places that differ from other locations in a largely superficial or aesthetic way, rather than being heterotopic or subcultural places.

In marketing and consumer research there has been little attempt to compare or contrast the gay village and the gay ghetto perspectives. In sociology and geography these two perspectives have been considered alongside one another, but largely through a chronological narrative where gay ghettos transform into gay villages as LGBT people become more accepted (Ghaziani, 2015; Hubbard et al., 2015). Indeed, some researchers propose that many Western countries have entered a ‘post-gay’ era where LGBT people experience stigmatisation so rarely that they no longer see their sexuality as a defining or dominant identity (Ghaziani, 2011; Ng, 2013). In ‘post-gay’ cities the demand for gay villages is low, making them economically unviable and thus under threat of dissolution (Brown, 2014; Ghaziani, 2014; Nash, 2013).

All three perspectives, but particularly the chronological narrative, implicitly suggest that the meanings of a LGBT district can only be understood in relation to the broader urban contexts in which they are embedded. However, the chronological narrative overlooks those LGBT consumers who continue to experience discrimination (Brewis & Jack, 2010; Duggan, 2002; Heaphy, 2011; McDermott, 2011), and who may therefore still seek out places of safety and community (i.e. ghettos). It also fails to acknowledge that some LGBT-oriented places and festivals, such as gay pride events (Ammaturo, 2015), continue to thrive. Finally, the account overlooks the fact that Haslop et al. (1998) published their gay village perspective four years before Kates (2002) wrote about gay ghettos. These ‘out of sync’ exceptions question the chronological narrative. However, they do not challenge
the underlying assumption that the meanings of LGBT districts are defined (in part) through comparisons and contrasts to other places within a city. This paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of LGBT districts by exploring this implicit semiotic relationship in more detail.

CONTEXT AND METHOD

This paper revisits the research context of Manchester, almost two decades after the research by Haslop et al. (1998). Manchester is a British city with a very “visible and publicly accessible” LGBT district, known locally as the Gay Village (Simpson, 2013, p. 284). Researchers have noted how this place is a “regional magnet” for LGBT people (Simpson, 2012, p. 1) and cosmopolitan heterosexuals (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Haslop et al., 1998). Of the many intersecting streets within the Gay Village, Canal Street is the most famous and is often used synecdochically to refer to the whole LGBT district. This street was made particularly famous by the 1999-2000 television show Queer as Folk, a show that presented the gay subculture to the masses in positive, but sometimes shocking, ways (Skeggs, Moran, Tyrer, & Binnie, 2004).

In 2015 a show by the same writer, Cucumber, explored contemporary LGBT lives in Manchester. Notably there were only a few fleeting scenes set in Manchester’s Gay Village. This representation of LGBT Manchester echoes discussions in the local and national media about the diminishing role of Manchester’s Gay Village (e.g. Collier, 2014). The argument goes that Manchester is renowned for tolerating and even celebrating LGBT people (Senior & Dalton, 2011; Simpson, 2012, p. 2), so LGBT-specific places are no longer necessary. At the same time, LGBT social groups (such as gay rugby clubs), specialist venues (such as saunas), and specialist events (like Sparkle, the transgender festival) still thrive in Manchester (see Simpson, 2014, p. 152). This contradictory evidence suggests that Manchester and its LGBT district defy easy categorisation under a single, overarching narrative. Instead there may be multiple to explore.

To explore these narratives the first author conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with LGBT residents of Manchester. Existing research has generally constructed LGBT samples through ethnographic immersion in a LGBT district (Haslop et al., 1998; Kates, 2002). As sampling from Manchester’s gay village could potentially limit the range of experiences that would be expressed, a directory of LGBT leisure groups was used to identify potential participants (see Simpson, 2014). Three groups agreed to participate. The committee of each group disseminated an information sheet about the study via email, and individuals volunteered to participate by contacting the researcher directly. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then analysed in NVivo. As the interviews and data analysis continued the first author began approaching members selectively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), seeking to diversify the sample further. In the final sample six participants identified as lesbians, one as transgender, and one as asexual. Ages ranged from mid-twenties to late sixties, with a fairly even spread of participants in each age group (20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s). A range of occupations and economic backgrounds were covered, but the sample was predominantly white and university educated.

