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LGBTQ+ Catalog Users: A Brief Survey

Karen Snow
Dominican University, ksnow@dom.edu

Heather Moulaison-Sandy
University of Missouri

Brian Dobreski
bdobresk@utk.edu

Karen Snow, Dominican University
Heather Moulaison-Sandy, University of Missouri
Brian Dobreski, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Abstract

To promote social justice, recent work in knowledge organization (KO) has focused on providing access for members of marginalized groups including LGBTQ+ persons. Expanding on this work, the current project explores demographics and library usage as well as the participant-provided identity terms of LGBTQ+ library catalog users. Using a survey methodology that collected 141 respondents' information, researchers found that LGBTQ+ catalog users who responded were primarily young, educated, and identified as either Black or White. The majority of respondents reported regular use of the library catalog, though also found materials in a variety of other ways, including social media. When analyzed using facet analysis, terms used by respondents to express their identities were communicated in a range of ways with facets representing gender identity, gender alignment, gender expression, gender modality, physical attraction, emotional attraction, pronouns, and sociocultural identity all represented. Implications for the creation and application of specialized controlled vocabularies are discussed, with concerns about presumed simplicity of these approaches being questioned.

Introduction

Knowledge organization (KO) research, particularly in recent years, has been strongly associated with social justice aspects of access to information. Luminaries in the field, such as Hope A. Olson in her book *The Power to Name* (2013), provide a conceptual and ethical foundation. At the same time, the KO discipline has been criticized for not working closely with the communities it intends to serve and empower (Hoffman 2009). One such community of interest is LGBTQ+ users. While this community has received a pronounced focus in library research, much of this work has tended to examine issues related to collection development or services and outreach (Adler 2010). Within KO-focused work, researchers have examined how the LGBTQ+ community is represented in systems for subject retrieval. Although there is strong conceptual evidence that terminology created by members of marginalized groups will be more successfully embraced and used by members of those groups, there is a dearth of empirical research to support these claims. Even more concerning, little is known about the more basic questions around how marginalized groups use the catalog and what factors may affect their methods for finding library materials, and how they use terminology to describe their own identities. The KO discipline lacks a solid body of user-focused study of marginalized users, even for groups receiving more attention such as the LGBTQ+ community.

This work seeks to address this gap by offering some initial insight into LGBTQ+ users of library catalogs. Using an online questionnaire, researchers collected data about

the demographics, identities, and library usage of LGBTQ+ identifying adults from the United States. Though additional work to understand the perspectives of these users is needed, the present study demonstrates the range of identities present within this community, suggesting both challenges and opportunities when designing KO solutions for members of this group.

Literature Review

Prominent streams of KO research that do offer insight into the library catalog experiences of LGBTQ+ persons tend to focus on the effectiveness, and more often inadequacies, of current systems for subject representation and retrieval. Knowledge organization systems (KOSs) are notoriously fraught when it comes to providing adequate access to LGBTQ+ topics. For example, Christensen (2008) investigates problems with the Library of Congress Classification (LCC) of LGBTQ+ topics, and Olson (2002) brings forth aspects of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) that are problematic in terms of approach, especially as related to gender. Among KOSs, the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) in particular has received a good deal of criticism. Deficiencies of LCSH for LGBTQ+ users in particular have been attributed to an overall mismatch between terminology used for LGBTQ+ topics and identity in LCSH and the terminology recognized and understood by the LGBTQ+ community (Bullard et al. 2020; Colbert 2017; Greenblat, 1990).

However, the LGBTQ+ community is not monolithic. There is often a lack of agreement on the terminology used to describe oneself, the level of specificity desired (e.g., the general term "gay" as opposed to the more specific "lesbian"), and entry points preferred in information retrieval systems (e.g., the use of facets such type, process, parts, and space/time to identify LGBTQ+ subject matter at the user's discretion) (Campbell 2004; Christensen 2008; Colbert 2017). Furthermore, LCSH itself can be internally inconsistent, adding to the confusion and frustration of library users and librarians. For example, Christensen (2008) noted that the LCSH term *Gays*, which serves as an umbrella term in the vocabulary for both Gay men and Lesbians, is used to refer only to gay men in other headings, such as *Gays–Nazi persecution*.

