

Accessing the Community: The LGBTQIA Community and the Library

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Abstract: *This paper is intended to contribute to small the body of work surrounding LGBTQIA topics in library and information science. Through a series of interviews and a brief online questionnaire, the authors sought to determine whether individuals felt that their libraries were adequately serving LGBTQIA patrons, and what they thought libraries could do to improve their services. While progress has been made, the data shows that libraries still have a long way to go in providing resources for their LGBTQIA communities. Findings of note include differences in urban vs. rural library settings, the need to create safe and welcoming environments, and a lack of access to LGBTQIA-oriented print materials.*

Introduction

Libraries have been among the supporters of LGBTQIA causes in America since early in the history of the gay rights movement. ALA's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Round Table was first introduced in 1970 as the Task Force on Gay Liberation, only a year after the Stonewall riots. The round table remains active, publishing new professional toolkits frequently and facilitating the annual Stonewall Book Awards. In our changing political environment, it is more important than ever that libraries continue to advocate for LGBTQIA causes by fighting censorship and providing a safe space for everyone, including LGBTQIA youth and adults, to access information and gain new knowledge.

While interest in the topic of how to be inclusive to LGBTQIA communities is high in the library world, many libraries and librarians may find themselves at a loss when trying to meet these patrons' needs. Additional research on these topics is necessary for librarians to feel confident that they have the tools they need to welcome LGBTQIA patrons in and address their information needs. Our paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature on this topic by identifying what libraries are and aren't doing well when it comes to serving the LGBTQIA population, and discussing possible strategies for improving access in the future.

Literature Review

Literature both within and external to the LIS field indicates that LGBTQIA individuals continue to face discrimination in almost every aspect of life. Jardine (2013) notes that gender discrimination "in employment, housing, and health care" is completely legal in the majority of the United States (p. 465). Other research indicates that queer youth face homelessness, violence,

harassment, and bullying at higher rates than their non-LGBTQIA peers, and are twice as likely to attempt suicide (MacMillan, 2017, p. 3). Although the exact number of LGBTQIA individuals in the United States is difficult to know, most sources estimate around 10% of the population falls into this category (Greenblatt 2003). Thus, although this population is often considered small, it is large enough to warrant the attention of all librarians wishing to serve their entire population.

To do this, libraries should provide sufficient resources for individuals to access materials on these topics for medical, social, and other purposes. Jardine (2013) states that “appropriate print, digital, fiction, and nonfiction resources can help trans* patrons of all ages arm themselves with the information they most need” (2013, p242). The same could be said for many other LGBTQIA populations. However, the existing literature indicates a failure on library’s part to meet this need. Antell (2013) notes that “studies have shown that the vast majority of libraries lack high-quality, comprehensive LGBT collections” (p. 104). There are many possible causes for this failing, including self-censorship in title selection (Antell, 2013). Regardless of the exact causes, this is an area in which libraries of all stripes may need significant improvement.

In addition a lack of materials, LGBTQIA patrons may also face burdens when it comes to their ability to use the library. Facilities, such as gendered bathrooms, create access problems for patrons who wish to use library materials, and language and gender markers used on documents such as library cards can also cause issues for transgender individuals (Jardine, 2013; Rawson, 2010). Beyond physical space, LGBTQIA patrons may face stigma and misunderstanding in libraries (Alexander, 2007). Greenblatt (2003) notes that, because of prejudice and stigma, LGBTQIA users and those seeking LGBTQIA materials might be private about their searching needs. Clarke (2011) states that “there is reluctance on the part of students to disclose their topics if they are working on something they perceive as sensitive or stigmatic”, including LGBTQIA topics (p. 82). It is likely that public library users demonstrate similar behavior. In general, there is strong evidence that libraries have room for improvement when it comes to serving the LGBTQIA population.

Research Methods

We decided to take a mixed approach to the research. We used a semi-structured interview that could be answered by library patrons or staff about LGBTQIA patron library usage, engagement, and opinions about the topic. This was complemented by a survey-based questionnaire geared towards (but not limited to) LGBTQIA public and academic library patrons. The questionnaire used 4-7 questions, dependent upon some early answers, and took approximately 5 minutes to complete. The interview started with ten questions—with room for follow-ups for clarification or expansion—with the goal of a 30 minute duration.

The survey questionnaire used two closed questions (“Have you ever searched for LGBTQIA materials at the library” and “Did you seek help to determine this search?”) to determine whether the other questions were warranted. Two scale items were used to determine how often the respondent asked library staff for help in this search, and the effectiveness of that help; two multiple dichotomous questions were used to establish resources that would encourage LGBTQIA library use, and demographic data; and an open ended question about the availability of materials and their pertinence to LGBTQIA information seekers rounded out the set. Questionnaires were distributed through social networks to library science students, library staff, and the student researchers’ social network cohorts.

