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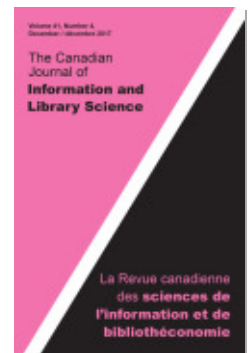
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Community/Obstacles à l'accès et à l'information pour la  
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Cameron M. Pierson

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# Barriers to Access and Information for the LGBTQ Community

# Obstacles à l'accès et à l'information pour la communauté LGBTQ

Cameron M. Pierson  
Wayne State University  
piersoca@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Despite current research, LIS continues to lack a holistic understanding of LGBTQ informational barriers in varying contexts. Using literature retrieved with no date limit applied from Library & Information Science Abstracts, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, and ProQuest's Library Science Database, this review surveys the barriers to access and information for LGBTQ users and potential users of public, academic, and school libraries. Using controlled vocabularies and keyword searching, sources directly or indirectly concerning LGBTQ informational barriers were chosen and further refined based on study scope. Eight barrier categories are outlined, with discussion on barrier formation, reinforcement, and perception.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ, barriers, access, perception, information-seeking behaviour

**Résumé :** Malgré les recherches en cours, les sciences de l'information et la bibliothéconomie ne disposent toujours pas d'une compréhension holistique des barrières informationnelles qui affectent la communauté LGBTQ dans différents contextes. En nous servant de la littérature extraite de Library & Information Science Abstracts, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, et ProQuest's Library Science Database, cette étude passe en revue les obstacles à l'accès et à l'information rencontrés par les utilisateurs et les utilisateurs potentiels LGBTQ des bibliothèques publiques, universitaires, et scolaires. À l'aide de lexiques contrôlés et de recherches par mots-clés, nous avons sélectionné certaines sources directement ou indirectement liées aux barrières informationnelles affectant la communauté LGBTQ, puis nous les avons affinées en fonction de la portée de l'étude. Huit catégories d'obstacles sont décrites, accompagnées d'une discussion sur la formation, le renforcement et la perception de la barrière.

**Mots-clés :** LGBTQ, barrières, accès, perception, comportement de recherche d'information

## Introduction

In 2013, Shawn Vaillancourt called on librarians to find ways to best serve the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (hereafter LGBTQ) community (Vaillancourt 2013). He explained that this group, regardless of progress, is still subjected to discrimination and harassment. LGBTQ youth especially are objects of bullying. He offered a variety of effective suggestions on service, all requiring proactive effort. Yet, to determine how best to serve

the LGBTQ community, it is essential to understand what stands in the way of library services and, more broadly, information access.

Joyce (2000) undertook the first notable literature review concerning the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, but failed to mention the transgender community entirely. Furthermore, he focused on services mainly through the public library, with some mentions of academic libraries. While the review is foundational in its own right, it has since become dated, most apparently with studies on LGBTQ-themed collection holdings. Throughout, Joyce discusses variables central to access for this community, yet fails to examine or discuss directly the literature focused on the barriers themselves.

This literature review seeks to build upon and update Joyce's (2000) work. It will identify the barriers to access and information for the LGBTQ community as library users or potential users of public, academic, or school libraries. While the literature surveyed is without respect to borders, this study is primarily framed in a North American perspective. Overall, the question is worth exploring due to the inherent value of LGBTQ people as users. Moreover, changes in social structure have implications on information needs and behaviours necessarily affecting libraries as both social and information institutions.

To understand library-focused barriers, one must examine contexts outside of the library as well. Surveying literature dealing with libraries is the most appropriate way to conduct this study. It is also of invaluable importance to look beyond library walls, where appropriate, to understand the context of a given community and therefore the information need. Consequently, this study attempts to look beyond the physical library to gain such context.

## **Methodology**

This literature review surveyed the barriers to access and information for LGBTQ users and potential users of public, academic, or school libraries. The following databases were consulted:

- Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA)
- Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)
- Library Science Database (ProQuest)

Accounting for individual database search parameters, a combination of keywords and database-specific controlled language was used, ranging from the broad to the narrow. Appendix 1 includes a full list of search strings used within each database in this study. The databases used in this study were chosen based on field specialty. As these databases are concerned with research in the library and information science domain, they were considered the most relevant resources, because they represent the discipline in topicality and depth and breadth both theoretically and professionally.