Alternatives to LCSH have been advanced, such as the Homosaurus, a controlled vocabulary designed to specifically reflect LGBTQ+ perspectives and topics. While the Homosaurus vocabulary does indeed capture a wealth of concepts and terminology absent from LC vocabularies (Dobreski et al. 2022), implementations within library catalogs remain rare, as do studies of its efficacy with users. One of these rare studies is Fischer (2023), which reported on one public library consortium's examination of patron keyword searches for LGBTQ+ topics and, after finding that the search terms aligned more often with the Homosaurus than LCSH, utilized this evidence to make the case for using the Homosaurus in the consortium's bibliographic records.

While developments such as the Homosaurus seem to hold promise for LGBTQ+ catalog users as relating to verbal subject access, more fundamental questions around the information seeking experiences of this community persist. Research that has been devoted specifically to library information seeking of members of the LGBTQ+ community has usually focused on health information seeking (Morris and Roberto 2016), leaving more to be said about general library catalog behaviors of these users. And much criticism of current subject access for LGBTQ+ users has come from critical content analyses of systems such as LCSH; user-focused studies soliciting the direct opinions of LGBTQ+ users and that attempt to understand their information seeking practices are much less common.

Research Questions and Methodology

The present study is part of a larger, ongoing project examining library catalogs and LGBTQ+ users, aimed at addressing the aforementioned gaps in the KO literature. This work, seen as an initial exploration into these users, is limited in focus to a smaller set of research questions:

RQ1: What can we tell about the basic demographics and usage patterns of LGBTQ+ users of library catalogs?

RQ2: What is the range of gender and sexuality identity terms that these individuals use to self-identify?

Researchers employed an online survey methodology for this study. A short questionnaire was designed featuring the following: multiple choice and open ended responses on participants' use of library catalogs and other means of discovering resources of interest, open ended responses about how they personally identify within the LGBTQ+ community, and standard demographic questions around age, education, race, and ethnicity. The initial questionnaire was pilot tested with two individuals. In response to pilot feedback, several questions were adjusted. Researchers sought and received IRB approval for the finalized survey instrument.

The population of interest for the survey was as follows: adults identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community, residing in the United States (U.S.), and having experience using a library catalog to find resources of interest. Survey participants were recruited via convenience sampling from online social sites with LGBTQ+ communities focused on reading (Facebook, Goodreads, and reddit). Starting in July 2022, the survey was distributed online via these sites, including specific GoodReads and Facebook groups, and subreddits devoted to LGBTQ+ reading. Between July 6, 2022 and January 5, 2023, the survey received 468 responses. Results were exported from Qualtrics as a spreadsheet and were analyzed by the research team using spreadsheet software and Tableau.

Results

Researchers screened survey responses in order to verify that respondents met the inclusion criteria as stated above. After all response screening was completed, 141 usable responses remained. In this section, we report on respondent demographics and self-reported catalog usage practices, as well as the terms respondents used to self-identify.

Demographics

Within survey responses a range of ages were noted, though in general the respondents skewed toward younger age groups, potentially due to the use of social media for recruiting. Geographically, respondents were distributed across the country and not limited to coastal, metropolitan areas. Table 1 shows age group representation among survey participants, and Figure 1 shows their dispersal through the U.S., also by age.

Table 1. Age of survey respondents.

Age Group	Respondents (n=141)
18 - 24	41
25 - 34	73
35 - 44	20
45 - 54	4
55 - 64	3

Figure 1. Geographic location of survey respondents by age.
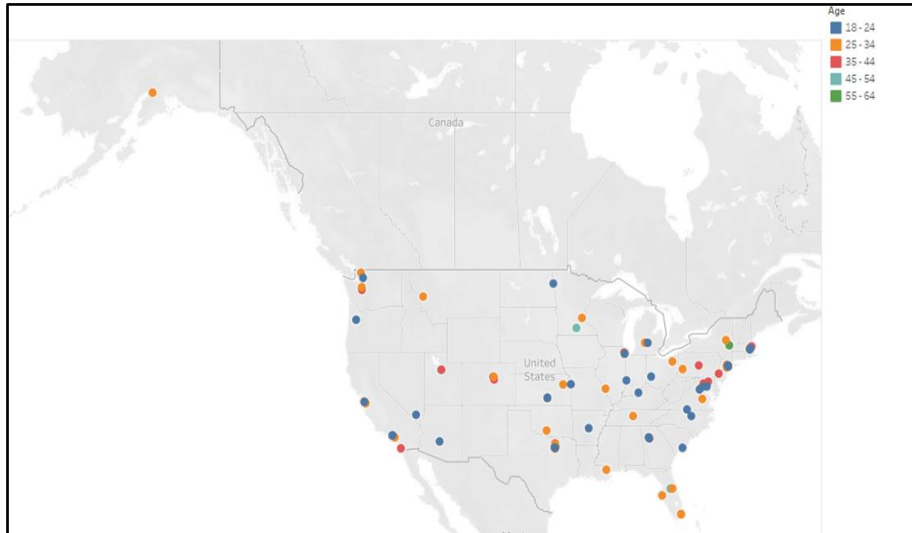
Concerning race and ethnicity, respondents tended to identify as White or Black/African American, with a higher than expected response rate among Black/African American persons (Table 2.) The majority of participants did not identify as being of Hispanic or Latinx origin (Table 3).

