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Chasing the rainbow: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth and pride semiotics

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Abstract

While the pride rainbow has been part of political and social intervention for decades, few have researched how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer young people perceive and use the symbol. How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth who experience greater feelings of isolation and discrimination than heterosexual youth recognise and deploy the symbol? As part of a larger study on supportive lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth environments, we conducted 66 go-along interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth people from Massachusetts, Minnesota and British Columbia. During interviews, young people identified visible symbols of support, including recognition and the use of the pride rainbow. A semiotic analysis reveals that young people use the rainbow to construct meanings related to affiliation and positive feelings about themselves, different communities and their futures. Constructed and shared meanings help make the symbol a useful tool for navigating social and physical surroundings. As part of this process, however, young people also recognize that there are limits to the symbolism; it is useful for navigation but its display does not always guarantee supportive places and people. Thus, the pride rainbow connotes safety and support, but using it as a tool for navigation is a learned activity that requires caution.

Keywords

Lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender; LGBT; youth; wellbeing; semiotics; rainbow; pride flag

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth face greater risk of physical and mental health hazards than their heterosexual peers, including substance abuse, sexual risk-taking, suicidality and depression (D'Augelli 2003; Eisenberg and Resnick 2006; Friedman et al. 2011; Institute of Medicine 2011; Ryan and Rivers 2003). Factors influencing these negative health outcomes include discrimination, harassment and physical harm, lack of family and social support and internalised homophobia, which culminate in experiences of minority stress, or a unique set of stressors experienced by those on society's margins (Chard et al. 2016; Eisenberg and Resnick 2006; Ryan and Rivers 2003; Saewyc, Konishi, and Smith 2011; Snapp et al. 2015). In an effort to address these issues, research has focused on what conditions serve to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer groups from these negative outcomes. Researchers have found that school-based support, like safe-space initiatives and Gay Straight Alliance or similar clubs, are instrumental (Kosciw et al. 2013; Payne and Smith 2013). Even more significant are the protective effects of support from family, friends, teachers and community members, and especially the support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer peers (Doty et al. 2010; Russell et al. 2011; Snapp et al. 2015).

Adding important nuance to minority stress arguments, in a study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth's higher rates of self-destructive behaviors, McDermott, Roen and Scourfield (2008) argue that it is the general context of environmental homophobia that is distressing to youth, not the sexual minority identities themselves. In attempts to address environmental homophobia and gender-based bullying, public policy researchers have encouraged school teachers, counsellors, health staff and administrators to invest in 'safe space' initiatives by using stickers depicting the iconic symbols of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer-associated rainbow 'pride flag' to proclaim certain areas as safe (Payne and Smith 2013; Ratts et al. 2013; Vaccaro, August, and Kennedy 2011).

Given the outcomes of bullying and other stressors lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth experience (Rivers 2000), symbols of pride may be particularly important. Pride relates to a feeling of comfort and accomplishment in oneself and ones' community. Policy makers hope the visibility of the symbol can help, but researchers caution that the mere display of such rainbows or 'safe space' stickers as part of many of the initiatives seldom requires training that aids teachers in their practical support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth (Payne and Smith 2013). Training teachers and other community members in how to support sexual minority youth is critical; however, this study shows there may be more advantages from the display of pride symbols than initially thought.

The rainbow as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer symbol

In June 2015, the rainbow flag appeared on government buildings and landmarks across the USA in celebration of the US Supreme Court decision legalising same sex marriage. Dozens of companies incorporated the rainbow into their brands (Lee 2015). Over 26 million individuals altered their Facebook profile pictures with rainbow filters as a show of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities (Dewey 2015). A year later, in

2016, the symbol appeared on buildings and in place of Facebook pictures for quite a different reason: as a symbol of mourning and support for the lives lost in the Orlando massacre at Pulse Nightclub.

Semiotics investigates how shared meanings are created and applied to symbols (Hall 1997, 36). To approach the rainbow flag through semiotics is to recognise it as a signifier of connoted meanings that are produced, redefined and renegotiated each time it is deployed (Sturken and Cartwright 2009). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities, for example, have a long tradition of using innocuous objects such as the placement of ear piercings, the colour and placement of handkerchiefs and hair styles to signal identity and community (Berlant and Freeman 1992; Bryan-Wilson and Fischer 2015).

