Chapter 5

The Rainbow Connection: A Time-Series Study of Rainbow Flag Display Across Nine Toronto Neighborhoods

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Abstract Recently, the display and use of the rainbow flag in historically defined gay neighborhoods has grown even as gay residents and businesses have been driven away by gentrification, rising real-estate costs, and cultural homogenization. At the same time, prevalence and use of the rainbow flag and the rainbow motif has increased in areas not usually considered part of recognized gay neighborhoods. This chapter explores the prevalence and persistence of the display of the rainbow flag and rainbow motif in nine neighborhoods across Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The visual assessment of rainbow flag use across these neighborhoods serves as a potential model for examining the rate of spread of rainbow flags and visual rainbow motif symbols as a means for tracking the movement of the LGBTQ+ community across urban neighborhoods. Initial results suggest potential significance of the prevalence and persistence of the rainbow flag and the rainbow motif. These include; (1) a possible diaspora of LGBTQ+ residents from traditionally defined gay neighborhoods to newly emerging gay or LGBTQ-friendly neighborhoods, (2) a newfound inclusivity or pride among residents of other neighborhoods, and (3) “rainbow washing” due to overuse of the rainbow motif by non-LGBTQ businesses and organizations connected with pride celebrations. While overuse of the rainbow flag may diminish historically coded meaning of the rainbow, that well-intentioned use of the rainbow flag is a positive and welcoming indicator for LGBTQ+ individuals and it may lead to the emergence of additional LGBTQ-friendly enclaves that, over time, could potentially emerge as new gay neighborhoods.

Keywords Rainbow flag · Rainbow motif · Gay neighborhoods · Place branding · Toronto · Rainbow washing

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5.1 Rainbow Flag: Visibility, Implication, and Meaning

The rainbow flag has signified safety and community to LGBTQ+ people for fifty years. Display of the flag in and around gay neighborhoods has grown continually as a result of pride celebrations each summer, but concentrations of the rainbow flag and rainbow motif are beginning to appear in areas outside of established gay neighborhoods. This chapter examines the concentration and persistence of display of the rainbow flag across nine neighborhoods in Toronto, Canada—one established gay neighborhood, one affluent neighborhood to the north, and seven other neighborhoods concentrated in the West end of the city—using the rainbow flag (and rainbow motif) as a means to visualize the “gayness” or LGBTQ-friendliness of a specific neighborhood, but also as a means to identify the potential emergence of LGBTQ-inclusive neighborhoods and enclaves. This study relies on a planned and coordinated field data collection effort across these nine neighborhoods over a three-year period and charts the growth in use of the rainbow flag over this same period.

5.2 A Capsule History of the Rainbow Flag

The rainbow flag was designed in 1970 by gay-rights activist Gilbert Baker in San Francisco. San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk suggested that Baker develop a symbol of pride for the LGBTQ+ community as an alternative to the pink triangle which was commonly used by the gay community in an effort to reclaim the symbol used to visually brand homosexuals throughout Nazi Germany. For the prototype of the initial flag, Baker dyed fabrics of brilliant color that he sewed into a striped banner. Each color had a meaning: hot pink for sexuality, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for the sun, green for nature, turquoise blue for art, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit. Baker recounts the moment when his new flag was first raised: “it completely astounded me that people just got that this was their flag. It belonged to all of us. I knew right then that this was the most important thing I would ever do—that my whole life was going to be about the rainbow flag” (San Francisco Travel Association 2019).

Later, the rainbow flag was modified by using a seven stripe-version (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet) because fuchsia pink fabric proved too difficult to source (Martel 2018; Albin 2009) and has since been endlessly adapted to visually demonstrate inclusivity for all identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Throughout San Francisco the original rainbow flag slowly became recognized throughout the 1970s as a symbol of gay community. Following the assassination of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978, the flag became a rallying symbol for LGBTQ+ individuals and was flown from light poles along both sides of Market Street for the 1979 Gay Freedom Day Parade (San Francisco Travel Association 2019). The rainbow motif was used as the cover of the Parade program the following year, as depicted in Fig. 5.2. The flag was eventually modified

into a six-stripe Rainbow Flag and was used to identify gay-friendly homes and businesses throughout San Francisco (San Francisco Travel Association 2019) as shown in Fig. 5.1, which became a visual code to LGBTQ+ individuals implying a safe welcoming space under the rainbow banner (Martel 2018). The flag continues

Fig. 5.1 The rainbow flag and rainbow motif used as a place brand throughout the Castro in San Francisco (Source Image by author)

to grow in popularity and is ever-changing to include emergent groups that identify with LGBTQ+ rights.

