Public Libraries and the Queer Community: Attitudes and Information Needs

John Mack Freeman

Valdosta State University

4/1/2011
Introduction

Queer (used in this context to refer to all members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning communities) individuals typically have neutral-to-negative attitudes towards public libraries. The queer community is an often invisible minority as there are no discerning visible characteristics marking an individual as being a member of this group. No exact count of the queer community in the USA currently exists (nor would such a count be feasible), but estimates typically place the number of queer individuals in the USA at 8 million, or about four percent of the population (Advocate.com Editors, 2011). Because queer individuals are found in nearly every community in America, it is conceivable to say that every public library serves this patron group. This review of the contemporary scholarly literature focuses primarily on the relationship between the queer community and the public libraries inside their own communities, and how the public library’s ability (or lack thereof) to meet the information needs of queer youth influences the opinions of the queer community towards the public library over time. This review does not apply to academic or special libraries, though occasionally literature in these fields is used to reinforce an overarching theme. This review also does not cover the current collection development efforts of public libraries in the field of queer literature, though this is a concurrent focus of contemporary LIS queer studies.

Summary

Although queer individuals use libraries as children (Rothbauer, 2004), negative experiences with the library lead to a belief as older individuals that libraries are yet another heteronormative public service that has no place for them (Pruitt, 2010). Queer youth primarily use libraries as a conduit to information during their coming-out and self-identification processes (Hamer, 2003). As the information needs related to the coming-out process (Hamer, 2003) and to the development a queer self-identity (Encarnacion, 2005; Mehra and Braquet, 2006) are not met by contemporary public libraries, queer individuals begin to look in other places to meet their information needs. Commonly, queer individuals
cope with this lack of library support by using the Internet, alternative book stores, and members of the queer community as information sources (Pruitt, 2010). As queer youth grow up to become queer adults, these prejudices towards the library being a place apart from the queer experience become cemented, leading to a lower usage of the library’s collection and other public services (Helms, 2004; Pruitt, 2010; Thistlethwaite, 2002). Although not all queer adults have negative opinions towards libraries (Fikar and Keith, 2004) and not all queer youth have negative experiences in their dealings with public libraries (Curry, 2005), public library service to the queer community is often haphazard and out-of-date, leading to a decreased ability to meet the contemporary needs of queer individuals. Additional research needs to be done into the evolving information needs of the queer community as a whole.

Further, a preponderance of the contemporary research encourages libraries to further train staff on how to interact with queer individuals to meet the queer community’s information needs (Helms, 2004; Thistlethwaite, 2002); the literature further expresses the need for libraries to continually and actively expand their holdings of queer-related materials that are both academic and general interest in nature (Encarnacion, 2005; Mehra and Braquet, 2006).

Queer Youth: Information Needs

The current literature concurs that the primary information need of queer youth is information to assist with the coming out process. Although in 1979 the average of queer self-identity was 21.1 years old, the average age in 1996 was only 14.7 years old (Hamer, 2003), and it is possible that this age has continued to get younger since these studies were conducted. As such, the age of individuals seeking information on queer topics to meet personal information needs is getting younger. Hamer (2003) noted that gay youth are primarily looking for information about the queer community, what it means to identify as queer, how to meet other queer people, and how to answer questions relating to sex and queer health issues. Because of the sensitive nature of these information needs, Schaller (2011) advised that confidence and privacy are primary concerns of queer youth information seekers due to a
desire to remain unidentified as queer individuals. This need for privacy also applied to self-identified queer people as they (often rightfully) believed that they would experience prejudice in public situations if their self-identity as a queer individual became public knowledge (Curry, 2005).

The literature noted the importance of meeting queer youth’s information needs as this group is more likely to experience prejudice, suicidal tendencies, and social stigma related to coming to terms with their sexual identity than other groups in the same age bracket (Mehra and Braquet, 2006). Mehra and Braquet (2006) further saw the importance of providing queer youth with the opportunity to create internal coping mechanisms for dealing with prejudice because queer individuals typically come from non-queer parents, causing a situation where queer youth do not “have parents who teach coping skills for dealing with discrimination and intolerance.” The goal of meeting the information needs of queer youth was further greeted in the contemporary literature as a need because of its capability of saving lives (Encarnacion, 2005), preventing AIDS (Hamer, 2003), reducing suicide rates (Mehra and Braquet, 2006), and increasing the interior comfort that queer youth have with self-identification (Curry, 2005).