The interview questions centered on the comfort of LGBTQIA patrons to access library materials, engage with staff and programs, and feel safe within the library. Eight interviews were conducted in person following a purposive sampling method where respondents were chosen based on their professional academic or public library staff/librarian experience, and/or experiences as LGBTQIA academic or public library patrons. Four respondents were LGBTQIA library patrons (two public library patrons, and two academic library patrons). The rest were library staff members, including two LGBTQIA library staff persons, and two straight, cisgender, and allosexual librarians (one public librarian and one academic librarian).

Findings

We received 52 total responses to our survey over the period of one week in November 2017. Of these responses, 2 were blank, leaving 50 useable responses. 78% of these were complete responses. The incomplete responses were included in our data set. 66% of respondents identified with at least one LGBTQIA descriptor (10% as lesbian, 4% as gay, 30% as bisexual, 38% as transgender, 38% as queer, 4% as questioning, and 16% as asexual, with several participants choosing multiple descriptors) and 64% had searched for LGBTQIA materials at the library. Of those who had searched for LGBTQIA materials, 81% identified as LGBTQIA, compared to 54% for those who had not searched for LGBTQIA materials.

Regardless of whether they'd searched for LGBTQIA materials, LGBTQIA survey respondents were slightly less likely to ask for help from library staff than non-LGBTQIA respondents, with 61% stating they asked for help "rarely" or "never" and 39% stating they asked for help "sometimes". Among non-LGBTQIA respondents, 12% asked for help "often", 47% asked for help "sometimes", and 41% asked for help "rarely". Only 2 respondents who had searched for LGBTQIA materials at the library stated they had sought help from staff when performing this search, and both these respondents identified as straight and cisgender.

Multiple themes emerged when looking at the survey and interview data together. One of these was privacy concerns. One interviewee stated that "I guess fear of judgement is a big thing, even if it's by a stranger". Another, describing the process they had used when searching for materials, said that they "just went to the internet and searched it, like through the library's resources, instead of asking a person." Connected to issues of privacy, the need for a safe space was mentioned several times, with one librarian noting that she'd like to "see everybody in the library – perm, temp professional and student - required to attend our "Safe Zone Training". These concerns represent a possible explanation for LGBTQIA survey respondents' reluctance to ask for help, as demonstrated in the survey data.

Another major theme in the data was difficulty in accessing LGBTQIA materials. 38% of survey respondents who had searched for LGBTQIA materials responded that they felt availability of materials had impacted their search, due to problems related to lack of materials, location of materials, and cataloging of materials. To combat this, several interviewees suggested that subject guides would be useful in facilitating access to LGBTQIA materials, with one staff member suggesting "lists not only of fiction but of nonfiction" that could be targeted to individual LGBTQIA populations. 56% of survey respondents listed finding aids as a tool they felt would help them access the library.

Discussion

Safe Spaces

Libraries have a long history of providing safe spaces for those facing persecution (Wexelbaum, 2016). But what determines a safe space? Part of what makes a space safe for LGBTQIA individuals is the ability to feel welcome. Though most have an expectation of entering a library as a neutral zone, data proves reality is the opposite. Imagine entering a space without any obvious display of resources in your native language, culture or discipline coupled with fear of judgement, reprisal and exposure of personal identity upon inquiry. Identity, privacy, research, education and accomplishment are compromised. Rawson (2009) notes that “environmental accessibility is determined by ‘the feel’ of a space and the way a person is treated in that space” (p. 127). Interviewees reported they would like a safe space to provide privacy, safety from harassment, and a welcoming atmosphere.

Privacy allows LGBTQIA users to search for information without outing themselves. One interviewee noted that she would prefer privacy in being able to search for LGBTQIA materials. She noted that she doesn’t “want to out [herself] to this stranger” by searching for LGBTQIA materials at the library. Both interviewees and survey respondents expressed a desire for self-checkout machines at libraries. According to Mathson and Hancks (2006), in a study conducted over one year, LGBTQIA materials circulated twenty percent more through self-checkout. Self-checkout machines help patrons retain anonymity when searching for sensitive topics. Jardine notes that trans* patrons “may not participate in information seeking” due to fears about the fallout of doing so (p. 245). Privacy, therefore, can help to protect LGBTQIA individuals searching for information and could even encourage more information seeking.

A safe space can also mean the feeling of freedom from harassment. Particularly for those located in more conservative areas, interviewees noted the need for safety when considering checking out LGBTQIA materials. One interviewee noted that she would be cautious searching for LGBTQIA materials given the area in which the library was located. When asked if she would feel comfortable asking library staff for help finding information about LGBTQIA materials, she responded “sadly no, especially here.” To combat this, interviewees indicated that they would like to see more public acknowledgment that the library is a safe space for LGBTQIA individuals. One interviewee noted that it would be useful to “[have it] prominently displayed somewhere in the library... that we are here to help you, regardless of what your question is, regardless of what your topic is, to the best of our ability.”

