

Here, queer, and underserved

INFO 200

Information Communities

Hayden Birkett

San Jose State University

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Abstract

LGBTQIA+ youth are drastically underserved in libraries across America, and in every community libraries serve. This paper addresses the informational needs and information seeking behaviors of LGBTQIA+ (also referred to as “queer”) youth demographic, touches briefly on why this information community is dramatically underserved by libraries, community centers, and schools, and the impact ignoring an entire community has within that community. This paper will bring up the methodologies used to examine this information community, as well as several articles and organizations that acknowledge and present the statistical information related to LGBTQIA+ youth and their “at-risk” status. The paper will dive into the realities many LGBTQIA+ youth face in every community, and what libraries should offer to help their underserved patrons connect to the resources they need. It will also address ways libraries can turn the failed relationship with LGBTQIA+ youth into a thriving, positive partnership with LGBTQIA+ youth and queer organizations that will flourish and benefit the community.

Introduction

The Human Rights Campaign defines queer as “A term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations. Often used interchangeably with LGBTQ” (The Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). Essentially, queer, or LGBTQIA+, is a term used to describe individuals who are not heterosexual. Queer can also be used to express one’s gender identity, such as,

Genderqueer people typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and often, though not always, sexual orientation. People who identify as "genderqueer" may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories (HRC, n.d.).

The LGBTQIA+ youth information community (Fisher & Durrance, 2003) thrives on a fluid flexibility of both sexual identity and society, and thus not every queer individual’s needs can be met with a single, blanket solution. And indeed, even their most basic informational needs are failing to be met within their communities.

LGBTQIA+ youth are drastically underserved in a majority of American communities, and in libraries in particular. In *Gender Variant Youth*, the author states

It is important to note that LGBTQ and gender variant youth are not choosing public libraries because they feel the most comfortable in these spaces; they are forced to patronize public libraries because of a total lack of support from other social groups and services (Robinson, 2016).

Homes, schools, and peer groups can be sources of contention, stress, and intolerance of their sexual identities and expressions. When they have no other options, libraries are used as a “last resort” source of information and resources. Robinson goes on to say, “When LGBTQ patrons

are too terrified to identify themselves, and ask for materials, they become a seemingly absent user group; thus, their collection needs cannot be met via requests, because society does not currently provide them with that luxury” (2016). With the limited research conducted on this information community, and the limited priority libraries are placing on serving queer youth communities, their community needs are understandably misunderstood.

This research paper is centered on topics that address the unique informational needs of LGBTQIA+ youth. Hawkins et al. (2017), Peirce (2017), and Fikar and Keith (2004) focus on the health needs and health informational seeking behavior of queer individuals, in which queer youth search libraries’ digital and physical resources in order to locate information on queer health, such as queer friendly doctors, safe and healthy sex practices, mental support groups, etc. Other resource institutions such as schools, hospitals, churches, and community centers often do not provide queer health information, especially directed towards queer youth. Across the articles in this paper, the fact that there is little information about this particular community, either health or non-health related, is prefaced to the author(s) presenting new or relevant information about this information community’s needs in order to help provide points of research for present and future scholars.

Literature Review

The authors gathered for this paper come from varied backgrounds, each bringing insightful viewpoints from their training and professions through their scholarly articles, including University Professors of Social Work, a Health Services Librarian, the founder and director of the *Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network*, several Science Librarians, Youth, Adult, and Teen librarians, Medical Librarians, University Librarians, a book author, and several MLIS students. I have also included The Human Rights Campaign, a non-profit LGBTQIA+

organization that provides additional input. These credentials show that the information presented in their writings comes from multiple viewpoints that provide a more complete picture of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Shelton & Winkelstein (2014), Stevens, (2018), Pierce (2017), Kostakis (2018), Jennings (2006), Fikar and Keith (2006), Drake (2017), Alexander (2013), all demonstrate Dervin's sense-making methodology approach to their research. They identify the situation: LGBTQIA+ youth lack of resources and support in libraries, and suggest that libraries need to pool together resources with queer communities, connect their queer youth patrons with their local queer communities, provide inclusive policies and procedures, be more open with the idea of highlighting queer material and familiarizing themselves with queer material, implement more training for staff, and expand a queer collection of materials for youth (Shelton & Winkelstein, et al.). The authors all agree that libraries should serve as the bridge that connects queer youth to the queer community as a whole (Dervin, 1983).