To increase retrieval, both controlled vocabulary and keywords were used. Database-specific controlled vocabulary enhanced relevant retrieval, whereas keyword searching was used to account for any omission within database meta-data. This was especially valuable considering the prolific use of variant natural language within the LGBTQ community.

Reasons for excluding items from the body of the reviewed literature were relevance and language. Relevance was defined as explicit discussion of one or more barriers, either directly or indirectly, to information or access beyond a mention for the target community. If papers did not discuss barriers, they were deemed irrelevant and excluded. Language was limited to English, as a mastery level of expertise was necessary in reviewing content of the documents. A small minority of sources were included based on previous personal knowledge, such as Gough and Greenblatt (2011). Inspection of reference lists was performed during the course of this study, in which additional documents were found either through the databases used or through open sources.

A core purpose of this study is to build upon and update Joyce's (2000) work. However, it also seeks to move closer to a more comprehensive view of LGBTQ barriers, as the LIS community knows them thus far. Therefore, no date limit was considered in reviewing the relevant literature.

### **Barriers to access and information**

The literature reveals a common characteristic of barriers, which is co-occurrence. Categorical arrangement is based on the core issue discussed. This study attempts to look beyond the incidental to uncover the root barrier. The barriers identified and discussed here will include societal conditions, interpersonal barriers, the digital divide, descriptive practices, inadequate collections and mediation services, geographic barriers, affective barriers, and inaction.

#### *Societal conditions*

On a large scale, a state's power to control access to information cannot be understated. Such access and preservation are subject to the mood of the era in which laws are created. This can have irreversible effects on communities in understanding their own pasts and in obtaining information (Mandlis 2011). In some instances, this can go as far as social and political exclusion, such as the homosexual purges at the Library of Congress in the 1950s during the McCarthy era (Robbins 1998). Sociopolitical conditions have a local impact as well. Personally held beliefs can affect interpersonal interactions, collection development, and procedure (Tsompanakis 2014), whereas social climate can affect individual views on removal of gay-themed or gay-authored materials (Burke 2008).

Public libraries in more demographically diverse regions tend to make more LGBTQ young adult non-fiction titles available than their demographically homogeneous counterparts (Stringer-Stanback 2011). When this demographic disparity is framed within Chatman's (1996) Theory of Information Poverty, libraries can be seen to underserve LGBTQ youth when the culture of information does not cater to those who deviate from the status quo, thereby creating an insider-outsider dynamic.

Even within this dynamic, members of the LGBTQ community understand that there are information barriers unique to them and, in some cases, can recognize them (Mehra and Braquet 2007). Among recognized barriers are

social isolation, perceived negative responses, lack of political representation and formalized support systems, and “inadequate information support services and no awareness of existing resources” (Mehra and Braquet 2007, 547). While social isolation indicates a self-imposed barrier, given the nature of societal pressure this is not surprising. Such societal pressure can contribute to fear of exposure, hesitance to discuss information needs with professionals, or internalized homophobia, as societal representation or reception is not necessarily positive or supportive of LGBTQ people. Inadequacies of informational services and awareness speak largely of deficiencies in library collections and/or services and marketing practices.

There is an inherent paradox between libraries as public space and the need for confidentiality (Pruitt 2010). Many in the LGBTQ community desire discretion due to a perceived negative societal climate. Being seen to access or overheard asking for particular materials may serve to undermine the would-be confidentiality of a library within the LGBTQ context. In addition, as barriers change, perceptions may not (Pruitt 2010). This again indicates self-imposed barrier behaviour, as perception can influence access and use (Joyce and Schrader 1997). Many LGBTQ people can recall being the object of hostility or apathy from political and cultural institutions and therefore may display hesitance in initiating contact. Yet the expectation remains that institutions are accountable for outreach activities (Pruitt 2010). Therefore, libraries not engaging with this user group are likely to be perceived, at best, as apathetic.

Other barriers are more obvious. In the American educational system, institutionalized barriers are found throughout the curricula (McGarry 2013). Students are often deprived of LGBTQ representations. Eight states in the United States, for example, legally prohibit LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum development (McGarry 2013, 28). Such exclusions represent larger, politically sanctioned decisions and affect all students. Furthermore, similarities exist between the educator’s curriculum and the librarian’s collection. Institutionalized homophobia can manifest in resource censorship (Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning 2009). By restricting LGBTQ informational access, schools at least implicitly condone homophobia. Barriers can be internal (self-censorship) or external (perceived or real community objection). This sets a dangerous expectation that only certain groups should be allowed representation.