The interviews varied in length from 23 to 115 minutes, but generally lasted just over an hour. They were conducted in locations that were suitable for audio recording but also comfortable for participants. Interviewees were given no remuneration for participation. The interviews were fully transcribed, at which point details were omitted or altered to ensure participant anonymity. Interviews covered a range of topics connected with the participants’ sexual identity and their lifestyle. Analysis followed an initial process of open coding, where the research identified interesting themes in the data, followed by a process of categorising, where these themes were organised to reveal recurring patterns (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013).

FINDINGS

The findings suggest that LGBT consumers interpreted Manchester’s Gay Village in multiple different ways. Manchester’s Gay Village featured as a topic in all of the interviews, often being raised by the interviewees before the first author asked a specific question on the topic. During analysis the authors began to notice that participants’ understandings of Manchester’s Gay Village were often related to their understandings of Manchester as a city.

A number of the interviewees argued that an LGBT-specific district was unnecessary in contemporary Manchester because the city was such an accepting place for LGBT people. Several participants spoke about how they felt comfortable holding hands with their partners in public. Participants provided only a couple of passing references to homophobic incidents in Manchester, none of which were based participants’ own experiences. Within this context of acceptance, participants did not associate the gay village with strong feelings of safety (c.f. Kates, 2002; Levine, 1979; Wittman, 1970). Many participants interpreted the gay village as a site of consumption, rather than a place of community. When seeking new consumption experiences or pleasant consumption environments, these participants ranked features such as price, atmosphere, food, or décor above the “homosexual status” of a place (Haslop et al., 1998, p. 322). Participants described Manchester’s gay village as overpriced, lacking atmosphere, alcohol-oriented, and generally an undesirable place to be.

Given the above, it is perhaps unsurprising that many interviewees rarely socialised in the gay village. One of the most frequent visitors was Lee, a gay man in his late 20s, but even he only visited once a week. Other participants could not even remember the last time that they had been to the gay village. These participants were highly critical of those who visited Canal Street regularly, arguing that they ‘ghettoised’ themselves by doing so. Such over-consumption was viewed as tantamount to self-imposed social segregation, at least in an accepting city such as Manchester. Kates (2002, p. 393) noted that those who consumed “exclusively in the geographic and social confines of the gay area” were referred to as ‘ghetto queens’. The data here suggested that this symbolic threshold was far lower in Manchester. It was not just those who consumed ‘exclusively’ in the LGBT district that were viewed with disdain, but also those who went there ‘regularly’. Some participants saw weekly visits to the LGBT district as too regular, but for others even monthly consumption was described as unnecessary.

The re-interpretation of the gay village as a consumption site was a common theme across the majority of interviews. However, participants who defined themselves as lesbians or as older gay men tended to distance themselves from the gay village more than most. In contrast to the more upmarket or ‘mature’ consumption venues that could be found in the rest of Manchester, they argued that the bars and clubs found in the gay village were mostly oriented towards the lifestyle of young, single gay men. For instance, most bars in the gay village offered cheap alcoholic drinks and played loud dance music, rather than providing high-quality food and places where people could talk to one another. Young, single gay men in the sample often echoed this interpretation. Some even argued that the gay village should diversify to better serve the needs of other LGBT people. However, these consumers also re-interpreted the gay village in a more positive way. The cheap drinks and ‘unsophisticated’
music found in these places were described as the perfect setting for ‘trashy’ nights out and weekends of excessiveness. The gay village became a site for “trash and excess”, a cultural trope that has long been associated with LGBT consumers (see Visconti, 2008, p. 124). These young and single gay men felt that the gay village provided unique (and even tailored) consumption experiences that could not be found elsewhere in Manchester. Importantly, such experiences of trash and excess were carefully “compartmentalised” (Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002, p. 263). The young and single gay men in the sample felt that the gay village was somewhere that they should only visit from time to time (c.f. Kates, 2002, p. 386).