There is so little information focused on LGBTQIA+ youth information seeking in libraries, and indeed on what their information seeking behaviors are, that article authors Robinson (2016), Pierce (2017), Shelton & Winkelstein (2014), and Hawkins et al. (2017) all drew upon the findings of the Human Right's Campaign survey report, *Growing Up LGBT in America*, a 2015 study that surveyed 10,000 LGBTQIA+ youth across America. While the questionnaire based study is immense, it is very telling that four of the most recent articles all cite the same source: certainly because the Human Right's Campaign is indeed an authority on the subject, but also because there is so little other research that has been conducted about this information community that they need to pull from the same source for lack of other options. And even within the scope of information that is present, very little focuses on LGBTQIA+ youth and their

relationship to libraries, especially their informational needs and informational seeking behaviors. The Human Right's Campaign's survey does not mention libraries directly, nor is it a peer-reviewed scholarly source of information, and is, in fact, a research based source. Regardless, it is quoted as a primary source in the scholarly articles mentioned above.

This is a major weakness across all the peer-reviewed, scholarly articles chosen for this research paper. While they have multiple sources, each article quotes either the Human Right's Campaign (a professional source), or A. Curry's reference survey of 20 library reference desks, in which an individual posing as a high school student asked reference staff about LGBTQIA+ information and recorded the staff's reactions and ability to address their needs (a scholarly source). This study does not directly address the informational needs of the LGBTQIA+ youth community, other to say that they are not being addressed. The professional research done by the Human Right's Campaign, a survey of over 10,000 LGBTQIA+ youth across America in 2015, is a far more helpful and relevant resource to current American libraries, despite the fact that it does not root itself in libraries. I believe this is the reason several of the articles mentioned draw more in-depth information from the Human Right's Campaign than they do from Curry's now outdated and limited research.

Methodology

I primarily used the Bates' method of "berry picking" to formulate my research. I compiled a list of multiple information resources, and conducted various search strategies through LIS and Google in order to locate the information I needed (Bates, 1989). I searched with the terms "LGBT" and "libraries", and then added "youth" when "LGBT" and "libraries" brought up a handful of results that did not meet my intended information community research needs. I wanted to locate articles that dealt with the impact ignoring this unique community has on the

community itself, including mental health, lack of a connection to queer resources within the community, and overall impact on quality of life for queer youth in their community. I especially wanted to find out how LGBTQIA+ youth utilize library resources, and how or how not libraries are providing those resources for this specific audience. When I narrowed my search to LGBTQIA+ youth in libraries, I included LGBTQIA+ youth and adult health needs in order to provide a variance of information for my research, and because there was not enough about LGBTQIA+ youth in LIS at San Jose State University library's database without it. The needs of LGBTQIA+ youth bleed into the similar needs of LGBTQIA+ adults, who suffer from the same lack of resources within their communities.

I returned to resources I've looked at personally, such as the Human Right's Campaign, and conducted searches for peer-reviewed articles on the LIS, which changed my queries from LGBTQIA+ youth and adults in the Inland Empire to LGBTQIA+ youth exclusively, as I discovered just enough articles to meet the criteria for this research paper—which, while satisfactory for my school purposes, was not satisfactory enough for me as a queer individual looking to serve queer youth in my future career. I also incorporated the novel *But what if we're wrong?* by Klosterman, which I read for my book review, as it ties in nicely with the research.