LGBTQ patrons relying on religiously centred libraries may encounter additional barriers of exclusion, underrepresentation, or negative representation (Stahl and Kushner, 2014). In such cases, patrons should reasonably be able to rely on other types of libraries for access. However, while Stahl and Kushner posit that generally social change leads to increasingly diversified collections, this is at odds with other studies outlining such failures (Cohen 2008; Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning 2009; McGarry 2013; Pruitt 2010).

In addition, systematic transphobia poses unique issues. Bureaucratic incompetence in Canada frequently results in the withholding of information or additional difficulty in obtaining information for people who identify as transgender

or gender variant (Mandlis 2011). For example, in the gender reclassification process for passports, receiving misleading, inaccurate, or false information after a lengthy process to obtain said information can be common. The process is lengthy because it is frequently accompanied by numerous reiterations of the same informational need to various government officers. With each new expression of information need to a new official, the barrier loop begins again, only sometimes allowing progress to be made. Further exacerbating this problem is the fact that information on supporting documents and necessary forms for gender reclassification can often only be accessible through speaking with an official who knows of the appropriate forms and their full uses and requirements. For people who identify as transgender or gender variant in Canada, “[i]n relation to gender reclassification, the systematic suppression of information is ubiquitous” (Mandlis 2011, 98).

### *Interpersonal barriers*

People tend toward interpersonal channels for information (Chen and Hernon 1982). This, however, can be fraught when dealing with sensitive topics. When presented with gay- and/or lesbian-related questions, some public librarians are either unwilling to help or unable to do so due to lack of knowledge (Curry 2005). Body language and verbal indications are often how personal sentiments are communicated, and this communication is not lost on the information seeker. Similarly, variables preventing students at academic libraries from asking for LGBTQ materials during the coming-out process include student perception of attending behaviours, student unawareness of query confidentiality, and student anticipation of (or perceived potential for) negative responses (Mehra and Braquet 2011).

Historically, members of the LGBTQ community have considered the public library and print sources as the most important resources during the coming-out process (Stenback and Schrader 1999). However, homophobia among staff, lack of materials, and difficulty in locating information are persistent issues. Interpersonal sources of information outside the library are equally important, although this highlights the need for a supportive network for information gathering, which may not be universally accessible. It is worth noting that digital sources may now be favoured over print. Nevertheless, the library can still provide an alternate resource, especially for those without a supportive interpersonal network. Yet underdeveloped or censored collections and negative interpersonal interaction within the library serve to undermine its viability as such a resource. As an often marginalized community, LGBTQ people frequently can be judicious about information sharing. This is especially so with strangers, in public places, and during the coming-out process, which can be fraught with affective variables. Therefore, ethical conduct and patron perception of attending behaviours cannot be understated. Undermining the core of information provision can contribute to negative library perception, and therefore barrier reinforcement.

*The digital divide*

Cost and lack of availability are two main reasons people do not use the Internet (Rainie 2015). In 2016, for example, 549,928 people were reported homeless in the United States on a given night (Henry et al. 2016). Estimates indicate 35,686 were unaccompanied youth aged 24 and below, with 1,770 identifying as transgender (Henry et al. 2016), whereas Nichols and Cortez (2013) reported that 20–40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. The United States Inter-agency Council on Homelessness cites similar figures (The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness 2015). Thus, for many in this population, a public library is one of very few resources to access and understand information.

By framing LGBT youth within Chatman's (1996) Information Poverty Theory, they can be considered an "information poor" group, and therefore "outsiders," because they lack the opportunities for access available to their heterosexual counterparts (Sulfridge 2012). While many sexual minorities display a "distinct and rapidly evolving use of the Internet" (Sulfridge 2012, 61) to redress information gaps, those without Internet access can be seen as information outsiders precisely because they cannot access the Internet and due to the nature of their informational need, should it be of an LGBTQ nature. Should the informational need include sexual health, it is then a persistent barrier (Cohen 2008).

*Descriptive practices*

Effective access in an information institution is reliant on its organizational system, the underpinning of which is its vocabulary. Thus, if vocabularies do not reflect relevant subjects and terms, the information does little good for the user. Moreover, the ways in which vocabulary is used can affect how further information is sought, understood, and evaluated (Case et al. 2005). Online public access catalogues (OPACs) rely heavily on systems and vocabularies that are inherently biased and clash with known vocabulary habits of LGBTQ youth and LGBTQ homeless youth (Nichols and Cortez 2013). The process of self-description or self-understanding for LGBTQ youth and LGBTQ homeless youth is iterative and complex in such a way that terms of expression may not be used by a system built with known biases. LGBTQ youth are therefore excluded from systems built on assumed societal norms, on which the OPAC continues to be based.

