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Coming out of the Controlled Closet: A Comparison of Patron Keywords for Queer Topics to Library of Congress Subject Headings

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Coming out of the Controlled Closet: A Comparison of Patron Keywords for Queer Topics to Library of Congress Subject Headings

Introduction

According to the American Library Association, those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans (the LGBT community) are part of an underserved population (American Library Association, n.d.). The information needs and information seeking behaviors of the LGBT community can be complicated by various institutional oppressions such as homophobia, decreased visibility, and lack of information (Antell, Strothmann, & Downey, 2013; Chapman & Birdi, 2016; Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, & Harris, 2013; Stenback & Schrader, 1999). But if a library does have the information, how do people search for information regarding LGBT topics? Do their search terms, such as those used during a keyword search in a library Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) or discovery layer, match any controlled vocabularies? Of course, these questions are near impossible to answer. After all, not every person in the LGBT community uses the same language or terminology for how they experience sexual attraction and gender identity, and the language currently en vogue can change without warning, suddenly rendering old language at best obsolete and at worst offensive or oppressive.

This old language, if solidified in controlled vocabulary, remains in use long after the community deems it harmful or incorrect. Often, librarians add language without consulting the community it represents. Many librarians have been analyzing and critiquing controlled vocabularies, particularly the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), since the 1970s. Yet despite the many suggestions of better language, these suggestions, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, have little basis in or are rarely based on empirical research.
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The aim of this study is to provide a comparison of Library of Congress Subject Headings and natural search language involving LGBT topics. The hypothesis is that there are differences, especially relating to topics that fall under the less stable “queer” identity. By illustrating any differences or similarities, as well as demonstrating a methodology and results, this research provides a better foundation for librarians wanting to update, remove, and/or add new language to controlled vocabularies. The findings of this study should empower librarians and patrons alike and to inspire action within our profession.

Literature Review

Since 1971, librarians have been attempting to correct the harmful and outdated Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) relating to people, particularly the LGBT community. These early critiques focus mainly on homosexuality and the specific identities related. For instance, Sanford Berman critiques the cross-reference of Homosexuality and Lesbianism to Sexual perversion in his book *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People* (1971). After Berman, librarians continue to critique and attempt to correct both Library of Congress subject headings and classification that relate to the LGBT community, as well as other controlled vocabularies, and how they are assigned (Carmichael, 1998, 2002; Christensen, 2008; Greenblatt, 1990; McClary & Howard, 2007).

It is not until almost a decade into the twenty-first century that these analyses are turned toward trans identities and identities which are not lesbian or gay. And because of the fluid nature of identity labels, many of these analyses compare Library of Congress subject headings and other controlled vocabularies to non-traditional forms of subject access, such as LibraryThing folksonomies (Adler, 2009; Angell & Roberto, 2014; Bates & Rowley, 2011; Johnson, 2010). These studies investigate the how users describe materials which involve trans
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and queer subjects, as well as the history of transgender subject access. Often, folksonomies
capture the nuance and fluidity of queer language while controlled vocabularies cement outdated
terminology.

However, the articles and books cited above do not cite that they took patron language
into account when creating new terms or critiquing old terms.

Methodology

A qualitative methods approach was employed for this research. Data were collected
through a series of one-on-one semi-structured interviews with faculty/professors in Gender and
Women’s Studies at the University of Illinois. Although the researcher sent out multiple
recruitment emails for research participants, only four professors responded to the request. This
small sample size does not and should not reflect a general patron base, especially considering
these participants knew a library school student was conducting the interview. The IRB at the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign approved this research. These interviews contained
at least 10 questions and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes each; because the interviews
were semi-structured, the researcher asked further questions based on the responses given by
participants. Questions were designed to examine the language that participants used to search
for concepts, with semiotics and post-structural critical theories serving as a framework. Their
answers answered the first research question: What language do patrons use when searching for
LGBTQ topics?

The researcher then analyzed the answers of the research participants to find the specific
terms used for searching. Data were analyzed through transcription and coding, and that coding
was compared to existing Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) through both a subject
heading search and a keyword search and Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms
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(LCDGT) through a keyword search; the reason for not also doing a subject heading search for LCDGT was that hundreds of unrelated terms would come up. These searches were done in Classification Web.

