Information needs and sexual identity / Michal Motauryano

ABSTRACT

This research examines the subject of information and sexual identity, through the concept of information needs, and attempts to describe the information needs of lesbians. Like any other disadvantaged group suffering from social exclusion, in- one way or another, the gay and lesbian community finds itself mostly amongst those groups whose information needs are unique, but lack a suitable answer. As individuals and as a community, gays and lesbians, like any other community, have information needs related to their social and mental emotional needs, and to their place in the general public. These needs stand out in view of the gap between the actual existing information and needed and expected information.

The aim of this research is to reveal the way information accompanies and supports, lesbian women during different phases of their sexual orientation. In order to do so, a qualitative-constructive methodology was chosen for this research, as part of the phenomenology research. The phenomenology research investigates phenomena, as they are experienced and understood by the subject who experiences them, and focuses on people making sense of the events which occur in their lives. Thus, the qualitative-constructive methodology suggests holding an interview, following the interviewee's language, and through this, giving his narrative a voice, as an individual who is making sense of his world.

For this research, a semi-structured depth interview was conducted with 20 examinees, of different ages, all of which are out of the closet. The findings of this research were analyzed in light of the integration between the phenomenology research and Dervin's sense making approach, and the uses and gratifications theory.

The findings of this research reveal that the information needs of lesbians, in different phases of their sexual identity, are dynamic, The principal needs that were described- as part of the self understanding of the- sexual identity process, and in pre-disclosure phase are: 1. Primary needs for information following an interest in self understanding and conceptualizing of the self sexual identity; 2. A need to feel part of a lesbian collective. The post disclosure phase was accompanied both by changes in the information needs, and a stable core. The main need that stayed consistent during this phase was the need to feel part of a lesbian collective, while other needs, such as the need for lesbian representation in the various information channels, and the need for empathy, were revealed. Surprisingly, during the disclosure phase, most of the examinees didn't report having any unique information needs relating to sexual identity that were specified during this period.

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The findings also reveal that, preceding the evolution of the internet as a popular source of information, there was an evident lack of accessible information relating to homosexuality. While at the time the interviews were held, the information accessibility level was repeatedly high, the interviews revealed differences in accessibility to information at different ages. These differences arise from the fact that before the late 1980's, a discourse regarding homosexuality was almost non-existent in Israel, unless associated in relation to crime and perversion and in the discourse of marginality. Since the late 1980's, legal and public landmarks have been put in place, which have placed the homosexual community in a positive, visible light and have changed the way this community is represented in literature and in the media. In addition, the enhancement of the technological aspect of retrieving and consuming information, brought on by the coming of the internet as a popular and common information channel, has narrowed informational gaps in general, and especially in the matter of homosexuality.

The technological possibilities of the information era (primarily the internet) have drastically improved the accessibility to information a lesbian has, in accordance with her information needs. Since the internet is barrier breaking by nature, the variety and quantity of information has grown along with the accessibility to information. Even so, potential information barriers might still exist for a lesbian, especially if she is still in the closet and living a in a family setting. In such a case, the sense of intimacy might be lacking due to the tension between the need to conceal and hide, and between the interactions with the rest of the members of the household.

A rather interesting finding that arises from this research is that the library was not viewed as a possible informational tool for acquiring information regarding homosexuality. Most of the women interviewed did not use the library services for other needs in their lives, and the need for information specific for the issue of sexual identity did not change that inclination.

This study has practical implications for field of social information science. The study offers general guidelines for a future model that will refer to a mediating form of information science, which will bridge between those who need the information and the information that is required. Such a mediating form of information science will allow the accumulation of information regarding sexual identity issues as surfaced in the needs described in this study, and will offer this accumulated information to public and school libraries. On the one hand, this model will provide for the information needs of young lesbians seeking an alternative source of, and on the other hand, this will single out the library as a possible and desirable source of information, which will assist to enhance its status.

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