Since its 1978 creation by the artist Gilbert Baker, the symbol of the rainbow has been increasingly used to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer pride and solidarity (Dreyfus 2015). As the use of the rainbow flag to both celebrate and mourn in the cases above can attest, it has become symbolic of sexual minority political and social movements that fight for equality and change through public demonstration (Berlant and Freeman 1992). The rainbow flag on street signs and pedestrian crossings can also mark geographically defined spaces for gay communities (Ghaziani 2014). To approach the rainbow flag through semiotics is to recognise it as a signifier of connoted meanings that are produced, redefined and renegotiated with each deployment.

Most research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer symbolism, including the rainbow flag, has generally been limited to adult populations with a cynical focus on capitalist consumption (Crowley, Harré, and Lunt 2007; Milligan 2013; Philippm 1999). Chasin (2001) for example, notes that with increased visibility, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people have become a ‘lavender market’ for advertisers. Instead of focusing on the rainbow’s meaning for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities, research has focused on how symbols can be used to market to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people without alienating others (Oakenfull and Greenlee 2005; Philippm 1999). The use of the rainbow in the production of pride has been overlooked in favour of a narrow view of consumption and profit.

Studies that examine the pride rainbow in a youth context tend to focus on its role in visibility management strategies, that is, the choice to make visible an invisible personal identity (Lasser and Wicker 2008); others have studied the rainbow as part of the evaluation or promotion of safe zone programmes, but have not necessarily explored why it is effective (Peters 2003; Poynter and Tubbs 2008). However, research into healthy lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth development does so with few or no mentions of the rainbow as a signifier that participates in the production of what healthy development can look like (Renfrow 2004; Shippee 2011). Instead, young people’s agency, in their recognition and use of the rainbow flag symbolism has, up until now, been overlooked or downplayed in relevant research. This study demonstrates that the symbol of the rainbow flag holds meaning for contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth over and above how it is marketed to them in media and consumable products, and is importantly associated with protective factors like school and community support.

In the absence of normalising cultural conversations or exposure to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in school curricula (Eisenberg et al. 2013; Toomey, McGuire, and Russell 2012), sexual minority young people are less likely to have developed understandings of their identities (Willis 2012), and must find their own resources during their adolescent development (Bond, Hefner, and Drogos 2009; Craig and McInroy 2014). Based on our interviews with 66 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth across Massachusetts, Minnesota and British Columbia, we argue that youth are engaging in active processes of meaning construction through displays of affiliation, productions of positive affect and navigation using the rainbow symbolism. As they create associations with the rainbow, they often physically and emotionally move towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer symbols and use the rainbow signifier as a navigation device in their physical and social spaces. While creating positive associations with the symbol, young people also clearly recognise the limitations of the rainbow as only one element that can facilitate their healthy development. They cautiously seek symbols, including the rainbow, that help shape their own identities and cue those identities to others in positive ways.

Methods

The current study is a subset of a larger study called Research & Education on Supportive & Protective Environments for Queer Teens (Project RESPEQT), which aims to explore, measure and test community-based protective factors that influence lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer young people's healthy development. As part of this mixed-methods study, interviews were conducted with youth in urban, suburban and rural locations to identify environmental factors that are consistent across population densities and geographies. Between November 2014 and July 2015, six female graduate student interviewers (including one queer and one lesbian) with experience working with sexual minority youth and backgrounds in anthropology, sociology, nursing, social work and public health, met with 66 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning youth between the ages of 14 and 19 in 23 distinct community settings across Minnesota, Massachusetts and British Columbia. Almost all of the interviews occurred *before* the June 2015 legalisation of gay marriage in the USA.

Research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth requires additional awareness of ethical and risk management strategies (Meezan and Martin 2003). For example, parental consent can put young people at risk by outing them to family members. Institutional ethics boards, including school districts and organisations, approved of our study, in part because it allowed youth to self-assent and have control over where they wanted interviews to take place, which helped minimise unintentional disclosure to parents or others that may put participants at risk (for more on our recruitment and ethics methodology see Porta et al. forthcoming). Some organisations in rural locations did deny request to help with recruitment because of concerns about confidentiality, but other organisations, even those that did not publicise their existence in their communities, were supportive.

