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Term: Fall 2023

Glad Day Bookstore: A site of queer resistance through the ages

Introduction

A shared curiosity about belonging in public space initially brought us together to study Glad Day Bookstore, situated in Toronto's historically queer neighbourhood, Church-Wellesley Village. Upon preliminary qualitative studies of Glad Day, we quickly discovered that it is much more than a bookstore. In fact, in its current form, queer media is not the focal point of the store. The patio, cafe tables, drag brunch, workshops, and events make clear that the space serves multiple functions and purposes. From the beginning, we were interested in the store's relationship to Toronto's queer community. Eventually, our multiple research interests were captured into one final research question: How has the mission of Glad Day evolved?

In search of an answer to this question, we looked for a common story in our qualitative research. We began to notice the shifts in the store's mission and purpose over its lifetime. Exploring the store's evolution serves as a microcosm of the obstacles and progression experienced by the wider queer community. For example, the adaptive mission of Glad Day becomes clear during societal shifts in attitudes towards queerness from its inception, to censorship wars, to the rise of the digital age, and the pandemic. Thus, we argue in response to our research question that Glad Day has evolved to meet the specific needs of the queer community at any given point in time. This paper begins with a literature review that introduces the theories and background research that support our project. A section on our methodology and findings follows, which outlines how we conducted our qualitative research and significant findings towards our research questions. We then reflect on our methodology and positionalities to acknowledge the limitations of our study. Finally, an analysis of our data uncovers the story of Glad Day's changing mission throughout the ages.

Literature Review

Theory

Two theoretical works guide our qualitative research of Glad Day. The first is Mills' (1997) concept of the sociological imagination. The sociological imagination highlights the importance of searching for connections between specific events and greater societal contexts. For example, Mills (1997) states that "the sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals" (5). This

concept provides a lens to how we approach our qualitative research. For example, tracing Glad Day's mission intersects with historical and contemporary issues of queerness in Toronto and Canada. Practicing the sociological imagination finds connections between changing attitudes towards queerness, and specific social and economic moments to tell a story about the mission and purpose of Glad Day.

Additionally, Kusek and Smiley's (2014) work on positionality in qualitative research frames our reflections on how our identities may impact our interpretations of our research. Kusek and Smiley (2014) highlight the importance of recognizing positionality to understand the multiple experiences and meanings of urban space. Their theoretical investigation into positionality has specifically challenged us to be critical of our differing insider and outsider biases during our qualitative research of Glad Day.

Context

Cossman et al.'s (1997) analysis of the Butler Decision in Canada provides a specific context of how censorship laws targeted Glad Day. For example, Cossman et al. (1997) reveal that the Butler Decision liberalized pornography in Canada by legalizing porn that passes certain measures of obscenity. However, obscenity laws were then mobilized to target Glad Day under the claim that the store sold obscene and inhumane pornography, that lacked emotional connection and relationships. This background information regarding Glad Day's instances of censorship reveals the impact the store had on supporting queer art, relationships, bodies and sex.

Methodology & Key Findings

The research methods supporting our conclusions are participant observation of the store, a visual analysis of the current space and previous iterations, and a semi-structured interview with the bookstore's co-owner. We started with a participant observation, immersing ourselves in the bookstore's environment as regular patrons. We noted various aspects such as the layout, and book selection including non-queer literature, the active bar area, the nature of conversations, the diversity of patrons, displayed artwork, and music genres. This detailed observation was designed to understand the essence of Glad Day's current state.

Our analysis of Glad Day Bookstore, influenced by an ethnographic approach, focused on its physical and social aspects. We identified patterns and interactions through an interpretive lens, considering our unique perspectives. The bookstore appeared to serve multiple functions: its loud music and bar suggested a lounge atmosphere, while posters and rearranged chairs indicated its use as an event venue. The diverse clientele in terms of age, gender-presentation, and race demonstrated no specific target demographic. This ambiguity in the bookstore's mission and diverse

usage prompted our investigation into its current role for the queer community and how its multi-functional space impacts this role.