Use of the rainbow flag to signify LGBTQ-friendly space continued, as shown in Fig. 5.3, and use of the flag spread to other gay neighborhoods outside of San Francisco. John Stout of West Hollywood litigated in 1988 for the right to display a rainbow flag on the balcony of his apartment (San Francisco Travel Association 2019). He won this fight and, as a result, display and popularity of the flag throughout the West Hollywood gay neighborhood grew. Similarly, LGBTQ-friendly establishments in other gay neighborhoods began to display the rainbow flag (Martel 2018) as a symbol of gay pride and inclusivity and to signify safe spaces for gay people. By 1993, the rainbow motif—not simply the flag—was being used at the then-largest LGBTQ+ march on Washington (San Francisco Travel Association 2019), claiming it as the predominant symbol of gay pride and inclusivity.

The rainbow flag (and the rainbow motif) are unique in that for much of the past fifty years, the codified significance of the flag required a degree of “insider” knowledge to understand the meaning signified by display of the flag. While the rainbow flag broadcast to LGBTQ+ individuals an open and welcoming invitation (Bitterman and Hess 2016b), for many years, most of straight society did not know about the flag or its meaning, and some thought it was simply a colorful banner. Even today, some still do (Wareham 2020). The coded significance of the flag is important to its evolution and adaptation over time.

The rainbow flag and motif was also not without detractors in the LGBTQ+ community, however. Doan (2015) cites one such case of a self-identified lesbian woman who wondered why anyone would want to fly a rainbow flag on their home and thereby advertise their location and potentially make themselves a target for criticism or discrimination. Some within the LGBTQ+ community felt that the flag was ostentatious, and some implied the colorful flag was “tacky” or “too gay” (WeHoVille Staff 2012). Popularity of the rainbow flag, and its important meaning of inclusion won over the small criticisms or concerns. Over the past fifty years, the rainbow flag has become a visual symbol of the struggle for LGBTQ+ inclusion and has been used to signify specific locations of gay-friendly businesses, homes, and accommodations across the world. The rainbow color motif, once a coded signal to LGBTQ+ individuals that they are welcome, included, and safe, (Bitterman and Hess 2016a) has become a widely recognized universal symbol and visual shorthand for LGBTQ+ inclusion especially among the LGBTQ+ and allied communities (Bitterman and Hess 2016b).

5.3 The Rainbow Flag as Place Brand for Gay Neighborhoods

The rainbow flag, an internationally recognized symbol of gay pride, could be considered a place brand. It has been used for about five decades to “brand” LGBTQ+ spaces

Fig. 5.2 The rainbow motif used on the cover of the 1980 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day program
(Source Image by author)

and neighborhoods. However, unlike most place brands, the flag is no longer specific to any one location, but instead a “type” of location which makes it a highly unusual sort of place brand.

The rainbow flag is unique in that its origins are not only grassroots, but it is also place-agnostic, used to denote connection and acceptance of those under the

protection of the LGBTQ+ umbrella, regardless of location. Developed as a labor of love, the rainbow flag has been widely adopted and modified, and its success is perpetuated by its power to unite marginalized sexual minorities. The rainbow flag assists LGBTQ+ people in proudly expressing sexual orientation or gender identity, and it signifies the places these sexual minorities have struggled to designate as collective communities safe from persecution and marginalization from the dominant group. There are few examples of place brands which are used to demarcate particular spaces but that also transcend borders. Other rare examples of universally identifiable visual elements used to denote place include red, white, and blue striped barber poles and the red cross symbol used to denote first aid or medical facilities (Bitterman 2008).