Participants were recruited through direct invitation from our research staff through schools, events and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth serving organisations.

Participants were invited to lead interviewers on a tour of their frequented spaces following go-along interview methodology (Bergeron, Paquette, and Poullaouec-Gonidec 2014; Garcia et al. 2012; Oliver et al. 2011; Sunderland et al. 2012). Most participants felt no threat to their confidentiality engaging in semi-structured interviews while walking or driving around in public spaces and using discrete audio recorders, but some did request interviews to be conducted in less populated spaces such as a park bench or their home. Go-along interviews were preferred so the young person's environments could help shape the audio recorded conversations. Each interview lasted between 35 and 110 min, and featured locations including, but not limited to, sexual minority neighbourhoods, schools, bookstores, community centres, restaurants, as well as non-profit and health resources identified by participants.

We pre-screened potential participants to ensure a diversity of contributions to the study. We asked youth to self-identify their gender, sexual orientation and family background (Table 1). A diverse range of population-density (12,000 to 65,000) was also intentional as a way to help identify similar lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth supportive community and environmental qualities across different geographical contexts.

In interviews, we asked questions such as 'How do you know a space is safe? What do you see?' and 'Please describe some supportive adults you know?' Interviews were professionally transcribed and the qualitative team, made up of the study's interviewers, additional graduate assistants and the study's primary investigators, created a predominantly deductive code-book of topics based on questions about youths' knowledge and opinions of resources, spaces and interpretations of their communities. Atlas.ti software was used to organise and manage the transcript data. Each coded transcript was also checked by another member of the qualitative team to insure inter-coder reliability (Merriam 1998). Posters, clothing, layout of spaces, the presence of other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identifying people, and anything else that young people said they visibly associated with safe spaces, were flagged during coding as 'visual cues'; many of these were about rainbows and were selected for further analysis.

Quotes coded as rainbows were then re-coded and theorised following constant comparison analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The lead author (JW) also removed some quotes due to leading questions. The resulting 108 quotes from 55 interviews were analysed following an approach focusing on the 'process through which representation, meaning and language operate' (Hall 1997, 25). Themes and the relationship between the themes were identified as aspects of meaning making processes used by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth to decipher and make decisions in relation the pride rainbow symbolism.

Findings and discussion

Rainbow-related discussions with youth followed five themes. First, young people chose to display the symbol to disclose their affiliation with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities to strangers, friends, family and authority figures. Second, participants expressed positive emotions and associations with the rainbow by telling stories of the

symbol as part of their memories and aspirations. The ways in which young people talked about the rainbow revealed that learned meanings associated with it helped them actively navigate towards health, emotional and social services as well as supportive individuals such as teachers and counsellors. Finally, several participants described navigation through symbolism as a learned process that requires caution and recognition that there are limits to the symbol's effectiveness.

Rainbows display affiliation with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community

Researchers have noted that young people meet with peers separate from adult communities, and use visible symbols to mark these encounters that may have not existed otherwise (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995, 163). Symbols like the rainbow flag inform individual encounters and participate in creating emotional attachment and a sense of community among peer and large populations (Collins 2004, 2010; Reichl 2004). For the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth we spoke to, displaying the rainbow created opportunities for affiliation. It was a symbol they used to express their personal identities, and also create potential connections with peers. The visibility of the rainbow was an important way to display their own affiliation, recognise others and push for change as well as recognition.

Informants' stories demonstrated how the symbol became part of their personal identity expression. Some told us these items were gifts or tokens from pride festivals, youth conferences and Gay Straight Alliances (GSA). For example, a 17-year-old gay man explained when the interviewer noticed his bracelet, 'That was given to me by the first teacher sponsor of the GSA when I joined in grade 10. So she just kind of had them – gave them to us which was pretty cool ... I wear it every day.' For this young man, the bracelet marked a moment when he joined a new community and met a supportive adult. Wearing the rainbow bracelet every day recognised the importance of that community and memory for the individual concerned.

