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**Examining the Information Practices of LGBTQ+ Individuals: Evidence-based Implications for Libraries**

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**Introduction**

Semi-structured interviews with 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+)[[1]](#footnote-0) participants from the United States (US) inform this exploratory, qualitative research, which investigates how participants’ social group and cultural memberships shape their information practices. As a result of cultural stigma and discrimination from formal information sources, participants legitimize new forms of interpersonal and embodied information on and offline. Findings yield implications for the development of inclusive library services, spaces, and systems.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research is situated within Library and Information Science (LIS) in the Human Information Behavior (HIB) sub-area. HIB research adopts two umbrella approaches: behaviors and practices. Informed by cognitivist metatheory, information behavior focuses on how an individual “thinks or behaves in response to information needs” (Savolainen 2007, 118). LGBTQ+ information behavior research (e.g., Beiriger and Jackson 2007; Creelman and Harris 1990; Garnar 2000; Joyce and Schrader 2003; Stenback and Schrader 1999; Taylor 2002; Whitt 1993) imposes a liminal lens on identity development, privileging the perspectives of gay and lesbian individuals who engage in identity disclosure (Hamer 2003). Such research also myopically focuses on library users, not considering LGBTQ+ people who may be discouraged from using libraries due to experiences or expectations of stigma and discrimination.

This research adopts an information practice approach informed by constructionist metatheory. LGBTQ+ information practice research (e.g., Hamer 2003; Mehra and Braquet 2007; Pohjanen and Kortelainen 2016; Rothbauer 2004) recognizes that it is impossible to understand LGBTQ+ people’s information-related activities and skills without addressing how external context shapes them (Savolainen 2008; Savolainen 2007). As a result, such research samples outside of gay and lesbian library users and employs semi-structured interviewing to facilitate participants identification of relevant information practices.

**Research Questions**

This research addresses the following questions:

RQ1. How does external context shape the information practices of LGBTQ+ individuals?

RQ2. How does the internet shape the information practices of LGBTQ+ individuals?

**Methodology**

This research used sense-making methodology (SMM), which empowers participants to express their lived realities with limited constraints imposed by the researcher (Dervin 1983, 1999). She conducted 30 interviews with 30 LGBTQ+ participants between the ages of 18 and 38 in the US. Internet use shapes traits of participants in this age range (Howe and Strauss 2000; Pew Research Center 2016). Further, they are likely to have explored and adopted LGBTQ+ identities in adolescence, allowing for recall of these experiences (Grov et al. 2006; Savin-Williams 2009).

The researcher recruited participants using a combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling techniques. She used semi-structured interviewing, SMM’s “Total Time-line” (Dervin 1999), and the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan 1954) to elicit participant accounts of information practices relevant to their LGBTQ+ identities over time.

The average interview lasted one hour. The researcher audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, importing them into NVivo for analysis using an emic/etic coding scheme. She nested inductive codes informed by participant accounts (emic) under deductive codes informed by an information practices approach (etic) (Miles and Huberman 1994). She performed an inter-coder reliability check with a second coder and member-checking with research participants (Cresswell 2014) to establish validity.

**Research Results**

Three key information practices emerged from data analysis – access, creation, and value. Formal information sources like textbooks and media impeded participants’ access to identity-related information. “Growing up, I wasn’t aware transgender existed” stated participant James.[[2]](#footnote-1) If this information was available, participants might avoid it for fear of incurring stigma and discrimination. “If I was caught with [LGBTQ books],” James recalled, “I’d be in deep trouble.”

As a result of cultural barriers, participants relied on embodied information (e.g., Olsson 2010, 2016; Lloyd 2010). Mark learned he was transgender from dreaming: “My identity in my dream was male instead of female.” Participants sought social groups of LGBTQ+ individuals with similar experiences. These interpersonal sources showed Diane “what [was] possible” for her lesbian identity expression. Participants redefined their worldviews based on these sources, considering them more valuable than formal ones. Jamie discussed an online forum for transgender men: “It wasn’t a doctor who knew nothing about [being transgender] giving you advice, it was people already living it.”

Social groups limited participants’ access to identity-related information based on which identities they viewed as legitimate. Per Casey: "I run an LGBT archive and have to say I'm queer, so people don't think I'm a random straight ally." Kyle perceived a “short-order bill or shopping list” of practices exemplifying a transgender identity, which limited his awareness of alternate identity expressions. Participants countered these expectations by individualizing identity categories. Per Jaime: “I eventually realized my way [of being transgender] was the right way for me, even if it wasn’t right for somebody else.”