More typical place brands encompass attitudes and perceptions about specific places and are used to promote these locales to visitors and potential residents as well as to boost civic pride among current citizens. Place brands can be constituted from a variety of elements—a sign, a slogan, a logo, or an advertising campaign—that denote place. The iconic Hollywood sign, the IAmsterdam sign and campaign, and the I ♥ NY logo and campaign are examples of visual efforts used to brand place (Bitterman 2008). Place brands range in type, scale, and application. Typically developed and promoted by a government, NGO, or corporation, Top-Down place brands tend to be planned, cohesive, and comprehensive. Controlled by various rules for use for each of the visual elements constituting the brand—color, typography, imagery, and scale—Top-Down brands are usually accompanied by a plan for dissemination and for administering the brand. These rules harmonize consistency in use of the brand across a broad range of media and scale in the built environment, which usually includes the design of street furniture, maps and kiosks, gateway signage, public transit systems (Hess and Bitterman 2008), wayfinding signage, smaller-scale print advertisements, and brochures, as well as digital applications such as websites and video productions. “Bottom-Up” or grassroots place brands, in contrast, are typically not sanctioned by an authority, but instead evolve in an organic fashion which tends to be spontaneous, decentralized, and fluid. I ♥ NY is one example of a grassroots place brand (Bitterman 2008) and the rainbow flag is another. Despite careful rules for use, very few top-down place brands persist beyond five years. In contrast, many “grassroots” bottom-up place brands persist for many years as they tend to be developed and supported by and for the people (Bitterman 2008).

As the reputation and identity of gay neighborhoods began to solidify and once-secretive marginal spaces of gay life became bustling centers of economic, political, and social revolution residents and businesses in gay neighborhoods proudly and publicly began to display the rainbow flag (Martel 2018) and motif as shown in Fig. 5.3. The rainbow flag—a place brand non-specific to any one city, region, or country—became an international symbol of gay pride (Martel 2018) and visually is used to delimit the boundaries of gay neighborhoods.

Fig. 5.3 Examples of the rainbow flag and motif used to denote inclusive place. At left in New York City, at right in Cambridge, Massachusetts (*Source Image by author*)

5.4 The Power of Graphics in the Built Environment

Graphics and visual elements—the constituent elements of place brands—are helpful in influencing behavior and cultivating or reinforcing a sense of community and belonging. Graphics also convey or signal meaning. Painted elements and color in the built environment are two of the most common visual elements on which place brands rely, and these graphic interventions across the built environment demonstrate the subtle power of surrounding graphics. A thin yellow or white line painted along lanes of travel on a highway is one example of the power of graphics in the built environment. Drivers and passengers in vehicles speed by in close proximity divided only by a thin painted line. Drivers have been taught to respect those simple lines, and pedestrians trust that when entering a crosswalk, the line will indicate to passing motorists the necessity to yield to their presence. Graphic elements—lines, color, logos—hold meaning and importance, even when our reaction to that meaning is so familiar it becomes automatic (Bitterman 2008).

Paint, color, and lines help humans to delimit space and to physically define boundaries (Bitterman 2013). In the early 2000s, NYC Department of Transportation commissioner urban planning Janette Sadik-Kahn led an effort to use little more than paint and street furniture to radically reorient streetscapes in Manhattan from vehicle-oriented spaces to people-oriented places (Bela 2015). These simple interventions helped to change the paradigm of urban design simply by using color, paint, and line to demarcate and suggest community space and separating forms of travel (driving,

bicycling, walking). These efforts may have been inspired by similar tactics in gay neighborhoods, which were among some of the first neighborhoods to use paint to proudly designate place by replicating the rainbow flag motif in crosswalks, trash bins, benches, murals, and other decorative applications, proudly identifying even the most mundane urban necessities as inclusive, friendly, and welcoming.

Visual devices such as color and symbol help to define place (Bitterman 2013). For example, ethnic neighborhoods are often proudly festooned with cultural pride denoted by festive flags, decorations, and symbols. The decoration of spaces as holidays draw near helps to visually reinforce the excitement of pending festivals. The display of a national or regional flag close to the time of ethnic holidays is common in ethnic neighborhoods. These practices are cyclical and occur at specific times each year to signify and commemorate specific holidays.

Street furniture and visual elements are necessary components of the urban environment—utility poles, crosswalks, benches, curbstones, and signage of all types (street, traffic, roadway, advertisements)—and are omnipresent, but so common these important elements have become forgettable. Urban street furniture and elements of the built environment are part of a visual cacophony that constitutes a typical urban streetscape. These public and prevalent elements in the built environment provide an empty canvas on which to decorate, and are sometime employ visual elements to identify the locations and culture of a specific neighborhood (Bitterman 2008).