While a number of venues in the gay village focused on young, single gay men, other venues had identified alternative target audiences. Mary’s House was a bar styled around the theme of a traditional English pub; it had quiet ambient music, real ale, and good quality food. Other venues provided high tea, carnivalesque drag shows, and other experiences that could not be found in the rest of the city. The participants who spoke about these alternative venues in their interviews were also the participants that spoke about Manchester as a multicultural city. The gay village was framed as a place within which to experience ‘LGBT culture’, with Manchester being understood as a mosaic of different cultures. This understanding was most clearly articulated by Hannah, a lesbian in her 40s, who compared “gay bars” in present-day Manchester to “Jazz clubs” or “Irish pubs”. In other words, LGBT venues were themed places where different LGBT cultures were packaged and sold as experiences. This contrasts with Kates’ (2002) understanding of LGBT districts as sub-cultural ghettos.

While the majority of participants described Manchester as an accepting place for all LGBT consumers, some were reflective that Manchester was not always so inclusive. A number of participants described transgender consumers as a potentially vulnerable group that continued to use Canal Street as a place of safety and community. Robin, who was the only self-identifying transgender person to be interviewed in this study, described how the gay village was the hub of the regional transgender community. Robin cited Sparkle, a national transgender festival based in the city of Manchester, as an illustrative example of this. Robin also felt that venues in the gay village were far more likely to be considerate of transgender issues than venues in other parts of Manchester. For instance, one bar constructed a unisex changing area specifically for transgender patrons. Robin argued that the gay village remained an important place for the transgender community because transgender people still experienced discrimination in the rest of Manchester. While other participants described few experiences of discrimination, Robin provided two personal accounts of transphobia. Transgender consumers were not the only vulnerable group mentioned by participants. Lesbian, gay, or bisexual people from certain religious, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds were also cited as groups who might continue to experience discrimination, even in an accepting city like Manchester. For such consumers the gay village was understood as a place of safety and community (i.e. a positive ghetto) because the rest of Manchester was seen as a socially and physically dangerous place to consume openly as LGB or T.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings suggest that LGBT consumers’ understandings of their local LGBT district depend, at least in part, on their understandings of the broader urban context. Understanding these places within their urban context avoids adopting a single overarching narrative, a zeitgeist of stigmatisation or acceptance. Rather it provides a more nuanced account that takes into consideration the multiple coeval perspectives of consumers. The findings suggest that the gay village understanding provided by Haslop et al. (1998) is still the most appropriate way to understand Manchester’s Gay Village. Participants use the gay village as a source of unique consumption experiences, a place to consume a commodified gay culture. This suggests an alternative narrative to the inevitable decline of LGBT places provided by recent research (i.e. Ghaziani, 2014). However, the data also suggest that Kates’ (2002) ghetto perspective can also be useful to understand some LGBT consumers’ experiences in supposedly ‘post-gay’ cities. The findings suggest that instead of one narrative or theoretical understanding, researchers should use multiple perspectives simultaneously to explore diversity of experiences that can co-exist within the same city.