In addition to engaging with the space, we used recent and archived images of the bookstore to inform our research conclusions. Many of these images were available online through the website of Jerald Moldenhauer, a gay rights activist, photographer and the founder of Glad Day, as well as Blog TO and Gay Toronto. The images traced the bookstore's journey from an inconspicuous apartment building to its current prominent location on Church Street. We analyzed these photographs in conjunction with historical contexts, exploring the significance of their locations and the evolution of their visibility within the queer community. Through this analysis, we found that the bookstore had undergone significant physical transformations over time. Glad Day's first few iterations were situated in discreet locations, at first a backpack, then an apartment, then a nondescript house, and then a retail space's second floor. These locations, likely chosen for the safety of their patrons, seemed to mirror the limited acceptance of queer individuals at the time. The evolution to its current, prominent Church Street location reflects a significant shift in queer visibility and acceptance in Toronto, contrasting its once inconspicuous presence with a new vibrant, queer-friendly environment.

Lastly, we conducted a semi-structured interview with Tianna, Glad Day's co-owner. We prepared an interview protocol with topics and themes aimed at deriving answers to our research question. We then performed a written analysis of our interview with Tiana and mapped discussion points to the themes surrounding our questions, making note of discoveries. Our conversation with Tiana surrounded four main topics: the current relevance of books in the bookstore, the motivations behind the store's many evolutions, the current mission of the store, and lastly what the future looks like for Glad Day.

Through speaking with Tiana, we discovered that the store had initially heavily relied on the sale of books and queer pornography, both of which were a major revenue source for the store due to their inaccessibility at the time. The books were so fundamental to their mission that they fought numerous censorship battles with Canadian governing bodies. The rise of the internet, however, forced the bookstore to redefine its role as it made queer materials and communities more accessible online, diminishing the need for potentially risky physical spaces. This shift not only decreased their traditional customer base of closeted individuals seeking discreet access but also impacted the store's sense of community. When discussing the impact easily accessible pornography and queer literature had on the store Tiana noted that: "[The owners] tried their best to keep it open and realized they wouldn't be able to sustain the store just on books alone ... they would need to incorporate other things like coffee and alcohol to keep the space operating which is the biggest reason why we're here in

this space.” This reinvention played a huge role in bringing Glad Day to its current iteration.

Originally, Glad Day Bookstore emerged as a solution to the scarce availability of queer materials. As society progressed with better access and acceptance of the queer community, the bookstore's focus shifted to addressing issues stemming from a hetero-patriarchal and white supremacist society. Its goal is to offer a haven for marginalized individuals within the queer and trans community. In essence, Glad Day has shown remarkable adaptability, continuously evolving to meet the changing needs of society, technological progress, and the queer community. This evolution reflects Wright Mills' concept of understanding personal experiences in the context of larger societal history, demonstrating how the story of Glad Day is interwoven with broader social transformations.

Reflection on Methods & Positionality

Our positionality played a crucial role in shaping our journey of discovering more about how Glad Day accommodates the LGBTQ+ community. Throughout our research, it became clear that our identities and individual experiences with queerness influenced our ability to fully comprehend and relate to the experiences of others. Kusek and Smiley (2014) discuss the “fluid” presence of insider and outsider status during qualitative studies, explaining how researchers may identify with certain aspects of their subjects while also being challenged by intersecting oppressions that lead to different overall experiences (P158-159). As queer individuals, our personal experiences with queerness drove our interest in studying queer safe spaces in the city, inevitably challenging our ability to remain neutral during the research process. However, the varying forms of queerness that could be found amongst our group members continued to serve as a reminder that the LGBTQ+ community does not offer a universal or “one-size-fits-all experience”, and thus emphasized the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to fully analyzing the topic. We recognized that our understanding of safe spaces was limited. Varying queer identities might find varying levels of acceptance and accommodation in LGBTQ+ enclaves, and consequently, no one can be an insider for the entirety of the research and must work harder to view safe spaces from fresh and more inclusive perspectives.