The internet facilitated participants’ content creation. Per Cole: “On YouTube, I didn’t find a lot of female masculinity [videos] so I was like, ‘I’m going to make [weekly] videos.’” Participants could also create new forms of embodied information. For instance, Jamie was assigned female at birth, but used male pictures when creating profiles on social networking sites (SNS): “[When] I was using male pictures [online], it was a lot of self-exploring and figuring out what [practicing a male identity] was like.” SNS also connected participants to LGBTQ+ social groups. “Once you follow one person, [SNS] come up with more people you can follow,” Mark stated.

Social groups used the internet to legitimize specific LGBTQ+ identities, affecting how participants evaluated information. Mark valued online interpersonal sources depicting “visual and video evidence” of their LGBTQ+ identities. However, being visibly LGBTQ+ online is not a desire for all participants, especially in spaces that might stigmatize or discriminate against these identities (e.g., Fox and Warber 2015). Sage recognized this tension: “[I] balance the safety of being anonymous with the fact that I can only get so much information [and] express so much anonymously.”

Technologies like search algorithms encode stigma and discrimination by using popularity to determine what information to make visible (e.g., Noble 2013). Per Joanna: “[A] queer person gets murdered [or] shot. It’s impossible to search without running into these things.” Technologies also violated participants’ privacy by disclosing their LGBTQ+ identities to others. For instance, a conservative religious group outed Amina’s queer identity to her workplace by finding her Facebook profile and taking screenshots of LGBTQ+ content she “liked” and events she was “attending.” Amina may not have been aware that this metadata was publically visible due to Facebook’s ever-changing privacy policy.

**Discussion**

Findings convey implications for the development of inclusive library services, spaces, and systems. Libraries must think beyond formal information sources to the everyday practicalities and barriers to being LGBTQ+. Since not all LGBTQ+ individuals can physically access identity-affirming libraries, it is vital for libraries to create digital collections. Libraries should develop them with the input of LGBTQ+ people, such as crowdsourcing collection metadata like social tagging and user-generated reading lists. Libraries can also facilitate LGBTQ+ authorship by providing resources and materials for self-publishing.

Libraries can incorporate embodied information into their collections by increasing outreach activities like movie nights, clothing exchanges, and book clubs. Finally, libraries can counter social groups’ expectations of legitimate LGBTQ+ identities by continuing to make collection development decisions that showcase multiple modes of being.

A single service or collection development decision cannot accomplish LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Rather inclusivity must be incorporated into everyday practices. Libraries can practice inclusivity by hiring LGBTQ+ librarians and fostering cultural competence in the workplace (Overall 2009; Cooke 2016).

Designers of internet technologies should recognize “stress cases,” or instances where a technology designed for a specific purpose has unintended, negative consequences for marginalized groups (Meyer and Wachter-Boettcher 2016). A search engine retrieves relevant information but can also stigmatize marginalized identities. To address stress cases, designers should incorporate a diversity of perspectives into the design process. Further, designers should make a technology’s norms of use and community expectations transparent, and give people autonomy over technology use. For instance, Facebook designers could clarify the site’s privacy policy and give individuals the option to choose which metadata to make visible and to whom.

**Conclusion**

Research findings denote that cultural stigma and discrimination facilitate participants’ mistrust of formal sources and reliance on interpersonal sources, the internet, and embodied information. While social groups provide new meanings for LGBTQ+ identities, they also limit the availability of identity-related information based on collective expectations for legitimate identity practices. The internet provides participants with new possibilities for information practices, but also amplifies offline cultural and social group barriers.

The research did not sample for other identities intersecting with LGBTQ+ ones, such as race and class. Future research can apply the dissertation coding scheme (see Reference Removed for Blind Review) to capture intersectional perspectives. Further, the small sample size signifies limited generalizability for findings. While generalizability was not a research goal, future work can continue to test the coding scheme on other marginalized populations.

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1. Since identity labels are contested and problematic (Gamson 1995), the researcher uses a plus sign to convey the possibility for multifaceted and variegated identity expressions beyond “LGBTQ.” [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. This paper refers to participants using pseudonyms to maintain their privacy. The researcher lightly paraphrases participant accounts for clarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)