One interview subject made a delineation between feeling safe, which they felt their local library provided, and feeling welcome, which they felt the library did not provide. Many of their qualifications for a welcoming space (an interest in material and its circulation, signage indicating that the library supports a more diverse populace, staff that visibly presents as LGBTQIA, etc.) could be the requirements that others may feel are necessary for an LGBTQIA safe space. LGBTQIA safe spaces are not just about stickers or decals, but about the ability of patrons to feel welcome in a space that visibly supports the community. Vaillancourt (2013) notes many ways in which libraries can provide a safe space for LGBTQIA patrons, including hiring a liaison to the community and establishing LGBTQIA organizations. Further research should examine how libraries can create a space in which LGBTQIA rights are actively promoted, but users still have the privacy to search for LGBTQIA resources anonymously. This

can include private computer spaces to search online as well as other means of preserving anonymity.

Library Materials and Subject Guides

Part of making the library space a welcoming environment for LGBTQIA individuals is providing and promoting LGBTQIA materials. Librarians face many obstacles in providing and promoting these resources, such as backlash from the community and self-censorship in collection development. Regardless of the reason, however, this lack of materials and lack of publicizing affects LGBTQIA patrons.

When interviewed, one academic library student in the LGBTQIA community could not describe any of the resources for the community at the library, noting that the library “doesn’t really, like, advertise that sort of thing.” Another interviewee expressed frustration with the lack of displays and a lack of signage indicating a promotion of diversity or regarding LGBTQIA issues in general. Without promotion, even the most robust LGBTQIA collection may go unused. Libraries that do not promote LGBTQIA materials are not only missing an opportunity to reach out to the community, but are essentially telling the community that the library does not acknowledge them. Promoting these materials also promotes a welcoming atmosphere for the community.

One library staff member interviewed noted that she feels restricted in what she adds to the library collection. She noted that she takes a risk when she purchases items that are not sought after or popular. But when she does take the risk, people don't check them out for fear of repercussion to themselves. This creates a cycle in which LGBTQIA materials are not purchased or promoted because they are not popular, but they are not popular, in part at least, because they are not purchased or promoted. In our survey, of 32 survey respondents who had searched for LGBTQIA materials at the library, 19 said availability of materials impacted their search in some way, either because materials were spread out (five responses), poorly tagged (one response), limited in quantity (eleven responses), or hard to find for other reasons (four responses). One person also listed “more materials” as something that would be helpful for them in accessing the library.

Still another obstacle to material access shared by library staff is parental complaint of a child's exposure to displays or labels. In addition the fear of financial donations which support local programming by community partners is critical. Parents facilitate access for themselves and children by approaching the friendlier children collection space. Library staff limit programs. And finally, collection censorship by library staff bias presents an obvious conflict of information science ethics. A clear difference within academic libraries is the willingness to train student staff for circulation and reference. This policy advocates peer support and offers a doorway to connect students with ally professors and experienced, neutral librarians.

Regardless of whether or not the library's collection of LGBTQIA materials is robust, LGBTQIA patrons need to be able to find this material. LibGuides or book lists could help provide patrons looking for LGBTQIA materials a guide. A survey respondent noted that “The materials are so spread out that it is difficult to find what I want and there is no guide.” Further, 28 survey respondents said LibGuides would help them access the library. Wexelbaum (2016) notes that, the ALA or the IFLA codes of ethics “talk about making all information, resources, and services as accessible as possible, and providing equitable resources and services to everyone” (p. 56). Discussing archives, Rawson (2009) notes that “because archives are often physical places... it is of course important to consider whether archival records are physically

accessible to researchers. Can they be reached?” (p. 126-127). This is also true of the library. If the items and the location of the items are unknown to the patron, these items are inaccessible.

Library Staff

Library staff members serve as the front line of the library—they set the tone for the inclusivity of the library space and can help to determine how welcome library patrons feel. Vaillancourt (2013) notes that welcoming and trained staff members can help ensure that patrons in the LGBTQIA community feel comfortable. Staff members and librarians can help make the library more inclusive and welcoming in a number of ways: attending ally training, displaying ally decals, promoting LGBTQIA materials and events, vocally supporting the community, and etc. Alternately, staff and librarians can contribute to the problems LGBTQIA patrons face in accessing the library

Library staff can contribute to the problems that can make the library feel like an unwelcoming space. One interviewee told a story about how an employee requesting the purchase of gay romance materials was told by the Library Director, in 2007, “There are no gay people in [town].” Even when not outright opposed to LGBTQIA materials, staff may not have enough knowledge of materials. Interviewees expressed discomfort with trying to get help from staff members uneducated in LGBTQIA issues. One interviewee noted that, although they would like a LibGuide, they would be uncomfortable with one written by an uneducated staff member.

