

“Language is never complete”: LGBT2QIA+ Creators on Metadata

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Abstract

We interviewed creators of items in an LGBT2QIA+ community library, asking for their assessment of the catalogue record and for suggestions on how to augment the record with identity terms to increase discoverability. Early results from our analysis underscore familiar challenges around applying terminology to LGBT2QIA+ materials and creators, and indicate design considerations for the library’s catalogue.

Keywords: LGBT2QIA+; queer identities; creator-informed metadata; interview study

1. Introduction

The exclusion of LGBT2QIA+ individuals through the language of the library catalogue is well-established (Adler, 2012, 2017; Billey & Drabinski, 2019; Colbert, 2017; Crowl, 2018; Edge, 2019; Greenblatt, 2011; Johnson, 2008; Sullivan, 2016). Ubiquitous and pervasive organizational systems actively push the voices of LGBT2QIA+ people to the margins, explicitly identifying them as “abnormal” and library users “learn” that heterosexuality is normative, that gay and lesbian sexuality is the only sexual identity that ought to be examined, and that queer sexuality is inherently deviant” (Drabinski, 2013).

The bias of standardized processes against systematically marginalized groups is further problematized by the fact that librarians rarely contact the creators of collected items to learn about them—there are constraints on time and budget, and often the creator might be unreachable for various reasons. However, Koford’s (2017) dialogue with a genderqueer author on the cataloguing of his book demonstrates that outreach to LGBT2QIA+ creators is key to understanding the limitations of subject heading systems and addressing questions of power, language, and representation. This is consistent with a movement to “shift [librarians’] role from agents following opaque rules and gathering information on other people to partners mutually working towards accurate information” (Gross & Fox, 2019) and where inclusive description relies upon slower processes with more opportunities for dialogue (Frick & Proffitt, 2022).

In this project, we interviewed creators of items in an LGBT2QIA+ community library, asking for their assessment of the catalogue record and for suggestions on how to augment the record with identity terms to increase discoverability. We briefly review the background for this project, the structure of the study, and detail the most salient findings from the first pass at analysis.

2. Out On The Shelves

Out On The Shelves Library (OOTS) is an independent community library serving the LGBT2QIA+ community of Vancouver, British Columbia since the early 1980s. Originally part of QMUNITY resource centre in the Davie Village neighbourhood of Vancouver, OOTS is currently housed on the University of British Columbia (UBC) Point Grey campus, on land acknowledged and appreciated as the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people. OOTS collection consists of roughly 2,500 non/fiction monographs, graphic materials, DVDs, and zines for adults, teens, and children. The collection is stewarded by an all-

volunteer staff comprised largely of queer and queer-allied graduate students from the UBC School of Information. Volunteers have undertaken many initiatives in recent years to improve classification and cataloguing. In 2017-18, the Library underwent improvements to its classification system (“Classification System,” 2019) and in 2020 introduced OOTS Queer Subject Heading Thesaurus (QSH) to provide accurate, informative, respectful, and understandable labels for LGBT2QIA+ content of materials beyond the limitations of Library of Congress terminology (Dierking & Woontner, 2021). In December 2021, the Library migrated its ILS from Koha, a MARC cataloguing environment, to LibraryThing, a non-MARC cataloguing platform, and its associated discovery layer TinyCat. The migration to a non-MARC platform necessitated a shift in cataloguing procedure from traditional library subject cataloguing to a less formalized tagging systems using controlled vocabulary derived from QSH, Homosaurus, and LCSH, as well as enhanced in-house standards redeveloped throughout the course of this project.

3. Methods

We began this study by selecting representative titles in the OOTS collection, seeking a diverse sample of works and their creators to identify a broad range of issues, relevant terms, and concerns from participants. After creating summary statistics based on current bibliographic records, we identified a few underdeveloped sections of the collection and purchased recently published works to address these gaps and include their creators in the study. For each work, we sought current contact information for creators and recruited them by email for a research interview discussing the cataloguing of their work. We sent study recruitment emails to 32 creators; 12 replied, completed the consent form, and took part in interviews and follow-up on catalogue revisions.

Each interview revolved around a shared excerpt of an item’s catalogue record that clearly identified the subject headings present. The focus was on the record’s accuracy, and the representation of identities from the item (aboutness) and of the creator’s identity in the record. All interviews were conducted in recorded web meetings. After verification of a transcript with the participant, we deleted the recording. We presented each participant with the typical option to be pseudonymous; half of the participants (6) opted out of using a pseudonym and preferred we use their real names in our analysis and writing. Here, we refer to these participants using their full names and participants represented as pseudonyms by a first name only.

Following the full set of interviews, the research team collaborated on creating revised catalogue records for the 12 items. These revisions were shared with participants; most participants approved of the changes with no further requests, some made further suggestions as to corrections, additions, and removals among the revised list of terms, and some have not yet responded.

4. Findings

The items discussed with study participants were primarily fiction novels (10), with the remaining two items being a fiction graphic novel and a creative non-fiction memoir. While most participants identified as cis, some that did so were ambivalent on the term as applicable to their gender identity. One third (4) of the participants identified as non-white. Participants almost unanimously said that they had never been consulted on the cataloguing of their works. In the following subsections, we discuss recurring themes found across the interviews and participants’ catalogue records.