Invisible neighborhoods in plain sight, except to those “in the know,” and often located in otherwise disused areas of cities, gay neighborhoods were figuratively and literally on the urban fringe for many years. The gay liberation and freedom movements of the 1970s and 1980s and the more recent gay pride movement paved the way for increased civil rights for LGBTQ+ individuals and greater acceptance among mainstream society in the 1990s and 2000s, and as a result the vibrant life, lively bars, and shops found among gay neighborhoods became a magnetic draw for LGBTQ+ visitors. Between the 1970s and the early 2000s, gay neighborhoods became centers of community life, commerce, and leisure for LGBTQ+ individuals and were—like all neighborhoods—in a state of constant change and reinvention.

The rainbow flag and the rainbow motif have similarly helped to establish place and visually delineate the presence and boundaries of gay neighborhoods (Bitterman and Hess 2021; Hess and Bitterman 2021). The rainbow motif is typically displayed as a striped fabric flag, but is sometimes painted onto crosswalks, applied to street furniture such as traffic control signs, public seating, trash receptacles, and banners, and incorporated into murals and public art (Hess and Bitterman 2021). Stickers featuring the rainbow motif are often applied to the doors and windows of LGBTQ+-welcoming businesses. Across gay neighborhoods, rainbow flags, painted stripes, and the rainbow motif have become commonplace on street furniture, murals, and other installations marking the neighborhoods as welcoming spaces for LGBTQ+ visitors (Bitterman and Hess 2016b), and residents. Signs using the rainbow motif typically identify and welcome people to the neighborhood alongside light poles festooned with banners that identify the gay neighborhood. The prevalence of the rainbow motif helped to brand—as well as identify and demarcate—gay neighborhoods as distinct gay spaces (Hess and Bitterman 2021).

5.5 Concentration and Persistence of Rainbow Flags Define Boundaries of Gay Neighborhoods

Display of the rainbow flag, for much of its use throughout history, had been primarily confined to gay neighborhoods, but use of the flag and rainbow motif has more recently leaked beyond the boundaries of established gay neighborhoods into other neighborhoods not traditionally associated with outward support of LGBTQ+ residents and visitors and their human rights (Hinrichs 2020; Hess 2019). Over time, in concert with growing mainstream acceptance and increased legal and civil rights, the use of the rainbow motif has become more widely adopted, and now is common across LGBTQ-friendly businesses and spaces in many major cities. Observational data suggests that the rainbow flag and rainbow motif are now more widely adopted than other subcultural references that signify place in the urban environment. What does this sudden surge in display of the rainbow motif and rainbow flag indicate? The spread of the rainbow flag and rainbow motif in and around cities seems to suggest a certain level of positivity and support—reflected in inclusivity, tolerance, and safety—associated with certain urban districts (Neville and Henrickson 2010). The prevalence of the rainbow flag in areas of cities not typically considered “gay” may suggest a variety of possible conditions: a diminished importance of more established gay neighborhoods, newfound pride among previously “quiet” or previously closeted members of the LGBTQ+ community, the emergence of new or fledgling gay neighborhoods, or increased support among mainstream businesses and residents for LGBTQ+ rights and equality.

This study seeks to understand how the concentration of rainbow flags and the rainbow motif suggests the existence of a gay neighborhood or a LGBTQ-friendly neighborhood. A related part of this inquiry examines the persistence of rainbow flags and explores whether or not they appear only around the time of pride celebrations rather than year round. Could dense concentrations of displayed rainbow flags in areas of cities not previously thought of as gay neighborhoods indicate potential emergent gay enclaves or future gay neighborhoods? In this way, the rainbow flag can be considered a visual indicator of a potentially LGBTQ-friendly enclave or perhaps even an embryonic gay neighborhood.

The concentration of display and persistence in display of the rainbow flag are two measures that provide a possible means to gauge the physical *genus loci*, boundaries, and centers of gay neighborhoods. Similarly, rainbow flags can help to identify key institutions within gay neighborhoods. One high-profile measure of the presence of LGBTQ+ individuals (and their supporters) is the concentration of display of the rainbow flag and motif across a defined area. Persistence of display also provides a means to visually track the concentration and spread of LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ-friendly presence throughout gay neighborhoods and areas immediately adjacent.

“Rainbow washing” refers to the appropriation or corporatized use of the rainbow flag for the financial gain of a business (Wired Staff 2018); this practice compromises the coded mean of the rainbow flag and rainbow motif. Rainbow washing weakens LGBTQ+ symbology, making the rainbow flag simply LGBTQ-friendly decoration in mainstream space.