The Library of Congress classification system, for example, did not authorize the term "homosexuality" as a subject heading until 1946 (according to James A. Fraser and Harold A. Averill, *Organizing an Archive: The Canadian Gay Archives Experience*, quoted in Hogan and Hudson 1998 as "Archives and Libraries," 37–39). "Lesbianism" was introduced eight years later. Both, however, were joined with a "see also sexual perversion" entry until the early 1970s. Thus, official access to such information is relatively recent, originating from a biased perception. Appropriate and consistent subject heading application affects access, with wider implications for collection development efforts. Effective use of Library of

Congress Subject Headings (hereafter LCSH) to redress its own failings, underpinned by consistent maintenance of the scheme, can help barrier deconstruction (Yan Lee and Freedman 2010). Furthermore, local modifications in subject access could prove to be beneficial in cases where persistent biases are slow to be remedied by existing systems.

However, controlled vocabularies such as LCSH are inadequate for the trans community because of their inflexible nature. Defining the term is complicated, given its changes in a relatively short history and the virtually static movement of controlled vocabularies. Indeed, terms such as *transgender* pose challenges due to their malleable definitions and contexts (Johnson 2010). Controlled terms, or rather the lack of them, can serve to hinder access to nuanced topics. People who identify as transgender or gender variant face a particular degree of complexity in controlled vocabularies, contributing to underrepresentation.

To address the failings of classification systems, some advocate shifting responsibility from cataloguer to service librarian (Drabinski 2013). Biases of schemes such as LCSH ought to remain, at least in remnant form, to engage the patron on why they exist. This prompts the patron to “grapple” with the limits of schemes through dialogue and critical thought rather than being taught “compliance” through scheme navigation. This approach, however, fails to note patrons’ desire to “grapple” in their pursuit of materials and fails those who do not utilize it. Such an approach highlights entrenched problems in controlled systems and offers a fascinating pedagogical exercise, yet still falls short for most users.

### *Inadequate collections and mediation services*

Much of the literature details how library collections are lacking LGBTQ materials (Garnar 2000; Greenblatt 2003; Loverich and Degnan 1995; Lupien 2007; Rothbauer 2005; Schaller 2011; Stankus and Raaflaub 1991). As an historic problem, this is characterized by the belief there is no demand or by challenges resulting in removal, reclassification, or quiet integration (Alexander and Miselis 2007).

Issues of accuracy, balance, personal values conflict, and community standards are sources or potential sources of censorship. Personal and professional attitudes are not necessarily indicators of practice and, to avoid controversy, librarians may pre-emptively censor materials (Moody 2004). Labelling is a common practice of “attaching a warning or rating label to an item” (Moody 2004, 172), which can be seen as a form of censorship when the act is intended to prohibit some from access under the guise of notification of type of resource. While a “necessary evil” (Moody 2004, 180) to balance community tensions with professional commitment, this practical solution speaks largely of a sometimes self-exploited pressure point interfering with professional duty.

Low collecting levels of LGBTQ-themed materials impact teacher and librarian education as well. Disparities between libraries supporting teacher or librarian education programs and regional differences between these libraries



can play a pronounced role in current and future LGBTQ collection development (Williams and Deyoe 2015). Without access and exposure to these types of materials, especially current materials, teachers and librarians may not be appropriately supported within their respective programs. Such issues can create a false expectation that either the materials or topics are not immediately relevant, or the need may not present within professional practice.

Another pervasive issue is Internet filtering. Common in school and public libraries, filters can act to exclude LGBTQ information for merely containing words such as homosexual or lesbian (Alexander and Miselis 2007). One such instance in a school library was the deliberate censorship of positive or informative sources on LGBTQ topics but not negative sources (Storts-Brinks 2010). While an extreme case, this exemplifies how the LGBTQ community is often the target of information suppression or censorship. In addition, an under-developed physical collection in school libraries is not uncommon.

Barriers to factual information can be seen through the tendency to collect more LGBTQ fiction than nonfiction and smaller amounts of LGBTQ non-fiction in general (Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris 2013). Regardless of library type, librarians and the LIS profession are ethically responsible to resist such censorship.