It should be noted, however, that the information needs of queer youth do not stay static over time. As Schaller (2011) noted, “it can be hard to find a balance between the information needs of the LGBTQ individuals that are not already out and the ones that are confident about their sexual identity [sic].” Mehra and Braquet (2006) recommended that libraries develop strategies for meeting the needs of queer youth at all stages of the coming out process. They further advocated for libraries to become a resource in their communities for queer individuals of all ages to seek information to further their knowledge about their queer self-identity. Mehra and Braquet also called for libraries to become gateways to other geographically-related services for the queer community that queer patrons may be previously unaware of.

Queer Youth: Perceptions of Libraries
Overall, queer youth had mixed feelings regarding public libraries. Although many queer individuals reported using libraries as children, this usage lessened as they enter their teen and collegiate years (Rothbauer, 2004). This is problematic as these are the years when most queer individuals begin to grapple with their self-identities. However, this lessening usage did not necessarily correlate with a decline in patron trust in the library.

In several recent studies, queer teenagers became more likely to use remotely-accessible OPACs to search library catalogues for queer-appropriate materials than they were to visit the library in-person (Hamer, 2003; Rothbauer, 2004). These searches were often of limited success because of a patron’s unfamiliarity with the controlled vocabulary used for searching library OPACs (Curry, 2005). Queer patrons were more likely to use terms that they had familiarity with from other sources (such as television, other queer individuals, or other media) than the controlled terminology that manages most library searches (Adler, 2009; Rothbauer, 2004).

Queer patrons also became frustrated with the lack of easily available resources. As Schaller (2011) pointed out in her study of the information needs of LGBTQ college students that public libraries occasionally had decent collections of mainstream queer materials; however, these libraries were significantly less likely to contain less-common works and works that were not of literary or academic importance. Kilpatrick (1996) mused (in connection to periodical holdings) that this may be because more academically-inclined selections were less likely to be challenged. Although Schaller’s (2011) study was only focused on the Greensboro, North Carolina area and involved less than ten personal interviews, its findings that queer patrons are habitually underserved by libraries was echoed throughout the literature (Curry, 2005; Encarnacion, 2005; Kilpatrick, 1996).

Despite these frustrations, in a double-blind study of reference interviews related queer topics conducted in 20 British Columbia public libraries by Curry (2005) noted that only 15 percent of the reference librarians surveyed seemed offended or uncomfortable with the request made. Conversely
though, Curry (2005) also noted that less than half of the reference interviews relating to the formation of gay-straight alliances and the location of YA LGBTQ literature resulted in overall positive and successful experiences. Because of this, Curry (2005) recommended the expansion of queer literary holdings and further education of staff about how to deal with these inquiries. This concurs with Encarnacion’s (2005) study of LGBT collection development that called for further staff development in assisting the queer community with their periodical needs.

Queer Adults: Information Needs and Perceptions

Queer adults that have completed their initial self-identification and coming out processes typically have information needs similar to that of the larger population: fiction related to themselves, health needs, business concerns, and other general interest materials (Pruitt, 2010). However, according to Pruitt’s (2010) study of members of gay book clubs in Wisconsin, gay individuals were less likely than other patron groups to seek these information needs from public libraries. Individuals interviewed for Pruitt’s (2010) study mentioned previous negative experiences with public libraries including less-than-helpful librarians and a lack of availability of queer resources. Research further indicated that the queer identity and the relationships that the queer community established with the public sphere were developed through experience with these institutions in the past (Lukenbill, 2002). Thus, these negative experiences with public libraries in a queer adult’s past echoed to neutral-to-negative opinions of these institutions in the present. Further, these queer adults echoed the privacy concerns mentioned for queer youth by Mehra and Braquet (2006) and Curry (2005). According to Pruitt’s (2010) research, many queer adults did not want to be seen in public participating in queer activities or interacting with queer materials because this may identify them with a community that could be professionally or personally compromising. Instead, the gay men studied here were more likely to have their information needs met through online retail, queer bookstores, and through other, previously-known queer individuals.
Although there has been a concerted effort on the part of many LIS professionals to reach out to the queer community, queer individuals have not had the best success in securing equal access to information. Helms (2006) detailed a controversy in which the Ohoopee Regional Library System in Vidalia, Georgia removed a “free-to-the-public,” general interest materials area due to patron complaints regarding a queer-themed newsletter called *The Gay Guardian* from this area. Though the Ohoopee Regional Library System dealt with this censorship in an equal fashion by removing the entire section and not just the gay-themed newspaper, queer individuals may take actions like this to mean that materials of interest to them have no place in a public library’s collection. Indeed, Pruitt (2010) noted that many queer individuals have self-censored their public library access because they believed that the materials they wanted would be too controversial (because of their queer nature) for public library collections.

