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CONNECTIONS AND COLLABORATIONS: NEW ZEALAND'S QUEER INDEPENDENT ARCHIVES AND COMMUNITIES AND GLAMU INSTITUTIONS (Paper)

Abstract

It is only recently that GLAMU (galleries, libraries, archives, museums, universities) institutions have realised the importance of collecting and documenting their queer communities. Developing connections with queer communities is vital to facilitate these endeavours to build sustainable and respectful relationships as well as collaborating with queer independent archives to preserve and make accessible their collections. Using a qualitative survey and interviews from selected New Zealand GLAMU institutions selected findings related to connections and collaborations demonstrated not only the necessity of establishing queer contacts but the importance of using queer, social and collegial networks to foster connections and collaborations.

Introduction

Up until the 1960s and 1970s most queer personal collections were lost or destroyed because of the prevailing criminal and social stigmas. Galleries, libraries, archives, museums and universities (GLAMU) institutions ignored queer materials rendering them invisible in history and creating a conspiracy of silence (Parkinson, 1984). It was these attitudes that spurred the establishment of queer independent archives, to preserve and provide access to their narratives and collections. However as societal attitudes have evolved, collaborations between GLAMU institutions and queer independent archives have become more evident as the value and significance of their stories are recognised. Additionally, developing relationships with queer communities is vital to not only facilitate collecting and documenting but to improve queer visibility within cultural heritage institutions.

This paper will consider two selected findings, connections and collaborations, from a broader research project on queer collecting by GLAMU institutions in New Zealand and their relationships with queer communities and independent archives. Furthermore, a researcher-driven initiative to facilitate relationship growth between GLAMU institutions will be explored from a success and failure perspective.

Literature Review

It is only recently that mainstream institutions have realised the importance of documenting their queer communities and have begun to collaborate with queer independent archives and queer donors (Brown, 2010). Queer independent archives enable their communities to preserve and access their stories and histories (Wakimoto et al., 2013) thereby shaping

community identity and memory. Collection preservation, storage and accessibility are often the main drivers for queer archives' collaborations with institutions (Cvetkovich, 2022; Cohen, 2010; Ajamu et al., 2009). These vary considerably, ranging from specialist advice to formal hosting and preservation agreements. Queer independent archives may take the initiative to approach institutions “realizing the value that a professionally managed archival institution would add” (Loveland & Doran, 2016, p. 420).

Significantly, queer independent archives prefer to maintain their independence within such agreements, the Hall-Carpenter Archives retained ownership of their collections upon transfer to a London university (Donnelly, 2008). Other queer archives have digital hosting agreements with GLAMU institutions, like the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archive and UCLA, but retain custody rights (Cvetkovich, 2022). For queer independent archives, these collaborations are often essential contributors to the archive's sustainability, although they have received little scholarly attention from a New Zealand viewpoint. Exploring these will offer a different perspective and fresh insights.

Building connections between GLAMU institutions and queer communities for donation purposes is important as many donors may not appreciate the cultural and historical value of their documents (Kumbier, 2014). One critical element of community and donor relationships is trust, either with the archivist and/or the institution (Skeem, 2018; Fife, 2019) and is most effectively achieved by employing a collaborative approach (Krizack, 2007). For queer independent archives and donors, these relationships will be investigated in a New Zealand context.

Theoretical Framework

This research has been scaffolded by queer theory, which influenced by Foucault (1978), challenges the societal constructs of sex and gender identity and advocates for identity fluidity to allow multiple interpretations (Carnes, 2019, Sullivan, 2003). Queering the archive means shifting from a heteronormative gaze to a queer perspective thus rendering queer collections and items visible within GLAMU institutions and revealing the gaps and issues. Building connections with queer communities and queer independent archives would support making this shift.

Methods

Initially, a qualitative survey was sent to 38 GLAMU institutions in New Zealand's top 18 population centres and 33 responses were received. This led to 30 semi-structured interviews with GLAMU information professionals to expand on their survey responses. Questions included GLAMU collecting approaches for queer communities, the extent of queer collections and the nature of the relationships with queer communities and queer independent archives. The survey and interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Familiarisation with the data was followed by the generation of initial codes which underwent both refinement and review during the process of analysis as themes emerged.

