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Whose Culture? Gay Culture in Liverpool

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Structure of presentation

- Background to study
- Methodology
- Results: 'key themes'
- Interim conclusions and pointers for future research

Background to study

- Previous research by one of the authors (Homfray 2007) investigated the nature of ‘gay and lesbian community’, using Liverpool as one of the two main research sites
- Some of the issues identified:
 - relative lack of provision in Liverpool
 - perception of Liverpool as not ‘gay-friendly’
- In addition, we drew from the variety of work which has identified Liverpool’s unique social, geographical, historical and economic factors, and as two openly gay sociologists working in the city, begin from that standpoint

Some useful reference points

- Liverpool's lack of a 'gay commercial zone' (e.g. similar to Manchester's 'Gay Village')
- However, one area contains most of the commercial 'gay' venues (Stanley Street)
- Liverpool has two cultural festivals which are centred around 'LGBT' (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) interests:
 - Homotopia, a mixed arts festival
 - Outsiders, a film festival
 - 'Our Story Liverpool' - A recent oral history project
- The City Council is currently drawing together a new Cultural Strategy to move the city's cultural presence forward after 2008

Methodology

- Seven in-depth interviews with key gay or lesbian individuals with direct involvement in either cultural provision or policy formulation or implementation
- All could be viewed as ‘movers and shakers’ who are likely to have both involvement in, and impact upon, ‘cultural activity’ particularly as defined by the CofC
- The interviews were unstructured and conversational in order for content to be directed by respondents as much as possible
- Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Results: Key themes

- A number of themes emerged.
- This presentation will concentrate on:
 - 1. The difficulties of defining ‘culture’ generally and ‘gay culture’ specifically**
 - 2. ‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool**
 - 3. The role and/or effect of the CofC**
 - 4. The way forward?**

1. Defining 'culture'

- Culture as a 'way of life' (e.g. Tylor 1874, or later pioneers of cultural studies such as Raymond Williams 1958)
- The 'big-C' 'Culture' of 'high' and 'low' artefacts – film, literature, Art and music
- Sociological research looking at the CofC operates in a somewhat uneasy sense of needing to acknowledge both understandings of the term
- We would conclude that our respondents used the two meanings interchangeably, or in a manner which reflects their own priorities and interests

Defining 'Gay Culture'

- Adding 'gay' into the mix introduces another contested term – in this research, we chose to use the term as an 'umbrella' which incorporates 'lesbian'
- It became clear that there was a sense that gay culture is dynamic and multi-faceted, and not particularly easy to conceptualise
- *'Gay culture is fluid, it's always changing.'* (R1 ♀)
- *'Gay culture is not homogenous in any sense'* (R2 ♀)
- Discussing this concept in the context of Liverpool as a city enabled some further focus

2. 'Gay culture' in Liverpool

- Of our seven respondents all lived in the city or its immediate suburbs.

Three had spent time in the city, left, and then returned, so were able to reflect on their experience of the city over different periods of time.

- **There was no agreed definition of what 'gay culture' is, although all respondent took the view that it did exist**

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

- Both the commercial gay scene and ‘gay artistic products’ were recognised as elements of ‘gay culture’, although respondents qualified this recognition.
- *‘Gay culture is a strangely difficult one (to define). Is it an alcohol fuelled culture? Is it Canal Street in Manchester, Compton Street in London, or Stanley and Victoria Streets in Liverpool? Or is it art, photography, paintings, homoerotic work? ‘. (R5♂)*

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

- Some respondents appeared to equate ‘gay culture’ with a perception of the ‘gay scene’, for example:

‘I’m not sure what Gay culture is, beyond the bars, beyond Stanley Street. Obviously there’s the film festival, and Homotopia.’ (R2 ♀)

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

- Others saw the value of the ‘scene’ for gay culture, for example:
- *‘There’s more to gay culture than bars, but we shouldn’t underestimate the synergy of people meeting in commercial venues and other cultural exchanges, creating a dynamism in their own right.’ (R4♂)*

