

Pride and the Power of Media – Research Prospectus

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This cultural studies research prospectus is primarily focused on the entertainment media phenomena, the Vancouver Pride Parade and Festival (Pride), and how the Pride organization used the power dynamic that existed within electronic media, (Television, Internet and Facebook) to control the message concerning the diversity of the LGBT community to the local audience. This critical research will illuminate the intersection where Pride redefined the relationship between the producer and the consumer of content by taking control and using the power of entertainment media.

Vancouver Pride, as noted in this research study, also known as more commonly known as Gay Pride or just Pride, is an organized celebration of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) identity and diversity. It has become a world class celebration with over 700,000 people attending the actual spectacle on the street and more, that stream the parade live on the internet. Media has played a significant role in the growth of the spectacle of Pride, one from which they have certainly profited, but what has been the role of media in shaping the representation of the LGBTQ community? Who is really in control of the image of Pride? When did Vancouver Pride start having enough power to influence the message and redefine the equal representation of the diversity of the LGBTQ community in the media?

The acronym LGBTQ will be used as the standard manner of addressing this community, yet it does not discount other members of this diverse community or allies. The terminology in this research means to be inclusive to all members of this community. When discussing the Pride Parade, one cannot discount the importance of the allies to the community, and the visible demonstration of support by attendance enforces the idea that Pride created successful messaging for the spectacle that welcomed the public to partake. This research will show how the general

population were influenced by media with messaging that engaged them enough to attend an event for a marginalized community, and yet feel like an important and welcomed member of the audience. How did Pride achieve this? The Pride organizers had the ability to encode messaging intentionally with a clear agenda. This critical research will delve into the communication tactics used to manipulate the messaging through media to influence the outcome.

To understand the power dynamic that exists with media, one must understand the past relationship and how gay and lesbians have been represented. When discussing media during this period, the only media that held power over this community, would have been television and newspapers, where the distribution of messages had the widest reach. The lesbian and gay liberation movement in the 1970's created a sense of community, empowerment and visibility in media. That cultural spectacle gave a voice and prominence to the diverse expression of gender and sexual identities. The LGBTQ community grew to encompass a broad spectrum of individuals who could not be categorized simply as gay or straight, male or female, masculine or feminine. Because the LGBTQ demographic is marginalized and full of sub-cultures and minorities within its community, it was silenced and misrepresented in the media with stereotypes that continued to enforce negative associations. Gross (2001) questioned if the gay identity was manipulated by a media that was unwilling or unable to comprehend the diversity of the LGBTQ community. Activists at the height of the gay liberation movement, in Canada and the United States, recognized the power of the media and challenged the images and inaccuracies. Since that time, there has been an emergence of gays and lesbians in popular culture and media over the last a half century, on television, in movies and in mainstream culture (Gross & Woods, 1999).

Vancouver Pride and the representation of the local LGBTQ community in media has also changed over time. The first Pride in Vancouver was a protest march organized by a handful of social activists, thirty-seven years ago. Pride was a raw, political statement and there was no media that was interested in covering this deviant community in a positive light. There was one photograph in the local newspaper that highlighted that first protest march and photographed people wearing paper bags over their head to disguise their identity and reveal their shame. That was the extent of media coverage of Pride at that point. In the 1990's, the LGBTQ community was on the cusp of change in Vancouver, and LGBTQ visibility was more becoming more mainstream and tolerant, with large scale events hosted in the city for this demographic. Pride became the perfect site for the culture to emerge and the LGBTQ community to come out and be represented. As the community came out, Pride grew and by 2004, there were approximately 100,000 people attending the parade.

In 2005, same sex marriage became legal in Canada. It was then that a long-term, strategic communications plan for messaging, development and growth was devised. Pride in Vancouver knew it had to work with media that had, in the past, presented a view of homosexuality that was infused with homophobia, which echoed the sentiments in mainstream society. Those views still existed despite the legal changes, and Pride wanted to change the perception of homosexuality in the public eye, enlighten the LGBTQ community to their common history and develop a tolerant and inclusive future for everybody. The intent was to harness the power of media and grow the spectacle of Pride through the visibility of the community in entertainment media, recognizing the intersection of culture, economic and political power dynamics.

This cultural study research prospectus will be focused on the specific time period from 2007-2010, when Vancouver's Pride saw the greatest increase in public participation at the Pride day parade, from 300,000 attendees to over 700,000. The media campaign was created to engage the public over a three year period and allowed for the cultural shift in growth, visibility and acceptance to occur naturally over time. Vancouver Pride recognized that the LGBTQ community needed to be represented in the media as a powerful, positive community with rich history worthy of note and examination.

The research will examine how Pride was able to reflect the diversity of the LGBTQ community through the images distributed in media, and messaging aligned to the texts. Analysis of the messaging will uncover; how it was created to be inclusive to a mainstream audience, yet provide subtle subtext to the community; and how it was created through a gay lens to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of an authentic queer identity. Pride was required to deconstruct, and then reconstruct the LGBTQ community identity imposed by outdated hegemonic media conglomerate perspectives.