Many other participants also showed up to their interviews with buttons on their vests or backpacks and rainbow coloured bracelets, demonstrating their approval and use of the symbol. The rainbow was a significant symbol for their personal and shared identities (Mead 1922). The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities, as with other national and international groups, are imagined political communities; it is imagined because not all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people know each other or ever will, though they feel an abstract kinship through a shared identity (Anderson 1983). Visible symbols, shared narratives and other cues help produce group boundaries as well as the self-awareness of shared identities in the community (Cohen 1985, Brass 1991).

Wearing the rainbow displayed young people's recognition of their own identities, but was also a way of prompting interactions with their larger imagined peer and adult community. For example, an 18-year-old bisexual man explained:

If there's a little thing there that you can see it's like a wink, definitely go up and ask about it, because it's something that you might want to figure out, because it's definitely someone who is going to be there for you.

For this young man, the rainbow is a way of prompting conversations that could turn into supportive relationships. These winks helped produce new interactions that potentially fulfill a need for friendship and support.

In many of the cases mentioned by our participants, the rainbow was both a symbol of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer young people's imagined community and a symbol of change – a change motivated by young people themselves rather than school boards and administrator directives. Throughout its history, the rainbow has been a public symbol flown to challenge the political and social status quo (Nusser, Parker, and Anacker 2013). Young people encounter these uses in the media and online, at pride festivals that began as protest marches and as acts of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer solidarity that continue to be political acts when flags are flown at pride events held across the world (Horton, Rydstrom, and Tonini 2015; Kelley 2015; Zamon 2015).

The young people we interviewed were aware of these practices, and shared stories of incorporating the rainbow into their own politicised interventions. For example, one 17-year-old trans-male pansexual in British Columbia who was president of his gay straight alliance said, 'we're trying to get a pride flag up and just have, like, a poster that actually says pride and people, like, would put a handprint with paint on there and then sign their names to show that they support the people.' He felt the youth-generated rainbow was a first step in lobbying the school for a gender-neutral toilet and an important step towards changing the atmosphere at the school to make it more inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students.

Members of school clubs we talked to expressed their affiliation differently, but all used the rainbow as a key symbol of becoming and being part of the club. For example, one 18-year-old gay man showed his interviewer a picture of his school's club where each member was wearing a rainbow t-shirt. One non-binary 16-year-old, for example, wished they could, 'gayify' a club room at school by displaying even more rainbows. And other students talked about the importance decorating club rooms at school with pride rainbows as a way of creating and making visible their community's existence and inclusion in the school.

As lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth individually use the rainbow to prompt non-verbal disclosure of membership, boundaries of spaces and political interventions, they are reinforcing their associations between the rainbow and supportive environments that identify the meaning of the symbol as supportive. Young people we talked to then strengthen these associations when they meet others wearing the rainbow and use it for peer-based politicised campaigns. Displays of the pride symbolism also produced and reflected the use of the rainbow as a sign of membership and support of a wider community. By seeing, and displaying their affiliation, young people are prompting community building activities by interacting with others who also wear and use the rainbow for action.

Rainbows produce positive feelings

When young people talked about the pride rainbow, they also generally expressed positive feelings they felt in the presence of the symbolism. Different informants in the three sites described either wanting to purchase a flag, the joy they felt displaying it in their bedrooms

or aspirations that involved rainbow imagery. These kinds of descriptions, alongside the stories of display, reveal the positive affect produced when encountering the rainbow. While some acknowledged there could be too many rainbows, others explained that seeing them made them feel attraction to certain areas of their cities, feel good about themselves and a desire to incorporate the symbolism into positive visions of the future.

As we walked around neighbourhoods and community centres, young people pointed out rainbows and pride flags. During these moments, interviewers asked about how a neighbourhood felt. One 16-year-old gay man replied, ‘some of the stores have rainbow things in them, so that makes you feel happy.’ A 17-year-old bisexual woman mirrored this sentiment when asked what seeing the rainbow communicated to her. She replied, ‘It will communicate to me, “It’s okay to be yourself. It’s comfortable here. You can be comfortable here. You don’t have to worry about people being judging.”’ Being comfortable marks a feeling of satisfaction with oneself. This relates to the definition of pride as well. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth who may face additional challenges during adolescent development, the rainbow signals the spaces and people where such satisfaction can be achieved. Encountering these feelings in spaces where the rainbow is displayed creates stronger associations between the symbolism and the young people’s own definitions of themselves and their communities.