While high school libraries are likely to have materials on controversial topics, LGBTQ materials are comparatively lacking (Garry 2015). Community values, as well as size and diversity of student bodies, tend to affect collection composition. However, there is a positive correlation between librarian certification and the likelihood of avoiding censoring (Garry 2015). Formally trained librarians are better educated in the principles of access, equity, and inclusion and thus are better equipped to develop equitable collections. Similarly, participation in professional development on LGBTQ issues is correlated with purchase of related materials (Rickman 2015). Reluctance to purchase materials, however, can be a residual issue, particularly if regional climate is a source of concern. While education level is a key factor in barrier development, regional cultural factors cannot to be dismissed.

LGBTQ output from the publishing industry is seemingly linked to changes in social attitudes, affecting selection and collection development (Passet 2012).

Selectors relying on reviewer sources can be unduly influenced by reviewer biases. This speaks to the relationship between library selectors, the publishing industry, and reviewers. While librarians are thought to maintain neutrality-yet-equity in provision, reviewers are obliged to provide an assessment. Therefore, such assessments necessarily influence acquisition, indicating another avenue for personal bias. As selectors rely on reviewer assessments to build a collection, any systematic exclusion of a group's narrative or a more general topical discussion can have consequences for the user searching for such information.

Assuming that a library accurately understands the composition and needs of its community, reviewer assessments can be mediated. However, when a library does not fully understand its community, a cycle presents in which the librarian can claim neutrality-yet-equity in provision while relying on biased

assessments, thereby allowing (even implicitly condoning) biased collection construction. In relying on biased methods without community understanding, neutrality-yet-equity in provision becomes superficial, thereby alienating a constituency of the very communities libraries claim to serve.

Whereas barriers imply focus on the information seeker, common myths and misconceptions also contribute to barriers met by selectors (Gough and Greenblatt 2011).

Sociopolitical barriers manifest in collections through themes of personally held beliefs, selector qualifications, budgetary issues, misunderstanding of the community served, inappropriate expectation of interlibrary loan and Internet use/access, and stocking-equals-promoting. Such variables can be rebuked with professional obligation and common sense. Consequently, barriers to selection create barriers to access. Thus, “the absence of these materials in a library is a failure to serve” (Gough and Greenblatt 2011, 170).

### *Geographic barriers*

Geographic factors often play a role in access and associated barriers (Burke 2008; Pruitt 2010; Rickman 2015; Stringer-Stanback 2011; Williams and Deyoe 2015).

Rural LGBTQ residents tend to have fewer resources to access and reduced privacy in the act of accessing them (Passet 2012; Stenback and Schrader 1999). Acquisition in rural libraries can be seen to follow patterns similar to regional social attitudes, suggesting further implications for rural LGBTQ access. Additionally, in urban environments information resources for gays and lesbians tend to be (even while limited) more available than those for people who identify as transgender (Jardine 2013); these environments do not necessarily offer better access or fewer barriers for people who identify as transgender or gender variant. Access can be highly dependent on location, as a result of regional differences in information type, currency, evaluative skills, and societal integration.

Thus, there is a distinction between urban and rural communities and urban and rural LGBTQ communities, the implication being that those in more densely populated areas will have better access. Conversely, information and services not present due to geographical location also suggests an impact on the heterosexual counterpart.

### *Affective barriers*

Affective responses are less directly studied, yet are a frequently present variable (Koh, Kang, and Usherwood 2014; Mehra and Braquet 2011; Pohjanen and Kortelainen 2016). For example, inconsistent sexual orientation disclosure to a general medical practitioner is not uncommon in the LGBTQ community, which can lead to division of care, mostly for sexual health needs (Koh, Kang, and Usherwood 2014). Fear of experiencing difficulties while accessing services is a main cause of this inconsistency. Similarly, symbol-as-surrogate (e.g., rainbow flag, crucifix) is often a contributing factor to perception of interpersonal climate, where perception informs the affective variable.

In other instances, library anxiety is coupled with “anxiety of disclosure” (Schaller 2011, 106), that is, fear of sexual orientation disclosure within libraries and to library professionals and staff. Given Curry’s (2005) findings on negative patron interpersonal interactions with librarians dealing with LGBTQ topics, this is not an unsupported anxiety.