This research will divulge the specific tactics and strategies used to create and control messaging for Pride through these particular entertainment media channels; local television, the internet and the social media platform, Facebook. Pride utilized long-term, strategic communication tactics to control the messaging and create a shift in the power dynamic by developing entertainment media campaigns with socially conscious messages. Pride development a narrative for media that symbolised the values of the LGBTQ community, and reason for the Pride celebration, and knew that what the media shared would shape cultural perspectives. The research will focus on the representation of this marginalized community and how they were represented at Pride, on television broadcasts, on the internet and across the social

media network, Facebook. This study will consider the hetero-normative power that media corporations hold in relation to the marginalized LGBTQ community and explore if Pride was really able to control the message.

Initially, this research will explore how VPS used the power of media to share a LGBTQ cultural narrative and create the perception of a united community identity for Pride. VPS wanted to take control of the representations in the media, and as Alexander and Smith (1993) stated, the symbolic power of ‘community’ cannot be overestimated, and having an authentic voice to represent that community has power. Vancouver Pride had that power and knew that it was necessary to create culturally relevant texts and visual representations to unite the LGBTQ community and grab the attention of mainstream population. VPS was able to create media stories and images that would be ‘palatable’ to the mainstream community and bring them to the streets for Pride. This research will reveal the challenges of representing a fragmented and marginalized LGBTQ community to the mainstream media and the messaging needed to negotiate the intersection of social, cultural, economic and political dynamics.

In a democratic, consumer, society, political goals cannot be achieved without the employment of systems of media and entertainment (Dean, 2003). Pride needed to craft messaging for multiple platforms of media to that could be encoded for different audiences to knowing that media has an important role in informing us and shaping attitudes. This research will look at how Pride attempted to reflect an authentic view of the diversity within the LGBTQ. There was no way to provide a complete snapshot of the LGBTQ community so Pride could only attempt to create a symbolic representation of the entire population for media. Whatever platform, the content and message related to Pride and the LGBTQ community was designed to be inclusive and appealing with colourful images and content that carried symbolic meaning.

The internet has given rise to huge shifts in society and changed attitudes and is a proven effective carrier of ideology, especially if it hits mainstream, (Ahmad and Bhugra, 2010). Online access is now ubiquitous and members of the LGBTQ community tends to have a high-level of computer competency therefore, it is a perfect site of analysis. This research will look at how Pride successfully used the power of the Internet and social media as entertainment media to share their message. It will examine how Pride created awareness and a social movement by harnessing the power of their social capital and message on the internet. This research will examine in part, the role of the internet in creating engagement and community activism and how this new paradigm was used to mobilize a community into action (Tatarchevskiy, 2010).

This media culture study is focused specifically on the representation of the LGBTQ population in entertainment media, because I identify as a member of this community. I am a community activist and leader in the Pride movement locally, nationally, and internationally and have a broad understanding of power dynamics from multiple perspectives. I was instrumental in the growth of Pride during the timeframe of this proposed research and have insight into the communication tactics and strategies employed to influence the message and gain control of the message from the traditional hegemonies. The representation of the LGBTQ community was intentionally created to represent the LGBTQ community in a positive light and Pride worked with media to ensure this message was communicated.

As the author of this research prospectus, I am solely responsible for any and all ethical considerations within this study. The critical research study is not bound by the constraints of any external authority, nor being conducted under the auspices of any third party, or supported by a corporate sponsor, a media company or any other organization that may benefit from the results. This research is exclusively for the knowledge of the principal investigator, Caryl

Dolinko, the author of this research prospectus. If subsequently employed or contracted by a company that is willing to fund further research, the sponsor of the research will have a predetermined investment in the outcome, which changes the basis for the subsequent study.

This prospectus will explore the limited or exaggerated representation of the LGBTQ community at Pride in the media and the struggle and negotiations to change it. This study will show the intersection of social change, where the marginalized LGBTQ community was able to access power through the VPS and develop control over the messaging traditionally provided by the conservative hegemony of media. This research prospectus will provide a glimpse into the balancing act and power dynamics that developed between Pride, the marginalized members of the LGBTQ community and the media. It will suggest tactics for other Pride organizations to garner media attention, direct the messaging and influence the audience.

The outcomes from this study can contribute to understanding how a minority group used the power of influence of the media to help change the culture and political, social and economic landscape in the city. The knowledge discovered from this critical research may shed light on potential communication strategies for crafting, and controlling image, and messaging for another non-profit hosting a Pride spectacle in a marginalized community elsewhere. The outcomes will offer an appreciation for how Pride was able to create positive representations of the LGBTQ community at the Pride Parade and how VPS became influencers of popular - even normative – behaviours that created acceptance of the LGBTQ community.

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