This study employs a visual assessment method to observe and chart the concentration and persistence and implied spread of the rainbow flag across urban space in Toronto. The purpose is to examine the prevalence and display of rainbow flags across urban districts as an indicator of identifiable gay neighborhoods; the method is further used to explore the possibility of a urban gay diaspora from established gay neighborhoods to new neighborhoods across Toronto. This particular assessment collected visual data bimonthly along main thoroughfares in neighborhoods across Toronto over a 3-year period between Autumn 2016 and Autumn 2019. In addition to the Church Street corridor (7) which anchors the established gay neighborhood in Toronto (Gorman-Murray and Nash 2021), eight other areas were visually assessed. These include: Queen Street West (3), Queen Street along Bellwoods/Trinity/West Queen West (6), and Parkdale neighborhoods along Roncesvalles Avenue and Queen Street West (2) in West End; Roncesvalles Avenue in the “Roncey” Village (1); Yonge Street in the Central Business District (8), Bloor Street in Yorkville (9), King/Bathurst in Fort York (5), and King West in Liberty Village (4) as shown in Fig. 5.4.

Results from this exercise can shed new light on the use of the rainbow flag to designate urban space and on the shifting geographies of gay neighborhoods in Toronto. Quantitative data from this study may yield important clues to the “spread” of tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion across Toronto, or it may underscore a broader societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, making the prevalence of rainbow flags indicative but inconsequential. If indeed rainbow flags are simply residual visual

Fig. 5.4 Map of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, showing neighborhoods assessed: 1. Roncesvalles, 2. Parkdale, 3. Bellwoods/Trinity/West Queen West, 4. Liberty Village, 5. Fort York, 6. Queen Street West, 7. Church Street Gay Neighborhood, 8. Yonge Street/Central Business District, 9. Bloor/Yorkville (Source Map by author)

indicators of broader societal acceptance, then a relative increase in the prominence of flags would conceivably be found equally across most areas of the city. One potential limitation of this visual assessment is that as mainstream recognition and particularly as use of the rainbow flag grows (especially among large corporate entities around the time of pride celebrations), the risk of rainbow washing becomes more persistent. Further study will be required to determine consistent correlation and/or discontinuity over time.

5.6 Empirical Plan for the Visual Assessment of Rainbow Flag Display

Each “neighborhood” encompassed all building façades visible from both sides along a 1.5 km span of a major arterial road. These important commercial corridors provide important shops and amenities—bars, restaurants, cafés, access to public transit, gathering spaces—that anchor each neighborhood. During each assessment, the streets were walked, façades along each thoroughfare were photographed, and the presence of the any rainbow flag or motif was documented, geotagged, and time stamped. The photographs were assembled in a database and the number of instances tallied for each neighborhood on each observation day. Each photograph provides a snapshot of a specific place at a specific time and in series provide visual evidence of the emergence, retrenchment, and spread/retreat of the rainbow flag/motif. These images were cataloged and compared over time to quantify both concentration and persistence of the rainbow flag/motif. The aggregate number of instances for each neighborhood was then compared over time. See Fig. 5.5. Comparing these snapshots over time provides two important visual assessment indicators. The first is change related to seasonality (for example, a change in the number of rainbow flags around special events, such as pride celebrations). The second is longer-duration insights about neighborhood change provided by an increase in visual clues—rainbow flags and motifs.

The visual assessment survey aimed to minimize potential researcher bias when examining the data; that is, rainbow flags and motifs are counted as either present or not. Subjective assessments about the application and expression of the mode (fabric flag, painted mural, graffiti, etc.) were also made but were not used in quantifying measure. Similarly, quality (i.e., rainbow flags faded from the sun or tattered by weather which are no longer impressive) or size (i.e., very small stickers in shop windows that do not make a large visual impact) was neither measured nor recorded.

Fig. 5.5 Emergence of rainbow motifs in areas not typically identified as gay neighborhoods. Photos on the left are from 2015–16, photos on the right are from 2017–20 (Source Images by author)

5.7 Observations and Findings

Throughout the study area, the rainbow motif is prominently displayed in the streetscape environment on various street furniture elements and at various scales on building façades. Pride event-specific signs and flags on light posts or displayed over the street are clearly part of an organized effort. However, other examples—rainbow-painted benches and access ramps—are more grassroots, individualized efforts. Other examples of public art and graffiti that supports the LGBTQ+ population such as rainbow-painted stairs that lead to a neighborhood church or the rainbow motif storefront are arguably radical.