The internalisation of these meanings and importance were also expressed in specific memories shared. Multiple informants in British Columbia, for example, shared stories of special memories of making special trips to a visibly gay neighbourhood and taking pictures with their friends next to a rainbow crosswalk. They had only visited once, but each had a strong memory of the experience. Sharing these memories in interviews revealed emotional connections to these moments and the symbol.

In addition to memories, positive affect was expressed in participants’ aspirations referencing pride symbolism. One 17-year-old gay man described wanting to open a gay-friendly business and display the rainbow flag. Another, a 16-year-old straight-identifying trans-woman included the rainbow when she answered a question about what she wanted for her community. She said:

I would make all the roads rainbow so it would be like the *Wizard of Oz* and it would look so pretty, and I would make everything gay. Have you ever been to Maine, where they have all the gay flags hanging from their doors? That is the most amazing feeling.

Owning gay friendly businesses and creating ‘amazing feelings’ are a contrast to the common narrative of mental distress and self-destructive behavior among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth (McDermott, Roen, and Scourfield 2008). The contrast between such positive and negative feelings is part of why the young people we talked to lingered on descriptions and identifications of rainbow symbolism. The positive feelings were important. For many participants, positive feelings were first or most greatly felt in the presence of pride symbolism and became part of the pride flag’s meaning. These meanings are reinforced as young people display and share the rainbow among themselves.

Rainbows help youth navigate towards spaces and people

The experiences associated with the production of positive feelings and the practice of using the rainbow to display affiliation help explain why a majority of participants described using the rainbow as part of navigating their social and physical worlds. Participants in most, but not all, of the communities we visited described opinions they associated with the display of the pride rainbow. For example, a 14-year-old bisexual girl from Minnesota described how she assessed a youth centre:

The first thing I look for is the flag. When I see 'crisis' [centre] I'm like, okay, is there a flag? Those are the ones that you can trust the most, because they dealt with harder things, too, so they can tell you and give you advice about anything.

In Massachusetts, an 18-year-old genderqueer lesbian told us, 'There are a couple of churches around there that have the rainbow flag. I'm like, you know what? If I believed in that stuff, I would go over there.' In British Columbia, a 19-year-old, non-binary gendered pansexual shared, 'That's how you know it's a safe environment. It's – usually the most safest [sic] environments have a ... rainbow flag.' Young people in each location had solidified a meaning of safety and potential resource to the signifier of the rainbow. In each example, informants were using the symbol to navigate and decide where to go and which resources to access.

Rainbows were also used to cue students towards knowledgeable supportive individuals. For example, a 14-year-old male bisexual noticed subtle pencil box on his teacher's desk. In another example, a 19-year-old bisexual man said:

Little things like that, little buttons, little pins. If a teacher is wearing it, chances are they're not just wearing it because they think it's the new hip thing, because teachers aren't as stupid as I once thought they were.

Both felt that if a teacher wore a rainbow symbol, they were more knowledgeable about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer issues and may act as a potential resource. The display of the rainbow by teachers ties into young people's own practice of displaying affiliation, which extends the idea of community and support to adults and resources. The meaning of the rainbow is also a result of intentional interventions that have taught students that pride symbols should be used to identify supports.

Participants' stories showed that these signifiers were successful in leading them towards particular actions and resources. For example, we heard from a 14-year-old lesbian who saw an information pamphlet folded in a triangle with a rainbow across it on the school counsellor's door. When she saw it, she decided to knock on the door. Through the connection she made with the counsellor she found a support group and other youth like her at a time when she felt very alone. She defined finding the pamphlet as turning point in her life: 'I want someone else to have a triangle moment like where, "oh, my gosh, there's actually a place for me to go."' Important moments such as these permanently associate the symbol with positive people and embed it as a tool for accessing help and an element in decisions making processes. Thus the display of the symbolism and the positive result are part of how this girl and others learned to navigate using the symbolism.