Two conditions are commonly present when information is sought during the coming-out process: fear and concealment of activities (Hamer 2003). A response to fear can often be delayed action in further information seeking, thereby potentially stunting the informational component of the coming-out process. Engaging in information seeking for gay identity construction can be seen partially through Chatman’s (1996) Theory of Information Poverty (Hamer 2003, 84). While this particular study did not find sufficient evidence to support Chatman’s (1996) second and sixth propositions, this application of Information Poverty Theory strongly indicates “self-protective behaviors” as self-imposed barriers. This is especially true for LGBTQ youth during identity construction (Hamer 2003). There is also the suggestion of a barrier cycle, where fear of being discovered leads to inaction. This inaction causes unaddressed information need due to fear. This cycle at least partially adheres to the Theory of Information Poverty (Chatman 1996) while also highlighting another characteristic of barrier formation and reinforcement, where one or more factors feed into a barrier.

### *Inaction as barrier*

Failure to address a barrier condones and reinforces it, either explicitly or implicitly (Cohen 2008; Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning 2009; McGarry 2013). A lack of identifiable action toward a positive end for the LGBTQ community is, in itself, a barrier (Mehra and Braquet 2007). In abstaining from the role of “agents of change” (Mehra and Braquet 2007, 3), libraries will not be seen as leaders in society where the community under review is concerned. Professional training and development are core factors in collection development practices and library policies. Training is integral to combating this inaction, which directly affects the LGBTQ community (Garry 2015; Passet 2012; Rickman 2015).

### **Discussion**

The literature indicates a strong awareness in the LGBTQ community of its minority status (Mehra and Braquet 2007, 2011; Pruitt 2010). Researchers have noted this awareness with several uses of Chatman’s (1996) Theory of Information Poverty (Hamer 2003; Stringer-Stanback 2011; Sulfridge 2012), providing evidence that this is a useful framework, at least partially, through which to understand LGBTQ information behaviour. The varied uses of Chatman’s (1996) theory in the literature continually illustrate the LGBTQ community as an “outsider” community, information-poor, and often using self-protective behaviours in libraries and other settings, therefore contributing to self-imposed barriers. Due to this “outsider” status, there can be hesitance to

initiate inclusive activities. In some instances, interactions with professionals have only reaffirmed this hesitance. Better understanding of LGBTQ challenges coupled with an honest examination of practice will equip professionals to identify and deconstruct these particular problems.

However, time can reduce some barriers. For example, there has been evolution in social thought insofar as LGBTQ resource acceptance is concerned (Burke 2008). As time has progressed, support for LGBTQ material removal and censorship from libraries has decreased. The digital revolution has, for some, opened a new avenue of access (regardless of the failings of these avenues) for LGBTQ youth (Hamer 2003; Sulfridge 2012), whereas pre-digital counterparts were otherwise constrained by available and accessible print or mediatory resources, depending greatly on circumstance. Another example of time-related barrier reduction highlights demographically related barriers as more pronounced for transgender elders, whereas those under 30 are perceived to have access to more sources (Pohjanen and Kortelainen 2016). There is a suggestion that different generations will perceive different barriers. The elder generation may perceive previous barriers that current youth does not perceive or dismisses, and vice versa. Citing “collective gay memory,” Pruitt (2010) quotes a participant in the United States as saying

[E]verything from local to the federal government bans gay marriage, underfunds AIDS research, challenges gay adoption, and prevents us from visiting our partners in the hospital. I use government resources and public utilities because I have to, but I'll never go out of my way to support them. (135)

This statement illustrates how “collective gay memory” reinforces self-imposed barriers. While these barriers are present in this community, they exist for different reasons. How strong this collective memory is in maintaining barriers, especially between elders and youth, is as yet undetermined, considering the changing LGBTQ landscape. Still, the collective memory has been fundamentally altered, as youth may no longer share the sentiments of Pruitt's participant and more experiences of those who identify as transgender or gender variant are better understood.

Consequences of restricted access can affect all parties. While the heterosexual counterpart is not affected in the same way, there are adverse effects for both communities, as highlighted through curricula (McGarry 2013). This has wider consequences for societal sentiment and chiefly for societal barriers. Thus, LGBTQ barriers have implications for the heterosexual community (Alexander and Miselis 2007; Garry 2015; Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris 2013).

Overall, the heterosexual and homosexual communities do not have the same informational barriers, and where barriers are shared, they may not have the same intensity. This is amplified when people who identify as transgender or gender variant are considered. Yet Schaller (2011) noted that while the LGBTQ have special information needs, “most information is centered on the heterosexual majority” (105). Thus, the information needs of the majority are perceived to be met more generally whereas the information needs of the minority are perceived to be avoided.