Figure 5.5 shows a small sample of before and after images of facades and street furniture from selected locations within the study areas. Over time, the emergence of rainbow flags/motifs become discernible and the concentration in specific study areas becomes notable. Figure 5.5 shows the evolution of one façade in the Roncesvalles neighborhood and two façades in the nearby Parkdale neighborhood. The rainbow-painted stairs at the church on Roncesvalles Avenue appeared around the late spring or early summer of 2018, and has persisted and been maintained since. The rainbow motif used into decorate the bench and adorn the entire façade of the nearby building on the other side of the road also appeared around pride celebrations in 2017, and have persisted and been maintained since. Notably, over the period of study, the rainbow motif on the Parkdale façade evolved slowly over time from a painted white façade, to a white façade with rainbow stickers in the window, to a white façade with large rainbow posters in the window, to a fully painted rainbow façade that can be seen in the image on the lower right.

Over the period of study, a steady overall increase is observed in the number of rainbow flags and rainbow motifs on display in all neighborhoods (except for one neighborhood, Yorkville). However, the pattern of increase fell into two general categories: steady cumulative increase (Roncesvalles, Parkdale, Bellwoods/Trinity/West Queen West) and unsteady cumulative increase (Queen West, Yonge Street, Church Gay Neighborhood, and to a lesser degree Liberty Village and Fort York) as shown in Fig. 5.6.

The neighborhoods with steady cumulative increase in rainbow flag display tended to be small community-oriented neighborhoods with a saturation of small businesses and adjacent residential density, as shown in Fig. 5.7. Neighborhoods with unsteady cumulative increases tended to be business districts populated by chain merchants and lower residential density. Community, in part is shaped by participation. Active participation by owner-merchants and those with a vested interest in the immediate neighborhood may tend to support neighborhood inclusively and diversity more than, perhaps, a chain store or corporate entity. Regardless, across both categories, the number of rainbow flags and use of the rainbow motif increased especially around the summer months (June, July, and August) in which Toronto holds pride celebrations. The “halo” effect of lingering flags and rainbow decorations seemed to slowly wane following this summer celebration period before being replaced by fall and winter holiday decorations. The pattern of increased display of rainbow flags leading up to, during, and immediately following pride was repeated year after year. However, the prevalence was significantly more hyperbolic in the unsteady cumulative increase neighborhoods and much more predictable in the steady cumulative increase neighborhoods, which suggests some degree of rainbow washing as the sharp increase in prevalence of rainbow flags is not matched by a likewise increase in persistence of flags over time.

The data in this observational study that suggests an explosion of rainbow motifs near pride month may suggest that outward display of rainbow motif around pride celebrations has become lucrative for local businesses. Each year more businesses participate than the year before. The unsteady cumulative increase group seems to be bolstered by businesses that commemorate the celebration of pride using the

Fig. 5.6 Prevalence and persistence of rainbow flags/motifs across nine neighborhoods in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Numbers correspond to neighborhoods shown in Fig. 4 (Source Chart by author)

rainbow flag and motif. These businesses are likely encouraged by an increase in sales revenues when the rainbow flag is displayed, therefore the display is repeated again the following year, resulting in a cumulative overall increase. Other businesses seem to follow suit. The aggregate number of rainbow flags on display for this group increases steadily over time. This increase over time could be overt and intentional, or it could simply reflect remnant decorations that are forgotten or unintentionally left behind. Perhaps well-intended, the tattered remnants of forgotten examples may be a result of benign neglect, or may be evidence of a rainbow washing effort to support business foot traffic, more than an indication of genuine concern for LGBTQ+ inclusivity. For example, as the visual display of the rainbow motif diminishes in these neighborhoods, the rainbow flags and decorations are often replaced with decorations

Fig. 5.7 Examples of neighborhood and merchant participation in displaying the rainbow flag/motif
(Source Images by author)

for other holidays like Halloween or Christmas. With this sort of use, the rainbow flag and motif become decorations used to celebrate a holiday in an inclusive manner, rather than a symbol of community acceptance, and this rainbow washing could eventually change the implicit message of the rainbow flag by diluting the coded meaning of the flag and its significance—safety and inclusion—to LGBTQ+ people.