The researcher chose a qualitative approach for this study because this research deals with concepts and wording rather than numerical data. It also allows for this data to be framed within a context focusing on participants’ lived experiences and letting them describe themselves in their own words, rather than privileging the data as empirical fact regardless of context (Creswell, 2014; FIRESTONE, 1987). For a more detailed look into the methodology, see the author’s article in In the Library with the Lead Pipe (Colbert, 2017).

**Results**

Through four semi-structured interviews, data were gathered about the demographics, searching habits, search terms, and relevancy of search results from Gender and Women’s Studies professors at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These interviews were recorded, then transcribed and coded. However, the audio of the interview conducted with research participant 2 was not loud enough to transcribe and code, and any reference to that interview comes from memory. Research participants are labeled using P for participant and a number indicating the order in which they were interviewed.

The data gathered from these interviews show the variety of language used when doing research on LGBT topics, as well as the variety of searching habits of research participants. As the results show, these professors rarely use the online public access catalog of the library and instead begin their research in other venues.

And despite the difference shown between their language and the language used by the Library of Congress, research participants stated that they often find what they are looking for.
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Although they might not find information during their first search, their skills and experience as researchers allow them to alter their search strategies to eventually find resources. Novice researchers might not yet have this skill set, and thus it is still important to investigate the language used in controlled vocabularies.

Demographics

Each research participant was asked their sexuality, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. These demographics can influence not only the language participants use to search, but also their search habits and experience. Of the four research participants, only one identified as straight, with the other three identifying as some sort of woman-loving-women identity such as lesbian. All four participants identified as women. Two participants identified as white, with one identifying with her Latina ethnicity and one identifying as Asian American. All four identified their socioeconomic status somewhere within the middle class, with one saying that she felt she belonged somewhere between working class and middle class due to her upbringing and the fact that she must work more than one job, despite having a Ph.D.

All four participants are researchers and professors at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, either in Gender and Women’s Studies or in adjacent fields. They all have extensive research experience in their fields and can conduct searches with enough skill to find what they need.

Search Habits

After asking demographic questions, each research participant was asked how she identifies an LGBT topic. Although each research participant gave different answers based on how they situate themselves within the discourse, they all agreed that LGBT topics might not need to necessarily be about the experiences and lives of LGBT people. LGBT topics, according
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to the research participants, can, in fact, be adjacent topics. P3 gave the example of hate crime statistics. While hate crimes happen to other demographic groups, members of the LGBT community could also be interested in those broad statistics because hate crimes also happen to the LGBT community.

The researcher then asked the research participants where they begin their searches when searching for what they consider an LGBT topic. None of the research participants start by going to the University of Illinois’ VuFind library catalog. Some participants start their searches by doing background research, either through consulting bibliographies or works about the topic (P1, P4); they might even consult works broadly related to the topic they need to search, such as looking at works about Oscar Wilde (P1). Research participants will also consult others in their field or in the field they are searching to get an idea of who is writing in that field. P4 cited that she relies heavily on the women’s studies librarian and the University’s other subject specialist libraries to help get her started when researching a new topic. P3 also preferred databases such as Google Scholar and PubMed for her research and only went into the actual catalog to get documents from searches done in those other databases.

In fact, all research participants only approached the library catalog when they either had the title, author, or recommended subject term for the search. The participant who cited using the librarians for help felt very comfortable using the catalog (P4), but she preferred going into the stacks physically when looking for print monographs and journals. She prefers this experience because she likes the serendipity of discovery that can come with browsing. In particular, she enjoys knowing that the books are “organized in a way that things are going to be next to each other,” which helps her to find books she did not even know existed (P4). The participant illustrates the relationship between subject access and classification and how subject access also
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affects browsing. Because she knows that similar books are grouped together in categories, she knows that browsing is another viable search strategy that might get around any awkwardness and difficulty when searching in a database or online catalog.

Research participants were then asked what their preferred search type was, and whether they tended to do keyword or subject searches more often. Most said keyword, but for those who said subject, it is not clear if they knew that subject searches require knowledge of a controlled vocabulary. When research participants did not use a keyword search, they would use a known author or title search. This illustrates that participants again do not approach the catalog unless they know what they are looking for and that in fact, they do the bulk of their research before going into the library catalog itself.