Librarians and staff members can likewise contribute to making the library a safe space for LGBTQIA patrons. Interview subjects noted the positive effects of signs that staff members have tried to become educated as LGBTQIA allies. One interviewee noted, “I know that there are staff members in the library that have done the ally training and so they have the sticker, but everyone in the library should be required to do that. Because the library is something that literally every student needs to use.” This visual demonstration of a person’s willingness to learn about LGBTQIA issues helps those patrons in the LGBTQIA community to feel more welcome.

Academic libraries can sometimes offer engagement with the LGBTQIA community and access to materials by building rapport, offering ally training among staff and students, display of safe space wall labels, online LibGuides inclusive of community resources, adult, young adult and children fictional collections, high traffic displays, partnerships with Gay centers, Pride and GLSEN events, and booklists inclusive of Lambda Literary Awards and the Rainbow List. One library participates in the Fair Accurate Inclusive Respectful Act (FAIR). FAIR requires inclusion of historical and cultural contributions of minorities, disabled, and LGBTQIA populations within all K - 12 public school textbooks. A clear difference was experienced by public and rural library staff and patrons. A lack of receptiveness, acknowledgement and at times hostility was exhibited toward members of The Community during resource inquiries. Though restrictions to budgets are a reality for all libraries, this line item is used as a justification for lack of willingness by public, rural and Friends of the Library organizations to be robust and transparent with LGBTQIA collections.

Finally, libraries should attempt to recruit LGBTQIA librarians and staff members. More than even subject expertise, one interviewee mentioned a desire for people who were part of the LGBTQIA cohort themselves: “if it’s someone who can at least halfway identify with me as a person who’s a part of the community, I’d be much more comfortable.” Implied in this was that those within the LGBTQIA community and working as librarians would be much more likely to be knowledgeable about queer issues, and easier to approach and act as a safeguard of privacy.

Internet

Interviewees communicated a strong preference for the internet when searching for LGBTQIA materials. The internet offers many benefits for those in the LGBTQIA community: privacy, robust resources, ability to search anonymously, more universal access, ability to search from home, and etc. Although the internet offers an arguably safer space for users to browse LGBTQIA materials, the materials may be less reliable than what a library would offer. One interviewee noted that they knew that the information they would receive from internet searches might be overall less reliable, but that it was easier to access. They also indicated that in some cases medical databases contained less information than informal shared repositories of knowledge about transgender issues (regarding the effectiveness of hormone replacement therapies).

Future researchers need to recognize the benefits of the internet and figure out how to integrate those into the library space itself. How can libraries provide the privacy and anonymity the internet provides? How can libraries provide the most robust and relevant resources? How can libraries address issues of access, such as gender neutral bathrooms? In addition, future research should examine how better to serve LGBTQIA communities online through the library. Digital librarians should examine how to make the library's internet space as welcoming as other librarians should make the physical space of the library. The library has an opportunity to serve the LGBTQIA community through online resources and virtual spaces in a way that it may not be able to in physical spaces.

Conclusion

While many librarians and libraries demonstrate interest in serving and welcoming LGBTQIA patrons, it is evident that most libraries still have a long way to go in meeting the needs of their LGBTQIA communities. Through multiple shifts in the conversation around LGBTQIA issues, LGBTQIA patrons and others seeking LGBTQIA materials continue to experience significant issues around privacy, availability of materials, and the need for safe spaces when using their libraries. As a result of these challenges, many LGBTQIA individuals turn towards the Internet, rather than the library, when seeking resources and community.

To address these issues, libraries must work proactively to create digital and physical spaces where LGBTQIA individuals are welcome and able to access the materials they need. This may include the creation of topic guides for LGBTQIA materials, recruiting LGBTQIA staff, and physically demonstrating a welcoming attitude towards LGBTQIA individuals. Further research in this area is necessary in order to determine how to make effective use of these and other strategies. Other topics for future research in this area include discovering additional causes behind the current dearth of LGBTQIA materials in libraries and in-depth analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of online environments as information resources for LGBTQIA populations.

As institutions, individuals, and communities, libraries and library staff have been allies and resources for LGBTQIA populations in the United States and elsewhere for decades. In our changing political environment, it is imperative that we continue to serve these communities to the best of our abilities. Our research provides some starting places, but more work needs to be done to create welcoming spaces, both digital and physical, where our LGBTQIA communities can access community and information at the library.

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