Neighborhoods with steady cumulative increases, in contrast, do not appear to “bump” as much during summer pride months, but instead demonstrate a month-over-month increase in the numbers of rainbow flags on display. Across these neighborhoods, rainbow flags are displayed and then remain visible. Rainbow flags in these cases are not replaced or removed, but augmented by decorations for subsequent holidays. The aggregate increase over time in the display of rainbow flags seems to suggest increasing societal acceptance and a desire to denote support for LGBTQ+ individuals year round, rather than only during a specific festival or pride season (Hinrichs 2020).

5.8 Diaspora as Practical Identity

Neighborhood evolution occurs slowly over time, and neighborhoods are in a constant state of change (Hess 2019). Undoubtedly, the elements that constitute a gay neighborhood are complex and varied. It is impractical to account for an increase or decrease number of LGBTQ+ residents/visitors to a particular neighborhood (Frisch 2021; Spring 2021) and without reliable population and census data more careful longitudinal research is needed to determine whether or not this is indeed the case (Ornstein and McCaskell 2017). Therefore, other data must be examined to determine the degree to which a neighborhood can be classified as a “gay neighborhood.” One simple way to determine whether or not a neighborhood is welcoming to LGBTQ+ residents and visitors is the visual prevalence of the rainbow flag/motif. The degree to which the rainbow flag/motif is displayed, and the persistence of that display send a clear message of safety and inclusion for LGBTQ+ individuals. Prevalence and persistence can take the form of well-intended rainbow washing. In any case, the general direction indicates one toward greater acceptance and inclusion. Any increase in the concentration or persistence of rainbow flags is likely a positive forward trajectory for LGBTQ+ people.

Visible signs and changes are one way that neighborhood evolution becomes perceptible (Ghaziani 2021), especially when these signs reappear in concentration or persist with an increasing frequency. The binary descriptors of gay/straight are beginning to be replaced by multipolar—and inclusive—diversity. Because of this change, variants of the rainbow flag are used to denote specific constituencies encompassed by the LGBTQ+ umbrella, but also may reference groups not explicitly included by the LGBTQ+ acronym. As the gay/straight dichotomy becomes less relevant and as descriptors are replaced by an infinitely more inclusive and fluid gay/straight/queer/cis/metro/solo/non-cis/trans/fluid/+ ordinates, the dynamics of gay neighborhoods and the display of the rainbow flag and its variants will likely

change—and have changed—in response. These shifts do not imply that gay neighborhoods are waning or dying but signals a positive paradigmatic shift toward inclusivity that celebrates and recognizes everyone. Rainbow flags in and around gay neighborhoods will provide visual evidence—an “afterglow”—at the genesis points of inclusivity and acceptance (Coffin 2021).

As recently as twenty years ago, an increased concentration and persistence of rainbow flags—a nascent rainbow diaspora—would not have been as visually evident in urban districts outside of gay neighborhoods. For example, Roncesvalles, once an ethnic Polish neighborhood on the western edge of Toronto, had not been historically known as unusually inclusive, but is now a bustling urban village that is diverse as it is welcoming. The Roncesvalles neighborhood visually celebrates its Polish and other ethnic heritages along with a newfound celebration of inclusive LGBTQ+ diversity evident by the prevalence of rainbow flags and motif throughout the neighborhood. Similarly, most other neighborhoods assessed seem to be similarly evolving.

5.9 Rainbow Proliferation: Synthesis and Conclusions

The widespread proliferation of the rainbow flag/motif makes now an opportune moment to critically examine the display of the rainbow flag/motif in relation to demarcating place and as a potential visual indicator of the diffusion of LGBTQ+ individuals away from established gay neighborhoods. The scope of this visual assessment study is limited, but the proof of concept offered by the visual assessment method described in this chapter that tracks the display of the rainbow flag/motif which may help illustrate societal undercurrents and population movements or the change in broader cultural attitudes across urban space. More consistent and reliable census and ethnographic data is needed to adequately correlate the movement of LGBTQ+ individuals to the display of the rainbow flag in neighborhoods outside of historically defined gay neighborhoods.