Search Terms

After the search habit questions, the researcher asked questions designed to discover what terms research participants associate with specific topics when searching. Each participant answered how they would search for six concepts that align with various demographic groups in the LGBT community: men who are only attracted to men, women who are only attracted to women, people who are attracted to two or more genders, people who are attracted to any gender, people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, and a community of people who fit into any of these categories.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men who are only attracted to men</th>
<th>MLM</th>
<th>Gay men</th>
<th>Queer</th>
<th>LGBT</th>
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People who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth

Transgender

Transgender

Transsexual

A community of people who fit into any of these categories

LGBT

LGBTQIA

Lesbian

Gay

Bisexual

Queer

The Queer Community

LGBTQ

LGBT

For men who are only attracted to men, all participants use some sort of variation on the term gay, whether gay by itself or gay men. Most participants viewed the term gay as an umbrella term (even if they did not agree with that) and thought that starting broader is usually better. Unless participants were doing medical or otherwise historical research, they did not use the term homosexual due to its history as a way to medicalize gays and lesbians. One research participant also cited that she would probably try the phrase “men who love men” and its variations (such as the acronym mlm) as a keyword search.

For women who are only attracted to women, all participants use lesbian and might use other terms depending on their discipline. One participant cited that she also uses foreign language terms like femme à femme due to the nature of her research (P1). Research participants
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noted that lesbian is somehow more specific than gay or gay men because of the umbrella effect of the term gay. One research participant also noted that she feels that more works exist on the subject of lesbianism and the lesbian experience, that women are more likely to “get to know [themselves] through writing…[and] have been more apt to write about [their experience] as a way of resistance” (P4). As the comparison of terms will show, while this assumption might be correct, more subject and demographic terms exist for gay and gay men, probably because those terms seem to act as an umbrella while also referring to a specific form of homosexual attraction.

While most participants could expand on the reason for their search terms for the first two concepts and felt confident in those terms, the rest of the terms produced very straightforward answers, even if those answers were uncertain. One possible reason for this is the fact that questions forced participants to think of terms they would use to search for both the attraction to multiple genders and the attraction to any gender. All participants cited the limitations of the term bisexual and how they feel it upholds our Western gender binary and that they would also use the term pansexual for searching. Most participants would use both terms for both types of multi-gender attraction to make sure they do the most comprehensive search possible.

Participants also shared the same search term for people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth but expressed concern that they knew it would probably be the only term that would garner any results. For this concept, participants use the term transgender and only use transsexual if they are looking for materials on the specific act of medical transition. However, participants worried that transgender would not cover all ways of not conforming to gender and sometimes would also use abbreviations like trans and trans* and
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terms like femme, butch, and boi. One participant also stated that she might search the term Latinx which is a gender-neutral term specific to the Latino/Latina community and studies.

Finally, participants answered how they would search for a community of people who fall into these categories. Many participants would actually repeat language from other searches but with “community” attached in addition to searching for common community terms like LGBT, LGBTQ, and queer. As the comparison will show, none of these common community terms exist in the Library of Congress controlled vocabularies.

Very rarely did research participants cite only one term they would use for these concepts, and if they did, they would explain how frustrating that was. Participants also cited that the language they would use to search for any of these concepts would change depending on the nature of their research and disciplines. This way of searching poses a problem where controlled vocabularies are concerned, as there should only be one controlled term for all ways of referring to a subject. Most participants used multiple terms when doing keyword searches, especially in databases, and these can be successful if that language appears in the item records. By using multiple terms when doing keyword searches, it is more likely that terminology used by research participants is also used by the Library of Congress. The next section will discuss this comparison between research participant terminology and Library of Congress terminology.

Comparison of Terms to Library of Congress Subject Headings

After interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed each interview and coded that interview using in vivo coding, which privileges the language used by research participants and allows the researcher to analyze that language. Coding the interviews pulled out the most common terms used for each of the language questions which could then be used for searches within the Classification Web system; the researched used this system as opposed to
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authorities.loc.gov because it allows more ways of searching and allows the user to search specifically for demographic group terms.

First, the researcher took the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, and LGBT and searched the Library of Congress Subject Headings. Classification Web allows the user to search for subject headings (a left-aligned search) and keywords, as well as other types of subject headings. Each term was searched as a subject heading and then as a keyword. The subject heading results are left-aligned and alphabetical and only include headings with the search term at the beginning of the heading. Subject heading searches also include cross listings and Use Fors, which are not headings in and of themselves. Keyword heading results are expanded to show Use For headings and other cross listings and show headings that have the search term elsewhere in the heading, even if it is not the first word of the heading. Keyword searches also include cross listings and Use Fors, like subject heading searches.