A key understanding is that *perception* of a barrier is as effective as a barrier (Joyce and Schrader 1997; Koh, Kang, and Usherwood 2014; Mehra and Braquet 2007, 2011; Pruitt 2010; Schaller 2011; Stenback and Schrader 1999). Where a traditional barrier is perceived, the mere awareness of it can pre-empt and deter interaction. In such cases, perception acts as a *proxy* barrier. When this is so, the information seeker allows the perception to influence information-seeking behaviour, rather than directly interacting with the barrier. Therefore, perception becomes a proxy for the traditional barrier. In cases where a traditional barrier may not be present, the perception that it exists is still enough to influence behaviour. In these cases, perception can act as a *shadow* barrier. Where conventional existence is displaced by an as yet intact perception, similar outcomes will result.

Complementary to this dynamic is the information professional's personal perceptions interfering with professional work (Cohen 2008; Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning 2009). This can contribute to inaction, causing negative patron perception. Thus, another cycle occurs: these barriers set off a chain reaction whereby patrons are unable to access desired information, library relations suffer, and barriers remain in place unless directly addressed.

There is a characteristic of barrier formation and reinforcement where one or more factors feed into a barrier. In turn, this either creates additional barriers or reinforces those already in existence. Therefore, barriers can be seen to feed into and off one another and, some barriers can act as a foundation on which others are built or strengthened (Hamer 2003). The literature indicates that these barriers begin from the earliest stages of complex human information seeking and persist throughout the life cycle to varying degrees. They can be highly dependent on contextual variables as well. Therefore, they are either systemic or incidental, yet interconnected, and often co-occurring.

When wondering why and how such barriers exist in libraries, professionals must undertake candid self- and institutional reflection. For example, LIS program courses in Canada and the United States lack adequate education in the intersection of health and gender/sexual orientation (Mehra and Tidwell 2014). The profession and LIS programs must make a more concerted effort recruiting diverse people (Jaeger et al. 2011). Indeed, cultural competencies inform interpersonal interactions, therefore affecting relationships. A seemingly homogenous approach from course programs onward presents a systemic problem within the profession in addressing LGBTQ barriers. Adequate preparation for such topics in practice and recruitment of professionals more equipped to understand and propagate such nuanced understanding is lacking, and therefore so is professional practice. Solutions could require fundamental scrutiny of educational programs and their accrediting bodies, or perhaps increased collaboration between accrediting bodies and specialized organizational bodies such as the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table. Such a task, while no small feat, could provide dividends necessary to combat some of these barriers.

Time and again the literature details professional failings, as uncomfortable as this may be. Barriers to information and access affect everyday life in myriad ways, many of which are outside library walls. Professional obligation requires more than collection improvement. It includes working proactively in communities and becoming socially engaged. In so doing, libraries can strengthen the domain's practice and expand it. Where informational barriers are present elsewhere for LGBTQ persons, the library could well be poised to become an alternative source by facilitating relationships.

To date, LIS research has concerned itself with barriers to access and information of specific groups within this wider community. However, LIS research still has strides to make in understanding LGBTQ users and their information needs and barriers in an increasingly changing world. Likewise, professional research could benefit from understanding cross-generational barriers—perceived and actual.

Reliance on print resources during the coming-out process was noted almost 20 years ago (Stenback and Schrader 1999), yet use of digital resources for the same process has become more common (Hamer 2003; Sulfridge 2012). While the shift in medium is obvious, underlying factors of information navigation persist, specifically frustration with inability to locate desired information or with encountering unhelpful information (Hamer 2003). What is more, a focus on digital resources continues to discount those who are without access, unable to use such resources, or reliant on institutionally provided, yet censored digital resources. Such reliance leaves some in the same position as searchers from two decades ago—dependent on resources that persist in being inadequate for the LGBTQ community (Alexander and Miselis 2007; Garry 2015; Gough and Greenblatt 2011; Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris 2013; Passet 2012; Storts-Brinks 2010; Williams and Deyoe 2015).

Whereas Pruitt (2010) crystallizes how perception plays a role in encountering barriers, the focus of this perception is limited to gay men of identifiable ages of mid-thirties and above.<sup>1</sup> Many other studies focus on barriers specific to youth (Cohen 2008; Curry 2005; Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning 2009; Garry 2015; Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris 2013; Nichols and Cortez 2013; Rickman 2015; Rothbauer 2005; Schaller 2011; Storts-Brinks 2010; Stringer-Stanback 2011; Sulfridge 2012; Williams and Deyoe 2015). Therefore, at present, only a provisional understanding of cross-generational barriers exists, due to this focus being omitted from the literature landscape. Information professionals must push into the less studied areas within this user group. The present is an especially fascinating time as we now have data straddling contextual and temporal lines.