This study also prompts new questions about the role of the rainbow flag in signaling safety and acceptance to a sexual minority group in a post-binary era, which may alter the inherent meaning—and importance—of the rainbow flag. While the prevalence and increasing use of the rainbow flag may signal greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially in areas of a city outside of defined gay neighborhoods (Bitterman 2020a), increasing use may also indicate that the flag risks becoming “politically correct” window dressing—rainbow washing—and potentially less about pride and belonging. Placing the rainbow flag within a broader context of place branding can help to more clearly identify the symbolism of the flag as well as provide a structure to assess the proliferation and spread of the rainbow motif apart from the physical flag itself. Place branding provides one possible means to contextualize the meaning inherent (Bitterman 2008) in the concentration and persistence in display of the rainbow flag. These efforts will help to more clearly delineate between rainbow washing and the use of the flag as a meaningful signal to LGBTQ+ individuals. Careful future study and may also help to accurately predict

the long-term impacts of using the flag to define the limits of gay neighborhoods and to track the movement and settlement of LGBTQ+ individuals or LGBTQ-friendly areas across a particular city (Hess and Bitterman 2021).

5.10 Takeaway Messages

This visual assessment study produces five takeaway messages:

Takeaway Message 1: Concentration of rainbow flags indicates likely presence of LGBTQ+ individuals.

A visually discernible concentration of rainbow flags and rainbow motifs suggests perhaps greater populations of LGBTQ + or LGBTQ-friendly individuals and implies perhaps a greater awareness and therefore acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals across a diverse urban environment. Conversely, the lack of visibility does not mean that there are no LGBTQ+ areas; but instead, means that planners must look more carefully at neighborhood patterns (Doan 2015). Over time, study and tracking use of the rainbow flag/motif will likely correlate with either population motility and/or an increasing integration of LGBTQ+ people into neighborhoods, in effect making these neighborhoods “more gay.”

Takeaway Message 2: Overall concentration of rainbow flag/motif increases around pride celebrations, which may imply rainbow washing.

Use of the rainbow flag/motif increases around the time of annual pride celebrations, which suggests a dilution of the meaning of the flag through well-intended—but nonetheless not fully authentic—rainbow washing. Display of the rainbow flag must certainly be beneficial to businesses, especially around pride celebrations. This relatively new use of rainbow decorations by large chain stores does not alone indicate any specific meaning, but is perhaps a strong indication that an increasing number of mainstream businesses and shops actively welcome LGBTQ+ customers.

Takeaway Message 3: Over time, use of the rainbow flag seems to be growing and persistent.

The persistence and semi-permanence of the rainbow flag and rainbow motif may suggest specific intention in the display of the flag as a deliberate choice. Some rainbow flags and rainbow motifs persist well beyond the pride celebrations that occurs annually during the mid-summer, and many of these lingering flags are prominently visible well through the winter holiday season. Persistence of the rainbow flag indicates potentially positive attributes for LGBTQ+ individuals and serves as a reminder that LGBTQ+ people “belong” year round and not only during pride celebrations. The most notable evidence to support this notion is simply that rainbow flags and other rainbow symbols are largely absent elsewhere in Toronto at the time of this study, reinforcing a common perception that outward symbols

of gay pride—such as the rainbow flag—“belong” to LGBTQ+ people and are used to identify gay or LGBTQ-friendly neighborhoods.

Takeaway Message 4: Rainbow flag concentration and persistence may indicate gay neighborhoods that are focused on populations other than gay men.

Perhaps more than a symbol of gay neighborhoods that are fracturing and dispersing, the prevalence of the rainbow flag elsewhere in the city may indicate other LGBTQ-friendly neighborhoods that are focused on minority populations other than gay men. The rainbow flag could be a visual indicator that these communities are emerging with pride as enclaves for subgroups that are under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, but are not specifically “*gay neighborhoods*.”

Takeaway Message 5: Meaning associated with the rainbow flag is changing over time.

The rainbow flag and rainbow motif denote a broad spectrum of attitudes toward diversity and inclusion that is the cornerstone of gay pride, much as red hearts denote love near St. Valentine’s Day. However, the historical importance and meaning of rainbow symbols run deeper in that the rainbow flag—to LGBTQ+ individuals—is a coded representation of safe and welcoming space and suggests a vital sense of belonging. Widespread use of the rainbow flag may suggest on the positive side greater mainstream acceptance, tolerance, and equality, however, it may also erode the coded meaning of the rainbow flag through overuse or unintentional appropriation. Additionally, some non-LGBTQ+ individuals may even interpret the rainbow flag as a broader symbol of inclusion and diversity—social movements they want to support—and not so much as a marker or coded message of the gay civil rights movement. In other words, the original targeted meaning is now eclipsed by broader notions of inclusivity for everyone, not just LGBTQ+ people.

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