The search term gay gives 381 results as a subject heading search and 456 results as a keyword search. These headings include the demographic terms (discussed below) but also include headings such as Gay accommodations and Gay detectives. It also includes the heading Gays as well as Gay men. The search term lesbian gives 175 results as a subject heading search and 180 results as a keyword search. These headings include the demographic terms (discussed below) but also include headings such as Lesbian librarians and Lesbian separatism.

The search term bisexual gives 48 results as a subject heading search and 47 results as a keyword search. The search term pansexual gives 0 results for both kinds of searches. The results for bisexual include demographic terms (discussed below) but also terms like Bisexual college students. The Library of Congress does not include any terms for the word pansexual, nor do any
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headings redirect from it as a Use For. The search term transgender gives 46 results as a subject heading search and 48 results as a keyword search. The search term transsexual gives 30 results as a subject heading search and 28 results as a keyword search. The results include demographic terms (discussed below) as well as other terms.

The search term queer gives 3 results as a subject heading search and 5 results as a keyword search. These results do not include demographic group terms but do include the heading Queer theory. The search term LGBT gives 7 results as a subject heading search and 6 results as a keyword search. These results include demographic group terms and other headings, but most of these are cross listings.

![Number of Library of Congress Subject Headings Matching Interviewee Keywords](image)

*Figure 1*

The second search type was a demographic group term search. Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms (LCDGT) are subject headings, but Classification Web allows users to search for them separately. Demographic group terms act as broad terms for an entire
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demographic of people. For the search, the researcher only did a keyword search; this is because
a subject heading search includes hundreds of unrelated headings for each term.

The search term gay gives 6 results. These results include the terms Gays and Gay men, as well as other terms like Conversion therapy patients. There are no scope notes for the headings Gays and Gay men to dictate how they are different or how they should be assigned. The search term lesbian only gives 1 result, the subject heading Lesbians. The search term bisexual also only gives 1 result, the subject heading Bisexuals. Pansexual gives 0 results. The search term transgender gives 2 results, and the search term transsexual gives 1 result. Like with Gays and Gay men, there are no scope notes for these headings to dictate how they are different or how they should be assigned. The search term queer gives 0 results, while the search term LGBT gives 2 results. The results for LGBT do not include LGBT in the actual heading but instead are the cross listed headings Gender minorities and Sexual minorities.

These comparisons illustrate not only the difference between common language for these terms but also the lack of authority control and equity between terms. Headings about gay men vastly outnumber headings about any other demographic, even though research participants gave several terms for each question asked. There exists just as much variety and nuance when speaking about issues of gender identity as when speaking about the issues of gay men.
After asking for the search terms that participants use for these concepts, the final
questions were about the relevancy of search results and the familiarity the participants had with
subject headings. Despite the discrepancy in some search terms to subject headings, participants
generally felt satisfied with the results of their searches. If participants were unsatisfied, it was
largely due to research and writings on LGBT topics not existing in their disciplines, or the
search terms they used were too discipline-specific when doing a subject search (but not a
keyword search). Rarely did participants not find anything or get zero search results; if this did
happen, it was again largely due to trends within their disciplines and not the search terms.
Research participants also cited not being frustrated because they are experienced-enough
researchers to know that you do not find what you need right away and that searching is a deeply
involved process that includes consulting materials outside of catalog and database searches.

Discussion
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The results of the research show that a discrepancy exists between the language people use when searching for various LGBT topics and the language used by the Library of Congress to control subject access to these topics. As discussed in Hope A. Olson’s seminal work *The Power to Name* (2002), cataloging librarians quite literally control how patrons access materials through the language we use to control subject access. Not only does this limit subject access by forcing patrons to use certain language in order to find materials, but it also reflects how the Library of Congress and librarians view these subjects. If there are no headings or cross listed headings for the identity pansexual, then what does that say about how the Library of Congress views works created about this identity? Is this body of research not important or valid enough for literary warrant?