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

- Similarly, the presence of openly gay people involved in the arts was acknowledged but:
- *‘A Gay artist doesn’t necessarily have his or her art defined by their sexuality. There are many artists who define themselves as Gay, Lesbian or Queer, their work is informed by their experiences, their passion and beliefs.’ (R3♂)*

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

- Despite the uncertainty, there was an appreciation of the continuing need for a ‘separate’ gay culture in respect of **recognition** and **easing isolation through active portrayal**
- The general view of Liverpool’s gay culture is that it exists and is more prominent than it used to be but is still *‘playing catch-up. It’s always lived in the shadows of Brighton, London, Manchester. There’s been a lack of LGB visibility across the board.’* (R3♂)

A comment made by one of the respondents who had left the city and returned was:

'I was born in the city, left it when I was young and came back when I was 20, left again, then returned in my 30s... I saw enormous changes and am seeing even more now – I chose to come back here.' (R3♂)

So some gay people are recognising a form of gay culture in Liverpool and making positive choices to live here.

However, another respondent noted:

'I don't think Gay is necessarily something that's cool to be in Liverpool' (R2♀)

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

- It was clear that Liverpool’s gay culture, or lack of it, reflected broader characteristics of the city:
- *‘I think people who share common sexual identities will share common experiences, threats and opportunities, particular to their sexuality and so there will be a Gay culture (in Liverpool) which may be distinct from, say, London.’ (R4♂)*

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

- The city was described by various respondents in ways which appear, on the surface, contradictory, but perhaps indicate both the complexities and uniqueness associated with Liverpool
- These descriptions included: *‘old-fashioned, shackled by nostalgia... tough... unforgiving... rough... open-minded and diverse’* (various respondents)

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

Whilst some respondents had made positive decisions to live in or return to Liverpool, the predominant view continued to emphasise ongoing barriers to development of Liverpool’s Gay culture.

This was summed up by one of our respondents:

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

‘Merseyside has some distinct trends which make Gay people’s lives vulnerable and I think the city has without a doubt an extremity of verbal abuse against Gay people far higher than other localities. I think that’s created a time lag compared to other cities where people who are homosexual do not want to identify as being gay, openly gay, as they might do when they move to London, Brighton or Manchester.’

‘Gay culture’ in Liverpool

.....There’s a lack of confidence, a lack of openness because people fear social oppression or worse, and that camouflaged sexuality reflects the lack of progress of the city as a whole. I think the two are closely linked. Gay people in Liverpool don’t feel organised, don’t feel confident, don’t feel comfortable with their sexuality, and are not going to campaign for change when other cities have been through that pain threshold.’ (R4♂)

3. The role of the Capital of Culture

- One of the aims of this research was to discover whether the needs of gay and lesbian people been taken into account in the agenda and programme of the CofC.
- There were strong views expressed on both sides of the argument.

The role of the Capital of Culture

Positive statements included:

‘CofC... wonderful. I thought it would be an absolute disaster and I was wrong. It has been hugely successful... The gay community has had £250-300,000 put into Homotopia and Outsiders, and they have done a fantastic job.’ (R5♂)

The role of the Capital of Culture

'I think CoC is a strange mix of energies and personalities with different agendas. I think overall they have done a good job at promoting and marketing the city and positioning it as a more progressive and modern city...'
(R3♂)

This respondent also noted that :

'I think a visible LGB community is important to achieve this. It has to be across all spheres, in business, politics, the arts, in every field for it to really connect.' (R3♂).

The role of the Capital of Culture

Some respondents were more critical or sceptical of the inclusion of gay culture in the CoC agenda:

‘We are totally sidelined... the amount of money given to Homotopia, which allows the city council to tick their LGB box, is ridiculously small in comparison to the amount of people who are LGB in this city.’ (R1 ♀)

‘I think they can put a big tick by the gay box because of Homotopia, but the amount of money is risible, laughable.’ (R2 ♀)

The role of the Capital of Culture

Lack of funding:

‘It (CofC) pays lip service. Isn’t that what O8 is meant to be about, why they gave it to us? There is very little investment it seems to me. Prior to the Culture Company, arts employed two people in the City Council, now it employs 75 or more... but there’s very little investment in the culture itself.’ (R2 ♀)