Table 2. Race of survey respondents.

How would you describe yourself (race)?	Respondents (n=141)
Asian	2
Black or African American	79
White	57
White, Asian	1
White, Black or African American	2

Table 3. Ethnicity of survey respondents.

Are you of Hispanic or Latinx origin?	Respondents (n=141)
Yes	15
No	123
Prefer not to answer	3

When asked about their highest education level, most participants reported having a bachelor's or master's degree. In general, education demographics showed respondents to be more highly educated than the general U.S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2021) (Table 4).

Table 4. Education level of survey respondents.

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?	Respondents (n=141)
High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)	5
Some college, no degree	17
Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)	9
Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)	71
Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)	33
Doctorate or professional degree (e.g. MD, DDS, PhD)	6

Respondents were also asked about any professional library experience they may have (i.e., attending library school or working in a library). Slightly less than half of the respondents reported having some professional library experience (Table 5).

Table 5. Professional library experience of respondents.

Have you attended/are you currently attending library school or have you worked/are you currently working in a library?	Respondents (n=141)
Yes	64
No	74
Prefer not to answer	3

Strategies for Identifying Materials

When asked how they find reading materials, respondents were given several options to choose from and they could choose as many options as applied. Use of the library catalog was the most frequently selected option. Though all 141 respondents had used library catalogs in the past, only 127 of them listed the catalog as a regular method for finding reading materials. Other methods were indicated about equally commonly, including using social media or asking a librarian (Table 6).

Table 6. Methods for finding reading material.

How Do You Find Materials?	Count
I use the library catalog	127
I know the area in the library where my books are so I walk there and browse	54
I follow through on advice about books from friends	49
I seek out books discussed on social media	42
I ask the librarian for help finding materials	56
Other	7

LGBTQ+ Identity

Survey respondents were also asked how they identify within the LGBTQ+ community. Unlike previous survey items, responses to this question were open-ended. A total of 138 respondents provided a brief self-description, ranging from a single term to a short sentence. Overall, 100 distinct self-descriptions were recorded, showing that the majority of respondents answered this question in a unique way.

Given the open-ended, qualitative nature of this survey item, researchers used an analytical framework to make sense of and synthesize responses while attempting to categorize or condense them as little as possible. The Gender Unicorn, a tool designed to differentiate terms associated with a person's gender, sex, and sexuality, was taken as a base (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2015). Researchers modified this in response to terms used by respondents, ultimately settling on a set of eight facets (Table 7). Terms or phrases from each self-description were assigned to one or more facets as applicable.

Table 7. Identity facets in participant self-descriptions.

Facet	Description	Example
Gender identity	terms indicating gender identified with	female
Gender alignment	terms indicating gender aligned with	woman-aligned
Gender expression	terms indicating physical manifestation of gender identity	butch
Gender modality	terms indicating relationship between gender identity and gender assigned at birth	transgender
Physically attraction	terms indicating sexual orientation	bisexual
Emotionally attraction	terms indicating romantic orientation	homoromantic
Pronouns	preferred pronouns	he/him
Sociocultural identity	other terms indicating LGBTQ+ identity	queer

No attempts were made to standardize any terms supplied by respondents, resulting in a number of similar terms, particularly in the gender identity facet. Terms from this facet were quite frequently observed, with 99 respondents using one. A total of 32 different terms or phrases indicating gender identity were noted within the responses (Table 8). Though "male," "female," and "nonbinary" were most frequently used, a variety of terms indicating transgender identities were also present.

Table 8. Gender identity terms in participant self-descriptions.