The results also show that, while many headings exist for most of these terms and identities, scope notes are not in place to dictate how they should be assigned. This poses a problem for subject access, particularly terms with complicated histories and nuance: if no scope notes are provided, how are librarians supposed to know how to assign them correctly? A bigger problem exists with the headings and demographic terms Gays and Gay men, as these also do not include scope notes for usage. Are librarians supposed to know that Gays is an umbrella term? Does the Library of Congress even consider it an umbrella term? What exactly is it an umbrella term for? Is it only for homosexual identities such as lesbian and gay? When there is no instruction for usage or definition, redundancies in subject access occur, as well as inaccurate subject analysis. One purpose of subject analysis is collocation of similar materials for shelf browsing as well as subject access in online catalogs. With the confusion between these somewhat similar terms, materials may not be in the correct place on the shelf, which limits access and item-level findability.
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Another variance found in the data is the difference in terms for the community. All participants would use some variation of the LGBT acronym as a search term for the community; however, no demographic group term exists using any variation of that acronym. The only terms that do use a variation of the acronym are terms such as LGBT History Month. Not even LGBT pride events are controlled using that language. Instead, there is a heading for Gay pride and similar events. The acronym has been in use for years and is generally well-known in the United States. There should be no reason that it is not used as a demographic group term for the community. Instead, the main community terms in LCSH are Sexual minorities and Gender minorities, which conflate minority status with marginalization.

The Problem with Queer

The final discrepancy between the language used by research participants and the language used by the Library of Congress is the use of the term queer. Queer is a tricky word even within the LGBT community. Originally a slur, queer was reclaimed by the community as a word of power and as a way to protest assimilation politics of mainstream gay rights organizations. Queer also goes against and challenges binary ways of understanding gender and sexuality. Queer refuses to be pinned down, refuses to be controlled, and refuses to be defined. Even if one experiences their gender and sexuality in a “straightforward” way, one can still use queer to signal that that is socially constructed, to recognize that sexuality is fluid. Queer can refer to sexual attraction and/or gender identity. No two people will use the term in the same way, and that is precisely the beauty of it.

This refusal to be controlled is exactly what poses a problem for subject access. If queer cannot be defined in a specific way, then by definition it is impossible for it to be part of a controlled vocabulary. If the Library of Congress were to create a subject heading for a queer
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identity, to what would it refer? Would we need two headings, one for a queer gender identity and one for a queer sexual preference? But again, no two people who identify as queer in either their gender or sexuality experience that in the same way. Of course, no two people ever experience sexuality or gender in exactly the same way, but identity labels such as lesbian and transgender describe broadly a shared experience by people in a community.

But people are searching using queer and are expecting to find materials that describe a queer experience. So what are librarians to do? Queer goes against our entire way of thinking about controlled vocabularies and subject access (Drabinski, 2013). If we are to create subject access for queer, then we necessarily must rethink and reframe all subject access. Queer is fluid in that it is socially constructed and is fluid in history because of that social construction. Queer will not mean the same thing in a decade. If we have it as a heading, will we then need to change its scope note and usage as the language changes? Is this something we should be doing with headings already?

Implications of Research

The results of this study have implications for various aspects of librarianship, both technical services and public services. When working with LGBT patrons or collections, librarians should be aware of how subject headings, online catalogs, and reference interviews function with other systems in the library. This research shows that these systems need to take the information needs and information seeking behavior of all patron types into account when creating them.

Limitations

The researcher not search each term used by each participant because some terms, such as the foreign language terms used by research Participant 1, are discipline-specific. Although
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the small sample size cannot represent a general population, this research aims to highlight terms that are most common within the LGBT community and those that would be used by those not within the community. For example, when performing searches using variants of the LGBT acronym, the same results were returned.

Conclusion

To conclude, more research into this area is required to get a better idea of how the language used by patrons differs from Library of Congress Subject Headings, and how that language difference affects search results. As the results show, even a small sample of research participants have differing language for the same concepts, but that differing language does not affect their search effectiveness. Even with their research success, librarians should be centering the experience of patrons when doing subject authority work, as not every patron has the research experience to know how and when to alter their search strategies.

One complication of the research is that the language used by the LGBT community to describe itself changes and often refuses to hold one solid definition. For example, the term queer by definition cannot be controlled and exists in a tense conflict with controlled vocabulary. Subject access should therefore not just include Library of Congress Subject Headings but should also consider other forms of access, such as local headings or tagging systems.

Further research done should include different methods and demographic groups to get a broader sample of language. It could also focus on other areas of librarianship and subjects, such as collection development and how it affects communities of color. This research should be used to support and influence changes made in LCSH.
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