The role of the Capital of Culture

Lack of challenging content:

‘If gay culture was part of CofC then it’s passed me... The cultural events we have had, as entertainment, are fine. I haven’t seen any events which are going to challenge the homophobia in the city... (R4♂)

One respondent explained this in terms of the CofC failing to note key dates in the ‘gay calendar’:

‘The CofC team and the Council had an ideal opportunity to mark those days in the LGBT calendar this year (e.g. World AIDS day), but there’s been nothing there. We are still invisible, and you know, silence equals death.’ (R7♂)

The role of the Capital of Culture

Limitations of specific events:

'I think that CofC will affect part of the community, it will affect the artistic community, it will encourage those people involved in that sort of culture, but it hasn't spread out to the wider community. How can one year stimulate culture?' (R4♂)

The role of Capital of Culture

*'Gay culture has been part of CofC through Homotopia.
There's always an argument about focused events
because they don't permeate the rest of the year.'* (R6♂)

However, the same respondent also noted that:

*'I think they have done an excellent job and found an
excellent balance...'* (R6♂)

4. The way forward?

Respondents were aware that the future remains uncertain in terms of where Gay culture, and indeed, the wider ‘cultural provision’ in the city will head, summed up by one respondent:

‘The CofC has created a buzz in the city but I’m worried about what will happen afterwards. Will there just be a void?’ (R1 ♀)

The way forward?

Terms such as *'incorporating gay sensibility'* and *'a more upfront Gay culture'* were used, indicating that the hope was that the positive elements of influence within the CofC could be maintained and integrated more thoroughly within mainstream cultural provision and activity

Although one respondent noted that:

'it doesn't have to be excessively open. The hidden can be quite subversive' (R6♂)

The way forward?

- It would be logical to expect this group of people, given their concerns and depth of knowledge and involvement in this area, to be actively supportive of a Cultural Strategy for Liverpool
- Some expressed views were much more negative: to give two examples:

The way forward?

'I haven't read the Cultural Strategy. I didn't think it would be worthwhile reading. ...I like plans which are specific. They haven't got any money to spend in the next year so they can't be specific, and I think Homotopia may find it very hard to survive' (R7♂)

'I haven't seen the Cultural Strategy. I don't know anyone who has, and it's symptomatic of things being bureaucratically led.' (R2♀)

The way forward?

There appeared to be an awareness that the CofC has created a shift in attitudes with regard to the possible legacy, but equally, a concern that the current strategy contained no guarantees with regard to specific budgets or provision for the future, post-CofC, Liverpool:

The way forward?

‘The document I saw made oblique references to the uniqueness of Liverpool, and immediately you want them to define what they mean by this uniqueness. Is it the friendliness of the people on the streets, the passion for the city...I don’t get this, or is it indefinable? From what I have seen, as a document, it could be anywhere. There’s no vision. They are calling it a manifesto, and for me that’s quite radical, more like a map, what we are going to do, than a strategy. The devil is to be in the detail and that will be the contentious bit – who gets money and who doesn’t’. (R6♂)

The way forward?

Given the history, respondents were concerned that Gay culture would not be given any particular priority in this situation, and this underlined the continued need for gay people themselves to be actively involved in creating change:

The way forward?

‘If gays and lesbians want to see the city change, don’t knock on anyone else’s door — knock on your own first. We have the responsibility. I took a decision to be open and honest and I invite every other gay and lesbian to force change when you decide you don’t want to be a second class citizen, it’s in our hands to force change. It is our responsibility. If we aren’t prepared to fight for our rights, don’t expect others to fight it for us.’

(R4♂)

To conclude:

- The research has not clearly defined either 'culture' or 'gay culture' but has provided us with a range of different and diverse perspectives, some of which may be driven by the focused nature of the sample
- Whilst there is acknowledgment of the contribution of the CofC, the overall flavour of contributions was sceptical, even cynical

- We intend to continue to formulate these ideas and the areas not covered in this presentation using our data gained to date
- Future research could involve a wider study looking at the views of gay and lesbian people not directly involved in 'cultural activity' or policy development