### Limitations and future research

As mentioned previously in *Methodology*, some limitations on this research include the focus on LIS literature in the three databases outlined. This focus excludes literature that may be relevant to this research, and therefore narrows its scope. Only one language is considered within this study; however, future

studies could include other languages. In addition, the dominant North American perspective narrows the context of understanding. Future studies could incorporate a more globalized approach in addressing regional perspective and language considerations. It should also be noted that the majority of research as it exists from the databases consulted does not act to separate out trans experiences. Frequently, these experiences are either not discussed or lumped together in a sequence of letters. The research that does exist is from a cisgender and homosexual normative understanding, leaving little room for a more nuanced discussion. Finally, limitations include that which is missing from the LIS literature landscape on barriers to information and access for the LGBTQ community and that which is missing from the databases consulted in this study.

There is opportunity in what the current literature landscape omits. To position research within the context of elders and youths is a key prospect. The LIS community would benefit from understanding how barriers and their perceptions can change depending on generation. Another relevant topic for further exploration is socioeconomic factors as a lens through which to understand LGBTQ access. Affect and its role in information seeking appear to be a promising research topic, as there is little direct focus on them. Indeed, the literature landscape presented within the databases used in this study is insufficient, necessarily influencing understanding. Other research areas with potential are on the bisexual and transgender members of this community and the information behaviour of lesbians compared with their counterparts in the community under review. Focus on these areas in particular would serve to bring the profession to a more holistic understanding of both the community under review as a whole and its constituent parts, which may have different experiences. Future research could also position its focus within the context of health science institutions, religiously focused institutions, archives, and others. An interdisciplinary approach to service and research would greatly amplify professional understanding and therefore practice.

## **Conclusion**

This study questioned what barriers to access and information exist for the LGBTQ community. Barriers identified by reviewing the literature included societal conditions, interpersonal barriers, the digital divide, descriptive practices, inadequate collections and mediation services, geographic barriers, affective barriers, and inaction.

This work identifies perception as a key factor in understanding LGBTQ informational barriers, acting as either a proxy barrier or a shadow barrier. It also highlights a characteristic of barrier formation and reinforcement, often creating cycles impeding access. This study promotes the usefulness of Chatman's (1996) Theory of Information Poverty as a lens through which to understand the LGBTQ community's information culture. Furthermore, it has identified gaps in existing literature and called for further research into this community, both for individual constituencies and for the group as a whole.

Overall, the LIS research community has a duty to continue exploring LGBTQ barriers to access and information. While the literature indicates previous work done, the profession must continue to understand these barriers to overcome them. Furthermore, the profession has a unique opportunity given the demographic diversity of the LGBTQ community in a time seeing more progressive attitudes.

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### Note

- 1 Pruitt (2010) explicitly notes age inconsistently, though he leaves us with the context of implied age, of which at the time the "youngest" was a senior student at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (p. 129). The majority of participants who were given an identifiable age or age range were in their mid to late thirties and above.

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## Appendix 1

- information OR information needs AND access AND "Bisexuality" OR "Sexual orientation" OR "Sexual behavior" OR "Transgender persons" OR "Gays & lesbians" OR "Gender studies"
- information OR information needs AND barriers AND "Bisexuality" OR "Sexual orientation" OR "Sexual behavior" OR "Transgender persons" OR "Gays & lesbians" OR "Gender studies"
- information OR information needs AND access AND barriers AND gay\* OR lesbian\* OR queer\* OR transgend\* OR bi\* NOT bio\* NOT bit\* NOT music OR (open access)
- (information seeking OR information seeking behaviour) AND (gay OR lesbian OR bisexual OR trans\* OR queer OR GLBT OR GLBTQ OR LGBT OR LGBTQ)
- (all(information seeking) OR all(information seeking behaviour) OR all(barrier\*)) AND (all(gay) OR all(lesbian) OR all(bisexual) OR all(trans\*) OR all(queer) OR all(GLBT) OR all(GLBTQ) OR all(LGBT) OR all(LGBTQ)) AND (socioeconomic\* OR economic\* OR socio-economic\*)