When participants were familiar with rainbow and had a strong sense of its meaning, the rainbow was useful for quick decision-making. For example, a 14-year-old female bisexual told the interviewer a story of when she felt unsafe and was being physically threatened. She saw a rainbow sticker on a stranger's car and went up to them for sanctuary. She summarised her opinions of rainbows by saying, 'I know I trust more, if I see a flag, the rainbow flag, and the LBGT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] signs, I trust that person more than if I didn't see it.' Her story is an extreme example, but many we talked shared similar stories of using the rainbow symbolism to quickly access avenues of trust and support – even from strangers.

Participants shared that they used the rainbow as an informational shortcut about spaces and people. They navigated by the symbol. As these meanings are solidified, young people can use the symbol's display to identify and prompt resource access. Navigation grew out of the practice of displaying the pride rainbow as part of affiliation and the positive affect produced by encounters with the symbolism. Whether asking questions, coming out or an instant decision about safety, informants described rainbows as prompts that helped inform them about what they could expect from people and spaces.

Rainbows have limits

From our interviews, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth appeared adept at using the rainbow and other symbols as a sign, but in the process of developing their navigational skills they also learn to recognise pride symbolism is limited. For some participants, part of the positivity of the rainbow was because youth discussed it in connection with school-based interventions, in which the symbol's meaning is intentionally transferred to students. Several young people in Minnesota and Massachusetts recognised that the rainbow can be misread, does not represent everyone and does not always guarantee positive encounters. Navigation is a learned skill that must take these factors into account.

In response to the proliferation of safe-space stickers in his school, one 18-year-old gay trans man said:

At my school, each classroom had PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] stickers that said 'this is an lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer safe zone.' I whole-heartedly believed it for some classrooms; others, not so much. I think it was something that they just put up to have up.

This young person recognised that context matters, and not all stickers, led to supportive adults or peers. The knowledge gained from interacting with different teachers, all of whom displayed the symbol, added nuance to his navigation skills.

Another young person echoed this statement outside of school. Although the 18-year-old non-binary-gendered bisexual recognised a rainbow at a church, they were still sceptical of what it meant:

I was surprised to see that there was a rainbow sticker at the church. It was the first time I've ever seen a rainbow sticker at a church. I felt really unsure if I was going

to be accepted here, until the second time I started going, and I was like, ‘oh, people here are really accepting.’

In the context of the church, the flag was met with scepticism because of the historical association between churches and intolerance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identities. Churches contained a certain understood meaning that seemed contrary to the symbol of the rainbow. Young people told us they would attend such churches, but were also aware of the need to be cautious. Although the rainbow provides a strong signal to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth, they know, whether through their own experiences or others’, that not all people and spaces with pride flags actually foster lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer pride. This becomes part of their assessment of the spaces and people that display the symbol.

At times, young people also recognised that displaying their affiliation with the flag was not always a ‘safe’ thing, and could make them a target of scorn. One 17-year-old female bisexual noted, ‘I see people look away whenever I wear something even remotely rainbow-ish. If it’s anything that looks untraditional, they kind of look away, even if I’m not wearing anything [specifically] LGBT-related.’ Young people notice reactions when displaying affiliation and take these into account as they assess the meaning and outcomes of the rainbow symbolism.

Some lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth saw the rainbow flag as a pride flag only for mainstream gays and lesbians, to the exclusion of trans, bisexual and other identities. A 14-year-old, bisexual female in Minnesota shared that rather than identifying with the broader umbrella identity symbolised by the rainbow flag (or not), some people may prefer to affiliate with a more specific group they identify as their community such as a bisexual or trans flag. Another 16-year-old, straight-identified trans-woman in Minnesota told the interviewer, ‘It’s scary, because some places have pride flags and support gay people, but they don’t support trans-[people], you know?’ To this teenager, the sight of the rainbow did not equate with safe space since she was never sure if her particular identity would be supported by the flag-bearer or not. Some young people had a more positive outlook on the meanings of spaces that displayed rainbow flag, but several agreed that the rainbow flag was not always inclusive of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identities and subcultures.

Finally, informants recognised that a rainbow is not always a pride flag and that misrecognition is possible. As an 18-year-old, bisexual young man in Minnesota warned, ‘When I came out, I thought anybody with bracelets is cool – anybody with a rainbow bracelet is gay – and I found out the hard way that is wrong. Do not look too far into things.’ This is the same young man who described the rainbows as winks, and continues to navigate towards other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people using the symbolism. Although he looked out for the rainbow, he used other symbols and signs (such as the age of people and the qualities of the space they are in) to evaluate such winks.