Gender Identity	Count
Male	24
Female	22
Nonbinary	10
Gender queer	4
Woman	4
Cis woman	3
Transgender	3
Cis female	2
Cis male	2
Cis man	2
Transgender male	2
MaleMan	1
Ci[s]gender male	1
Cis lesbian	1
Cisgender	1
Cisgender male	1
Cisgender woman	1
Demigirl	1
Female transgender	1
Genderfluid	1
Genderqueer	1
M	1
Man	1
Man of trans experience	1
Nonbinary person	1
Trans	1
Transexual	1
Transgender (Male)	1
Transgender man	1
Transman	1
Trans-Man	1
Transsexual man	1

Only one participant used a term associated with the gender alignment facet ("woman-aligned"). Similarly, only one gender expression term was used by a single participant ("butch").

The gender modality facet included terms that signified some relationship between a person's gender identity and the gender or sex they were assigned at birth. Twenty-nine

respondents used a total of 21 unique terms associated with this facet (Table 9), showing a large variety in how respondents indicated this aspect of their identities.

Table 9. Gender modality terms in participant self-descriptions.

Gender Modality	Count
Cis woman	3
Transgender	3
Cis female	2
Cis male	2
Cis man	2
Transgender male	2
MaleMan	1
Ci[s]gender male	1
Cis lesbian	1
Cisgender	1
Cisgender male	1
Cisgender woman	1
Female transgender	1
Man of trans experience	1
Trans	1
Transexual	1
Transgender (Male)	1
Transgender man	1
Transman	1
Trans-Man	1
Transsexual man	1

The physical attraction facet included terms associated with a person's sexuality, or physical or sexual attraction. A total of 101 respondents used at least one term associated with this facet, making it the most commonly reported facet of LGBTQ+ identity within this study. Less variety was observed in this facet than in the similarly common gender identity facet: only 13 unique responses were observed across the 101 respondents (Table 10).

Table 10. Physical attraction terms in participant self-descriptions.

Physical Attraction	Count
Gay	35
Lesbian	26
Bisexual	25
Asexual	4
Pansexual	3
Heterosexual, Straight	2
Attracted to women	1
Lesbian, Asexual	1
Bisexual lesbian	1
Heterosexual	1
Homosexual	1
Homosexuality	1
Straight	1

The emotional attraction facet was only observed once, with one participant using the term "homoromantic."

Pronouns were only specified by seven of the participants. A total of five different sets of pronouns were reported (Table 11).

Table 11. Pronoun terms in participant self-descriptions.

Pronouns	Count
she/her	3
he/him	1
she/they	1
they/she	1
they/them	1

The sociocultural facet was developed for one particular recurring term that did not fit neatly into any of the previous facets. Here, a total of 12 respondents used the term "queer" to identify themselves.

Discussion

Overall, findings from the survey show that a range of demographic groups were represented within the sample. Even so, some patterns in the basic demographic data are

worth noting. Respondents skewed younger than the general U.S. population, with the majority being under 35 years of age. In terms of race, most identified as Black or White, with little representation of other racial and ethnic groups. In particular, the number of respondents identifying as Black was higher than expected, making up a total of 56% of the sample. Respondents were also highly educated, with the majority holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Overall, demographics may reveal more about LGBTQ+ users of the particular sites that were used for sampling than about the population as a whole. Indeed, the sample was younger, less White, and more educated than the results of a 2013 survey of LGBTQ+ Americans (Pew Research Center, 2013). It should also be noted that almost half of the participants reported having experience or professional training in library work. Respondent age, race, education, and occupation patterns in the present study may reflect the online nature of the survey as well as the particular Facebook, Goodreads and reddit groups which shared the survey invitation.

The survey yielded further insight into the information seeking behaviors of this group as well. While previous experience with the library catalog was an inclusion criterion for the study, a large majority of respondents reported not just previous experience but regular use of the catalog. This finding shows the importance of this retrieval tool, even given the other methods for finding reading materials reported by the respondents. Browsing was reported as a regular method by 38% of the respondents, suggesting both the importance of physical access to the library, as well as the potential benefits of collocation of LGBTQ+ materials within libraries. Other methods reflected the importance of community and interpersonal interaction, including asking friends and checking social media. Finally, 40% of participants reported asking a librarian for assistance, indicating the importance for library workers of understanding LGBTQ+ terminology and library materials. Given the large number of respondents who currently or in the past worked in libraries or who attend or attended LIS programs, this group of respondents potentially exhibits more of a willingness to approach library employees than patrons who have not had these experiences.