Of the sources I located, Shelton and Winkelstein (2014), Stevens (2018), Jennings (2006), Hawkins et al. (2017), Hackney et al. (2018), Fikar and Kieth (2004), Drake and Bielefield (2017), Robinson (2016), Peirce (2014), Kostakis (2018) and Alexander (2013) are all research-based sources, as is the Human Rights Campaign—though HRC can also be considered a community-based resource, as it is run and contributed to via the LGBTQIA+ community.

Discussion

Queer lit is less than 1% of Young Adult fiction and nonfiction, and 50% of those books are centered on white, cis, males (Alexander, 2013). Libraries often face a fear of the community's reaction should they embrace LGBTQIA+ youth, and queer youth are often not comfortable asking for queer resources no matter what the topic, in the face of their own fear that the library staff will reject them. It is not that this information community does not exist, it is that they are not heard, and often treated invisible in the information available to them (Alexander, 2013). According to Shelton & Winkelstein (2014), Hackey et al. (2018), Hawkins et al. (2017), Garnar (2018), and Alexander (2013), one of the main issues is that the people and professional culture in libraries are not adapting fast enough to catch up with society. Thus, we have "gaps", in which information communities like LGBTQIA+ youth, a community previously ignored, suppressed, and marginalized by society, have not been properly represented. It is not that this information community is new; it is that the library culture surrounding the queer youth community are shedding old ideas and assumptions to embrace new ideas.

Society as a whole is becoming less reluctant to acknowledge queer youth needs and lack of resources. After all,

Can users truly feel they are receiving the highest level of library service when no one speaks their language or if they cannot find materials that are relevant to their communities? ... If diversity is one of the profession's shared principles, then it is imperative the information professional move beyond statements of openness and learn how to live it (Garnar, 2018).

According to the Human Rights Campaign,

Compared with their peers, 47% of LGBT youth in this survey report a greater sense of isolation or separation from their community in general, and among specific community activities. Fewer

LGBT youth have an adult in their community to talk with if they feel worried or sad, compared with their peers. When thinking of their future, 63% of LGBT youth believe to a greater extent than their peers that they must leave their community to make their hopes and dreams come true” (n.d.).

If queer youth are leaving their communities, or feel like they must eventually leave their communities, in order to have their information seeking needs met, libraries are failing their very mission in their own backyard. Queer youth have a constant information need within their community, and not many places are available that meet that need. They often do not have the support of parents, family, friends, peers, or mentors. This ostracized isolation leads them to seek information in less conventional sources, such as the library. They seek out information on sexuality, gender, the queer community itself, support, explanations, expectations, counseling, and representation (Robinson, 2016). Libraries should make it their mission to understand the characteristics of queer youth within their unique community, by reaching out to resources like the HRC, local resources, searching out resources online, and engaging in diversity training.

Information encountering, with the steps of noticing, stopping, examining, capturing, and returning, is not implemented in many libraries (Kuhlthau, 1991). What can queer youth encounter when the information they may be intentionally or unintentionally seeking is not highlighted in any way, save for Pride Month, or Transgender Day of Remembrance? In her article *Information Encountering: It's More Than Just Bumping into Information*, Sandra Erdelez states that “... [information] encounterers have a tendency to stop and “collect” useful or interesting information they bump into. Others, in contrast, prefer to stay focused on their primary objective and do not easily get distracted with opportunistic information” (Erdelez, 2005). The challenge is tapping into the LGBTQIA+ youth community, connecting resources,

providing information and a hub to discover that information no matter what type of consumer or learner. If there is no information to collect and observe, than this information community will continue to be underserved, ill-informed and invisible (Fikar & Keith, 2004).

The authors discuss the informational needs of the queer youth community and the ways libraries are failing those needs: a startling lack of LGBTQIA+ youth health care information, excluding other queer identities by highlighting only gay and lesbian literature and media, homelessness in queer youth, library online resources, library layouts, programming, staff training and interactions with queer individuals, and mental and physical health in queer youth communities (Hawkins et al. 2017, Peirce 2017, Fikar and Keith, 2004). LGBTQIA+ youth being underserved and ignored falls into the category of “uses and abuses” of informational ethics (Garnar, 2018). We as library professionals have “abused” the informational community of queer youth by dramatically undeserving them, and continue to do very little to turn this ethical dilemma around. However, I believe there are many librarians and library professionals working to turn this around, and if we continue to study, listen, and embrace LGBTQIA+ youth, we will move in the right direction to including them as an important part of our resources.