4.1. Marked and unmarked identity terms

When asked for their identity terms, participants led with terms related to their sexuality and gender identity. Of the participants who identified as cis, only two brought up their cis identity without being prompted. Danny Ramadan explicitly noted the privilege inherent in his identity as a cis man, saying “I am assigned male at birth and I do identify as a man, [if] that is something

you want to include, but that's actually my privilege talking." Similarly, participants who were visibly racialized noted their racial identity without prompting while racial identities that were not visibly marginalized often went unremarked-on. Natasha, in response to prompting for identity terms related to race, gender, sexuality, and disability, said, "I'm Caucasian, it's just not much, I don't know if that's worth mentioning, that sounds kinda lame." As with Danny Ramadan's case, identity terms that applied to non-marginalized identities were viewed as not worthy of inclusion or mention, effectively and "unremarkable" and therefore, in the catalogue record, "unmarked."

4.2. "Queer"

Most participants included *queer* among preferred identity labels. The term was suggested unprompted by 9 out of the 12 participants and readily approved of when suggested to a 10th. Of the two instances where participants did not want the term used, one case was due to its being to less appropriate to the content of the work, which focused narrowly on gay men. The remaining creator rejected the term due to its historical use as a derogatory slur. Resistance to the term was noted by Xavier as related to age: "[For] people from my generation, the word *queer* can be triggering. When I grew up, that was a very negative connotative word." He noted that he often uses the initialism *LGBTQ*, where Q represents *queer*, but remains uncomfortable with the term as a standalone.

4.3. Changing terminology

Participants were divided on the best course of action for handling terms that may in the future be considered outdated or offensive. Some suggested terms should be updated to reflect more acceptable, contemporary descriptors, because, as Miranda noted, "language is never complete." These participants described a near-future scenario in which the creator may be available to authorize terminology changes proposed by library cataloguers or scenarios in which creators have opportunities to suggest updates themselves.

Participants who preferred identity terms be left unaltered over time noted closely held feelings about the terms in relation to themselves and their work. Regarding this question of offensive terminology in the catalogue, Danny Ramadan stated, "if the word *queer* fell out of favour, again... that doesn't mean that I want to erase the history in my life where I called myself queer. Because it's joyful for me right now, to call myself queer." A variety of solutions were proposed for otherwise indicating context and intention to mitigate potential for offense, such as including a note in the record indicating that the terminology reflects the language supplied by the creator in good faith at the time the item was acquired or updated.

4.4 Changing identities

In discussions on the possible use of creator identity terms, most participants were positive about the inclusion, while two participants did not want such terms included. Stronger objections related to issues of privacy, while those for and against the idea raised the issue of identity being fluid. Some suggested that the identity terms that a creator used at the time of publication might not necessarily be the same as those used five years down the road. This perspective overlaps with the preference for the term "queer." Alex cited the term's flexibility and fluidity and said, "queer is so useful. Queer will be there when all the others change."

Similarly, Seanan McGuire noted a preference for specificity in identity terms when it came to fictional characters, but preferred the more umbrella term "queer" when it came to her own identity, saying "'queer' has been accurate for literally every stage of my life". She noted that fictional characters and their representation of specific identities "do wind up being important to [readers]," but that while a character's identity may be known and static, "I'm a real person, and I'm allowed to grow and change in my understanding of myself."

5. Design Implications

Much of the feedback received by these participants focused on issues expected to be complex when providing access to LGBT2QIA+ identities through the catalogue. Fortunately, the participants also conveyed enthusiasm for wrestling with these issues and appreciation for the interpersonal and technical work of resolving the messy reality of terminology within the catalogue. When finding inaccuracies in the record, participants expressed a desire to be contacted in some form during cataloguing, such as Farzana Doctor who suggested “it wouldn’t hurt to send an email to the author or to the publisher, to whoever, to say ‘is this accurate?’”

The input from our participants was vital in informing revisions to these 12 item records as well as cataloguing practices across the collection. As we begin to make these changes, we have identified a few areas of general concern for subject heading practices for OOTS:

Specificity, recall, and redundancy: Given participants’ preferences for both specific terms that represent precise identities and the desire to be discoverable by umbrella terms like “queer,” redundancy within these records will likely be more common than in catalogues that apply headings minimally in accordance with the LCSH cataloguing manual (Library of Congress, 2016). Limitations identified to balance this redundancy include not applying identity terms for minor characters.

Marked and unmarked identities: The library will need to determine whether to prompt creators to include dominant or privileged aspects of their identity when indicating their preferences for creator-identity terms. Without prompting, these aspects of creator (and subject) identity will likely not be included. While this may be irrelevant for discovery in this context, it would continue the asymmetry and othering of marginalized identities.

“Queer” as an identity term: Many participants found the term *queer* offered flexibility, allowing for creator identity to change over time without pressuring them to remain defined by a singular aspect of queerness. Prior to this study, OOTS records including subject headings with the term *Queer* had been limited to concepts and collectives, such as *Queer theory* and *Queer community*. The terms *Queer* and *LGBTQ+* in this sense as a narrower term of *Persons* are not currently present in LCSH. As a result of this study, the terms *Queer* and *LGBTQ+* have been applied where appropriate at the behest of participants. The term may be accompanied directly by a modifier (e.g. *Queer woman main character* and *Works by LGBTQ+ refugee advocates*) or in combination with other identity labels non-hierarchically (e.g. *Works by lesbian creators* and *Works by queer creators* as descriptive of the same individual).

Mutability of identity terms: Without flexibility to update, the inclusion of creator identity terms risks fossilizing a creator’s identity to what it was at a specific point in time, with the potential for accumulating inaccuracies. From a user perspective, if creator identity terms are meant to help find Own Voices (Duyvis, 2016) works, an inaccurate creator identity term would be misleading, at best. Developing a means for creator input into a record can therefore not be a one-time process or an identical process for all creators. For all these records, cataloguer-view-only notes indicate which displayed terms were chosen by the creator and when the choice was made.

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