Within a heteronormative world, young people’s experiences teach them that symbols such as the rainbow must be vetted before they are trusted. The implications of these limits mean in the process of being cautious, young people are often making the effort to verify the

purpose of the symbol's display when they navigate communities, businesses, schools and individuals. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth look for the symbol for affiliation, positive feelings, and to help them make decisions about spaces and people, but they also learn to remain cautious of assuming a particular reason for the rainbows' display.

Implications

Young people generally need safe and supportive environment and adults for healthy development (Resnick 2000). Although many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth face stigma and rejection at home, at school and in their communities, research on health outcomes and development note that they do find ways to positively navigate through adolescence (Saewyc 2011). Our research identifies the pride rainbow as one of the tools and signposts used to find support and feel supported. Our interviews provide evidence that justifies the rainbow's continued inclusion in health and school intervention initiatives.

In the absence of specialised knowledge or relationships with other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, taking ownership of the flag as a symbol of personal identity is also a gateway for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth to connect and feel part of a larger community. The local display of rainbows at school, in health centres, businesses and in neighbourhoods, participates in creating both individual symbolic meanings that help youth navigate and connect with others as well as the political production of global imagined communities that recognise equality and inclusion. This intervention is simple and inexpensive, but meaningful to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth in this study. While the rainbow is helpful, especially for youth, additional training and awareness of sexual minority issues at schools and in health centres can increase the effectiveness of the youths' processes of navigation for finding respectful treatment and support.

Some limitations to this study should be recognised. During the go-along interviews, we did not ask specifically about the meaning of the rainbow. In conversations the symbolism simply emerged as one of many characteristics of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer spaces that young people felt were important. While this may limit young people's direct insights about the rainbow's meaning, study informants did provide descriptive answers and, when analysed through the lens of semiotics, we can identify aspects of meanings making process that define the rainbows as signs (Barthes 1957; Massik and Solomon 2011).

Conclusion

Our research provides evidence that the display of rainbows is one of the facilitative conditions that potentially help young people in their positive identity development. The pride rainbow is one of the tools lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth use to develop their skills for creating community. The public visibility and presence of the symbol help young people feel better, find resources, identify supportive individuals and feel belonging to the larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities. Future research can explore and confirm the relationship between the rainbow, intersectionality and

identity development for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth as well as the role of the rainbow for creating a global community for youth and adults. Research can also explore how different development, orientations and coming out processes may relate to the young person's identification with the rainbow flag. Our research shows, however, that once considered a gay White male symbol, the flag now has broader appeal, at least among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth we spoke with as part of this study.

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Table 1

Participant demographic details.*

Age	N = 66	Gender identity	N = 66	Sexual orientation	N = 66	Race/ethnicity	N = 66
14	9	Male	24	Lesbian	8	White or European	33
15	5	Female	21	Gay	11	Black or African	3
16	14	Fluid/gender fluid	2	Bisexual	20	East Asian	3
17	18	Trans	2	Pansexual	7	Southeast Asian	1
18	17	Genderqueer	2	Queer	9	Aboriginal	1
19	3	N/A; nongender	1	Rainbow sexual	1	Hispanic/Latino	3
		Other	1	Same-sex attraction	2	Am Indian/Alaskan	1
		Trans man	5	Panromantic asexual	1	Black/Hispanic	2
Location	N = 66						
		Trans non-binary person	2	Lesbian but flexible	1	White/Hispanic	3
Urban	19	It	1	Homosexual	2	Am Indian/Black	2
Suburban	22	Trans woman	1	Straight	1	Aboriginal/SE Asian	1
Rural	16	Gender neutral	2	Bi-curious	1	Aboriginal/European/East Asian/Black	1
Small City	9	Non-binary	1	Asexual	1	Black/White	1
		trans gender-fluid	1	Other	1	'Multiple races/ethnicity'	1
						Am Indian/White	3
						Aboriginal/European	3
						S. Asian and European	1
						W Asian and European	1
						French Caribbean	1
						Israeli-Canadian	1

* Demographic information is presented separately in order to guarantee the confidentiality of participants.