A range of terminology was provided to describe LGBTQ+ identity, in a manner consistent with the published literature in this space (e.g., Campbell 2004; Colbert 2017). This project, however, takes the additional step of analyzing the terms using facet analysis and a variation of the Gender Unicorn framework to provide a comprehensive overview of how LGBTQ+ library users describe their own identities. When asked how they identify themselves within the LGBTQ+ community, participants were prompted to give an open-ended response. While this was a deliberate choice to elicit language more natural and spontaneous to the respondents, it resulted in a wide variety of terms and phrases, which researchers did not attempt to condense or normalize. Though some terminology differences may represent minor variations in spelling (e.g., "transman" vs. "trans-man"), other differences were more substantial and must be taken as reflecting deliberate preferences in referring to oneself (e.g., "transgender male," "man of trans

experience"). Differences in terminology and phrasing were particularly pronounced within the gender identity and gender modality facets. Less diversity of terminology was observed around sexuality/physical attraction and pronouns. Even so, within this study's small sample, we are able to see no unified language within these respondents from the LGBTQ+ community for self-description. This implies that attempts to capture information regarding LGBTQ+ identity and to codify it in a controlled vocabulary are necessarily fraught. Further, presumptions that community members are monolithic in the way they describe their identity are unfounded, leading to the identification of a topic of future study, that being the question of how the mechanics of search are carried out given the range of terminology that is a part of the community members' vocabularies. In other words, from these results we ascertain that multiple vocabularies exist, not a single, unified vocabulary. Though catalog records are seen as a kind of bridge between the language of the user and the language of the resource, the bridge does not start in a single place, even for members of a particular community, as evidenced by Campbell (2004) and Colbert (2017).

In making sense of respondents' self-descriptions, researchers turned first to the Gender Unicorn, an established framework for clarifying terminology around gender and sex. The final set of facets used in the present paper were modified from this in order to better suit the language used in the responses. While the Gender Unicorn may be of assistance in understanding terms and concepts, it may not reflect how persons actually talk about themselves. Even the modified facets used in this paper may not align well with how LGBTQ+ persons naturally describe themselves. For example, emotional attraction terms were used by only one respondent; this may stem from general assumptions about the relationship between physical and emotional attraction (e.g., gay men are always emotionally attracted to men). Similarly, terminology used (or not used) in gender modality may also suggest certain assumptions, such as that everyone is cisgender unless stated to be otherwise. Gender alignment and expression were rarely shared in respondent self-descriptions, suggesting there is more to be known about this aspect of LGBTQ+ identity, including when and how people may choose to share this and how it is phrased. The present study sought to elicit language that was unimpeded by any suggestions, and resulted in a rich set of data. Future work may, however, benefit from a more structured approach to exploring language preferences around identity for LGBTQ+ persons.

Finally, it must be noted that there was a large discrepancy between the total number of survey responses (468) and the number of usable survey responses (141). While some responses were excluded from analysis for failing to meet key inclusion criteria, such as residing in the U.S. and being 18 years of age or older, a large number of responses were excluded for being repeat, disingenuous responses. In such cases, researchers used IP address and timestamp to identify sequences of responses where (likely) the same individual responded to the survey multiple times in a matter of minutes. Such responses

were also characterized by highly varying demographic information and self-identifications. While very few responses seemed malicious in nature, the majority of such repeat responses seemed at best disingenuous, and may have been motivated by the opportunity to be included in a subsequent, paid interview opportunity. Researchers felt it was best to exclude these responses from the present study. This resulted in a large number of initial responses being considered unusable, and also illustrates some of the issues involved with online recruiting from marginalized communities.

Conclusion and Future Work

Data from this survey begins to reveal some basic details about LGBTQ+ catalog users, while also offering insight into their rich, varied vocabulary for self-identifying. Understanding this vocabulary is of particular importance to the larger tasks of providing subject access and designing for the information needs of the LGBTQ+ community. Although the current project does not provide the empirical results that would fully address the problem identified in the introduction, it does allow us to explore the overlap of certain demographic features among members of a marginalized community and their practices for information search and retrieval in library environments. This, combined with future opportunities for study utilizing interviews or focus groups, can offer some much needed insight into the needs and preferences of a community that has been of such interest within KO scholarship.

At the same time, this paper calls into question some assumptions that have been made in the literature. Although a number of well-founded studies and recommendations have been put forth, the problem of the complexity of language as it applies to identity, specific to members of a marginalized group, is more complicated than anticipated. Future study in this area should not only continue to work closely with end users to understand how best to meet their needs, but should also reflect on the extent to which KO can address the needs of all users equally, and seek to find the best possible path forward.

Acknowledgements

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