Haslop et al. (1998) argued that gay villages could be understood as servicescapes (see also Rosenbaum, 2005). The findings here provide some support for this argument. Building on Hannah’s suggestion that venues in the gay village are like ‘Jazz clubs’ or ‘Irish pubs’, it is argued here that the literature on themed environments may be helpful (Borghini et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2002). The owners of LGBT venues may carefully design their environments to draw on cultural tropes, just like the sports-themed ESPN Zone draws upon sporting culture (Sherry Jr et al., 2004). Future research may seek to draw more links between the culturally informed research on servicescapes (Diamond et al., 2009; Kozinets, Sherry Jr, et al., 2004), and research into commodified subcultures (Goulding & Saren, 2007; Rinallo, 2007; Schouten, Martin, & McAlexander, 2007). In doing so, new insights into the relationships between subcultures, commodification, and servicescapes may be gleaned. Researchers may also wish to adopt a more critical perspective than the exploratory approach adopted here. For instance, what negative consequences might the commodification and thematisation of LGBT culture have for LGBT people and politics?

Cresswell (2004, p. 7) defines a place as “a meaningful location”. The interpretation offered here suggests that the meanings of LGBT districts are negotiated within a web of other meaningful urban locations. This interpretation may provide some transferrable insights for marketing and consumer researchers who are interested more broadly in space, place, and consumption. According to Visconti, Sherry Jr, Borghini, and Anderson (2010, p. 513), places can be understood as “appropriated sites where social interactions, sense of belonging, collective memories, and shared identities occur.” However, researchers generally focus on interactions within a particular location when they explore how consumers, producers, materialities, and practices co-construct the meanings of places (Borghini et al., 2009; Kozinets, Sherry, et al., 2004; Sherry Jr et al., 2004). Only fleeting attention is given to relevant influences outside of these spatial borders (Diamond et al., 2009; Penaloza, 1998). The findings here suggest further attention should be given to the semiotic relationships between places. For instance, Exarcheia is understood as an anti-capitalist heterotopia partly through its contrast to the rest of Athens, which is pro-capitalist (Chatzidakis et al., 2012). However, residents and visitors that interpret Athens differently may construct an alternative understanding of Exarcheia as a place.

Future research could overcome the limitations of this study by developing a more diverse sample. Particular attention should be paid to recruiting more transgender and bisexual participants. It may also be interesting to include heterosexuals in the sample, people who consume places in the gay village without self-identifying as LGBT. Future research may also seek to include the perspectives of LGBT venue owners, managers, or designers. Such perspectives would allow researchers to consider whether producers also interpret (and design) gay villages as themed environments. Finally, the
analysis of this study is limited to the urban context of Manchester. It may be useful to conduct a comparative study of two or more cities with LGBT districts. Indeed, following Visser’s (2013) critique that LGBT districts are a largely Western phenomenon, it would be particularly interesting to study cities where LGBT districts have not formed. For example, Visconti (2008, p. 118) describes the “limited number of gay pubs and meeting places” in the Italian context, while Hsieh and Wu (2011, p. 400) describe a number of “gay havens” that are dispersed across Taiwan. Such isolated places may have different meanings for LGBT consumers than geographically concentrated LGBT districts. Investigating these places may provide new theoretical perspectives that fall outside the existing tripartite framework of ghettos, villages, or dissolution.

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How Sexy can a Paper Clip get?
Evidence for the Transfer of Erotic Meaning to “Unsexy” Products
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ABSTRACT
Marketing practitioners claim that sex in advertising only works for products that are related to sex. The presented experiment underpins that this folk hypothesis is not true. Via semantic conditioning (a variant of evaluative conditioning) erotic meanings can be transferred to any product including those totally unrelated to sex.

INTRODUCTION
Practitioners of advertising repeatedly claim that sex in advertising only works when the product is related to sex (Ogilvy, 1985). Advertising Professor Jef I. Richards from the University of Texas is cited with the statement: “Sex sells, but only if you’re selling sex.” (Kalb, 2012).

In their comprehensive analysis of research on the effectiveness of sex in advertising Lull and Bushman (2015) come to the conclusion that sex does not sell at all. However, most of the research reviewed solely considers variables like memory, valence of an attitude or intention to buy. In contrast, for many cases the primary intent of sex in advertising would be to load up the product with erotic content in order to give it an erotic image. Only little attention has been paid to the question whether sex in advertising is successful in reaching this goal. Moreover, the practitioner’s claim cited above has rarely been challenged: Is it really impossible to “sex up” an unsexy product?