Additionally, we had to acknowledge the limitations of our age in comprehending less accepting times in the LGBTQ+ community that we did not personally experience. Our understanding of queerness is primarily shaped by the more contemporary, inclusive, and digitally driven society. As a result, our focus on the establishment's evolution is more strongly supported by newer and more modern materials and narratives. This focus can unintentionally overshadow earlier, yet equally important, eras in Glad Day's journey. Therefore, we need to be mindful of providing a

comprehensive analysis that acknowledges and respects the significance of all periods in the establishment's history.

Analysis

Throughout our research, we have discovered numerous instances of Glad Day's evolution and adaptation to societal shifts. These instances serve to show how Glad Day has evolved to meet the needs of Toronto's queer community at any given point in time. Firstly, the birth of the establishment as a space meant to facilitate safe and discreet access to societally demonized and scarce queer materials, reveals the store's initial goal of providing access to queer content. In our interview with Tianna, she stated that "Glad Day was created in response to a complete utter lack of access to queer materials and books." Therefore, at the beginning stages of the bookstore, their preliminary goal was to be a site of access to queer media. At this time their mission was intentionally discreet and hidden: The store provided a safe space for individuals to be themselves without discrimination. This highlights how Glad Day, from its inception, found innovative ways to work despite challenges posed by society. Censorship became a significant challenge for the store during the late 1970s to 1980s. As the store gained more attraction, Canadian censorship laws targeted Glad Day under the claim that same-sex pornography is "obscene," further reinforcing the stigma surrounding queer culture and expression (Cosman et al, 1997, 4). Glad Day fought against these claims, occasionally winning and making space for queer bodies in Canadian pornography. Tianna stated, "Glad Day has been fundamental to changing the way Canadian censorship and pornography laws work." Therefore, our secondary and qualitative research reveals that during a high period of censorship, Glad Day's mission evolved to legalize queer bodies, relationships, and sex in media.

Additionally, Glad Day's move to a multi-functional space during the internet boom, when both patrons and income decreased, demonstrated their ability to adapt to the changing needs of the queer community. The store's shift away from books as the central focus showed that Glad Day was committed to providing a safe space for those who would still need it, regardless of recent technological advancements. This also highlights its resilience in the face of challenges posed by the larger society. Glad Day's adaptability allowed them to continue existing as a safe space, proving that their identity as a queer-safe space was far from monotonous.

Over time, Glad Day has shifted its focus toward helping those in the community with intersecting oppressions. This was demonstrated in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic when they used their position in the queer community to rapidly raise funds for the most marginalized in the community, particularly tip-based workers with intersecting oppressions. Along with this, Glad Day launched "Glad Day TV," a platform that provided queer performers with an opportunity to continue working digitally

during a time when live performances and in-person gatherings were heavily restricted. From here, it becomes evident how Glad Day is capable of navigating the challenges imposed by mainstream society and enhancing their understanding and accommodation of those most marginalized and in need of support during these shifts. The establishment consistently finds innovative ways of expanding its platform, even digitally, to better reach the community at various points in time.

To this day, Glad Day continues to serve as a vital source of support for the queer community, particularly for marginalized individuals who might face greater amounts of discrimination around other venues on Church Street due to their intersecting oppressions. The store's focus on diversity is evident in the photos we captured of bookshelves dedicated to BIPOC and transgender authors. Tianna also expressed their current focus on creating a safe space for the most marginalized and diverse patrons when she states, "The people who come here come here intentionally. They know that the staff here won't misgender them, they know we won't use gendered language. Things like that are really important, and a lot of queer spaces still don't make their spaces inclusive." Therefore, Glad Day's mission adapts with the queer community to best suit its needs.

Conclusion

When asked about the future of the establishment, Tianna expressed uncertainty about what lies ahead for the store's financial ability to remain situated in its current form on Church Street. However, she remains hopeful and confident that even if the physical store cannot survive, it will find a way to continue and preserve its legacy in alternative iterations. Throughout its history, Glad Day has overcome various challenges by adapting and finding innovative solutions. It has consistently evolved and expanded its platform to better serve the changing needs of the community. With this in mind, we can trust that Glad Day will continue to transform and meet the community's needs, even if it takes on a different format.

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