Findings

This paper will focus on two key interrelated findings, collaborations and connections. The data showed that many GLAMU institutions have little or no queer content in their collections as they rarely receive donations from donors who identify as queer and nor do they actively collect from marginalised groups. A critical factor expressed by many respondents was not being queer themselves and thus not having contacts in the queer communities. Institutions with queer staff were more likely to have fostered connections with queer communities and organisations. These had usually grown from individual staff friendship networks rather than from an institutionally driven project. Nonetheless, respondents overwhelmingly emphasised the lack of resources to develop meaningful, trusting and sustainable community relationships which might lead to future partnerships and potential donations.

For the majority of GLAMU institutions, there was no connection or even knowledge about the queer independent archives in New Zealand. However, some GLAMU institutions in two of the main centres have developed good connections with the queer archive in the same locality, such as the Charlotte Museum in Auckland, often utilising social contacts. The Wellington-based Kawe Mahara Queer Archives Aotearoa has a formal agreement in place with a national institution located in the capital. Dating from 1988, this is for the physical storage and preservation of collections, although digital storage is not covered, despite repeated attempts by the archive. The digital queer archive, PrideNZ, after initial contact was made by a national institution, has donated masters of its website files through a relationship based on mutual respect, trust and collaboration.

Another connection issue that warranted further investigation was the limited connections between the GLAMU institutions. It was found that nothing exists on a wider, more formal level for institutions looking to work together and share ideas around GLAMU practices, policies and constraints, including marginalised communities.

Discussion

Although this research is ongoing, an area of need that could be actioned immediately was identified, to connect GLAMU institutions. Using the contacts made by the researcher connecting respondents was the first task undertaken and permissions were sought and obtained. A curator at a national institution agreed to be the facilitator and two separate groups for university and GLAM institutions were organised, meetings occurring on Zoom. While the university group has continued to hold four weekly meetings, the GLAM group proved unsuccessful. Several attempts were made to launch this group, including conference promotion. In contrast, several people have joined the university group after collegial conversations, demonstrating the importance of such networks. The intention is to continue to leverage these networks in the coming months.

It was anticipated that connecting members of the GLAMU sector would eventually facilitate contacts and connections with marginalised and queer communities, particularly if staff themselves did not identify as queer. Developing connections with local queer communities

is vitally important to help build trust and confidence in GLAMU institutions and for communities/donors to feel encouraged to become part of the local and national narrative. One possible approach is to remunerate a queer community member, or a queer employee, to foster these relationships.

The collaborations with several New Zealand GLAMU institutions have helped to strengthen and sustain the respective queer archives. They also demonstrate the significance that is now being placed on these archives through institutional initiatives, such as supporting collection digitisation. The digital donation by PrideNZ to a national institution has ensured these narratives are not only preserved in perpetuity but are valued and recognised as an important component of the nation's cultural heritage. Some GLAMU institutions in Auckland have collaborations with the lesbian-orientated Charlotte Museum, facilitated through queer networks, thereby creating opportunities to offer material and/or specialist support. The boundaries of such connections were shown when an institution with a pre-existing relationship, offered to take the Museum's collections, although a later offer of digital storage, without ownership conditions, was accepted. Collaborations may not always bring the desired outcome, particularly with formal agreements as power differentials may make later additions or attempts to renegotiate by the queer archive problematic.

Conclusion

This research has shown that GLAMU institutions making connections and fostering collaborations with queer communities, donors and queer independent archives will signify not only the value of these stories in the local, regional and national narratives but will aid accessibility. However, for queer communities and collections to make their way to GLAMU institutions, information professionals need to develop sustainable relationships built on mutual trust and respect. The importance of networks was clearly highlighted, with respondents using a range of queer networks to initiate connections with queer communities and queer independent archives. Leveraging these is often vital for relationship development and could form part of remunerated positions moving forward. Collegial networks were also important in increasing university group membership, direct approaches less so. This research demonstrates, not only the value of GLAMU institutions developing queer connections and collaborations to increase queer visibility but also the importance of using queer, social and collegial contacts to facilitate these.

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