To address this issue we use a variant of evaluative conditioning. This kind of conditioning can be defined as the classical conditioning of liking or disliking by pairing a neutral stimulus (CS) with an unconditioned stimulus (US) which has a clear positive or negative valence (De Houwer 2009). The mechanisms behind evaluative conditioning, however, are not limited to elicit liking alone. Procedures similar to those of evaluative conditioning have also proven to be effective in changing meanings of the conditioned stimuli. These procedures have been labeled as a kind of “concept learning” (Glaser and Walther 2013) or “non-evaluative conditioning” (Förderer and Unkelbach 2011). For instance, Förderer and Unkelbach (2011) were successful in making neutral people seem more athletic by repeatedly presenting them with athletic people.

We use the paradigm of non-evaluative conditioning to prove that in the case of transferring erotic meaning to a product the effect is not restricted to certain stimuli. To do this we add an additional factor to the standard conditioning procedure: We present erotic and non-erotic US along with products that do have an erotic meaning on their own as well as with products that do not.

Moreover we hypothesize that the conditioning effect is not due to an effect on confounding variables. It can be argued that pairing neutral CSs with erotic USs may not go beyond evaluative conditioning after all: Since “erotic” for most people is a positive concept we controlled for this by an indirect measure, a semantic version of the affect misattribution procedure (AMP; Payne, Cheng, Govorun, and Stewart 2005). The indirect measure was important to make sure that the objects really acquired an erotic meaning and that the effect was not due to demand characteristics or explicit memory of the exposure during the conditioning stage.

METHOD
The experiment used a standard EC procedure (Walther, 2002) to transfer the attribute erotic from erotic pictures (USs) to pictures of neutral objects (CSs). However, in contrast to regular conditioning procedures, we used two different sets of stimuli for CSs: One set of six objects consisted of objects which presumably were well suited for being charged with an erotic meaning while another set comprised six objects which were totally unrelated to sex and was thus not unsuitable for a transfer of erotic meaning. We will refer to these two sets of stimuli as “sexy” and “unsexy”. This results in a two by two factorial design in which all conditions were varied within groups. The two factors were conditioning (erotic vs. nonerotic USs) and suitableness (“sexy” vs. “unsexy” objects).

As “erotic” is most likely a positive concept we controlled for valence in two ways: Firstly, we selected USs which were equal in valence. Secondly, we collected ratings of CSs valence and erotism to be able to control for valence statistically.

Material
Conditioned stimuli
As CSs we used a sample of twelve objects half of which were regarded as very “unsexy” whereas the other half was supposedly well suited for being connected to an erotic content. We took these stimuli from the results of a preliminary study. More specifically, a sample of N = 32 participants was instructed to name objects which are well suited for being charged with an erotic meaning as well as objects which are very poorly suited to acquire an erotic meaning. These lists consisted of classes of objects. For example furniture or office supplies were frequently mentioned as “unsexy” objects, whereas jewelry, candles or alcoholic beverages were frequently mentioned as “sexy” objects. As CSs two sets each containing six pictures were chosen which showed either potentially erotic or unerotic objects (see figure 1 and 2 for examples).

“Sexy” (i.e., potentially erotic) objects were: Candles, strawberries, jewelry, chocolate, perfume and beer
“unsexy” objects were: Writing desk, chair, sticky notes, paper clip, writing pad, folder

To make sure that the objects were otherwise neutral (except for their potential erotic content) pictures did not show any hint on an existing product or brand.

Unconditioned stimuli
USs were generated from ratings participants gave in the first stage of the main experiment. In this stage participants rated a sample of 40 pictures, presented in randomized order, on a scale from 1 to 7 as to whether they consider this picture to be erotic (= 7) or not (= 1). The pictures comprised of males, females, and couples (hetero-