Genderqueer youth are no exception to the underserved trend. In their article *Equitable access: Information seeking behavior, information needs, and necessary library accommodations for transgender patrons*, Drake and Bielefield state, in regards to transgender patrons: “67% reported visiting a library for recreational or leisure materials; 62% visited a library for school, education, or research; 48% for Internet use; 28% for transgender-related research; 23% for an event; and 13% for something else” (Drake & Bielefield, 2017). Transgender youth and adults are not visiting their library as a primary resource for their LGBTQIA+ needs, because their libraries are not providing material to meet those needs.

Sexually queer and genderqueer youth are receiving comparable, limited resources, and a wealth of misunderstanding from their community, family, and libraries.

Queer youth are constantly using libraries as last ditch resources, and libraries are not rising to meet the challenge of providing any sort of aid. In this manner, libraries have been and currently are wrong: they do not meet the needs of LGBTQIA+ youth, and must reevaluate their failure in this arena and how to turn it into a success-in-progress. In his novel *But what if we're wrong?* Klosterman states, “We spend our lives learning many things, only to discover (again and again) that what we’ve learned is either wrong or relevant. A big part of our mind can handle this; a smaller, deeper part cannot. And it’s that smaller part that matters more, because that part of our mind is who we really are (whether we like it or not)” (pp. 248, 2017). As librarians, we must learn to put that smaller piece of ourselves on “hold”. We must strive to constantly “check-in” on trends, technology, popular media, makerspaces, changing demographics of communities, and so much more. It is when libraries become stagnant and stop keeping their finger on the pulse of trends, the changes in society, and their community pulse, that they fail their communities.

The reason libraries fail information communities such as LGBTQIA+ youth in particular is that they do not ask the question Klosterman poses in his novel: what if we’re wrong? What if we are not meeting the specific needs of the community we profess to serve? Across the board, libraries must constantly ask themselves this question in all aspects of librarianship. By trade, we must be flexible, adaptable, combine the past, the present, and the future into valuable resources for every aspect of a library’s community. By listening to their community, by connecting with non-traditional organizations outside of the library to gather intel on what their community needs, and how librarians are charged with putting the needs of their community before their

own personal beliefs and traditional ideas of what libraries should be. In the end, we are in this profession to serve the public—and all informational communities within that public.

Conclusion

The articles all agree on one statement: there is much more work to be done in identifying the informational needs and behaviors of LGBTQIA+ youth in libraries across America—yet what we do know is enough to start addressing those needs. Libraries are doing painfully little to accommodate a regular, at-risk patron base, and certainly doing very little in adequately planning on how to fix this lack of resources. However, there are many librarians, such as the MLIS students who contributed to the research mentioned, Robinson (2016), Peirce (2014), Kostakis (2018) and Alexander (2013), as well as the professionals who are adding their voice and experience to the mix, who are striving to change how libraries ignore queer youth, and are starting this important and difficult conversation.

Queer youth across the states are stepping (reluctantly) into the library seeking information to help them identify themselves, their peers, find health resources and information, connect with others like them, find mentors and friends, and find themselves in works of fiction and non-fiction alike. They are a resilient and underserved information community who continuously use the library as a last ditch effort to fulfill their informational needs; there is no doubt that they are using libraries, and all articles illustrate a pivotal point in flux, where libraries are charged with fulfilling the needs of this community, and have the ability to change a last ditch source into a known, successful resource for LGBTQIA+ youth. It is up to libraries to meet this challenge, to admit to our mistakes, to listen to these precious voices and change “at-risk” to “well-connected” community. After all, “If you aspire to be truly open-minded, you can’t just try to see the other side of an argument. That’s not enough. You have to go all the way” (Klosterman, pp. 253).

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