This is not to say that all queer adults have negative opinions regarding the services that libraries offer. Fikar and Keith (2004) noted that queer healthcare professionals were generally positive about their experiences with libraries of all kinds. The professionals studied by Fikar and Keith (2004) rated libraries in a generally positive manner in regards to their ability to meet the information needs of queer-specific health demands. However, this same study warned that many of these queer healthcare professionals were more comfortable seeking information from librarians and other LIS professionals whom the healthcare professionals knew to be queer due to a belief that these needs would be better met by individuals more familiar with the queer community.

Further adding to the case that queer adults have mixed views regarding public libraries, Lukenbill (2002), in his profile of gay-and-lesbian themed special collections in the United States, did mention that several of the queer collections of note were held by public libraries, including the New York Public Library and the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center at the San Francisco Public Library. Although not expressly mentioned in Lukenbill’s (2002) study, these collections often center in urban
areas with large queer communities, leading to a disparity of service of public libraries to queer individuals depending on the library’s urban or rural location.

Personal Summary

Even though I am a queer-identifying individual that has a passion for library service, this research has clarified what I already knew: libraries and the gay community do not always mix well. Libraries are facing queer-related challenges on two levels. The older generation believes that because libraries did not support their information needs during their formative coming-out experiences, libraries are still as heteronormative and homophobic as they always were. Older queer individuals do not trust librarians to keep their confidences or to meet their information demands. Conversely, younger queer individuals do not believe that they need a public library’s support. Though queer youth may use libraries as a portal to the Internet, I doubt very many of these individuals connect this usage to the library assisting them; instead, the library becomes a gateway to what is useful. It does not appear, either from the literature or my personal experience, that the queer community expects or needs libraries to change. Queer individuals have coped with this information vacuum in the past, and they believe they can do so in the future. If libraries want to increase queer patronage and modify the attitude of queer individuals towards public libraries, then the onus of outreach is on the libraries to change the queer community’s mind, not the other way around.

The current literature about this subject strikes me as lacking in two primary areas. First, much of the literature is written by individuals inside the queer community. Although queer studies are open to all people, most individuals interested in this area are members of the queer community themselves. This could lead to a lack of external objectivity that may color the results of studies into the information needs and desires of the queer community at-large. Libraries may be over-emphasized in their importance to the queer community because of the leading nature of questions in these studies. However, I am more concerned with my second issue. Almost without fail, the contemporary literature
studies queer library usage in urban settings (Pruitt, 2010) and semi-urban settings with large academic institutions in them (Schaller, 2011). These settings are demonstrably more politically liberal and more socially open to queer individuals; however, my experience with library usage is the rural South which has its own queer population with unique information needs and a completely different set of problems than the apathy or indifference that is often cited in today’s literature. By its very nature, I realize that this sort of research would be difficult, but I think it would ultimately be worthwhile as these queer individuals are often the most underserved of any queer geographic group.

When I do research like this, I have to remind myself to stay professional. Works that reference mental health (Curry, 2005), AIDS (Fikar and Keith, 2004), and cruising in public locations (Thistlethwaite, 2002) do not describe my experience as a queer adult, and it often seems like stereotypes still rule public perception of the queer community. Even though these authors often deal with these subjects in the most sensitive ways, the idea that they must be dealt with at all in the public forum offends me. But, then I take a step back, look at history, and realize how far queer individuals have come in the last 50 years. From Stonewall and the Mattachine Society to the formation of the GLBTQ Round Table of the ALA to the American Libraries cover that caused a huge controversy to Lawrence v. Texas to gay marriage equality in seven states, I realize that the queer community is making progress, and, for now, I know progress has to be enough. I hope libraries continue to progress, and I hope they become a more entrenched ally in the fight for equal rights and service in the public sphere.
References


