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# DRAG STORYTIMES AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC INVISIBILITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PICTURE BOOK SUBJECT METADATA (Paper)

## **Abstract:**

Drag storytimes are one type of programming that public libraries offer to address the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ children and families in library spaces. The books read during these storytimes often feature LGBTQIA+ characters and themes. In this work in progress, we will compare the subject metadata assigned within the Library of Congress Catalog and the social cataloging platform LibraryThing to a corpus of picture books read during drag storytimes. We will consider the limitations of using traditional subject headings in capturing the diversity of LGBTQIA+ themes and if the application of user-generated tags offers a more nuanced reflection of content.

## **1. Introduction**

Drag storytimes are children's events that feature drag performers reading children's books and engaging in other storytime activities. These events were initiated in 2015 in Canada as Drag Queen StoryTime (Drag Queen StoryTime, n.d.) and in the United States as Drag Story Hour (About, n.d.). Drag storytimes are one of several types of programs that public libraries offer as part of their efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in children's programming.

Recent studies have shown that the picture books read during drag storytimes feature more diverse LGBTQIA+ identities and themes than the books read during other library storytimes (e.g., Barriage et al., forthcoming; Naidoo, 2018). Historically, LGBTQIA+ materials have often been subject to what Gough and Greenblatt (1992) term "systemic bibliographic invisibility," the use of "outmoded, prejudicial, inadequate, or inappropriate terminology" within bibliographic records to describe an item's contents (p. 61). Using such terminology within subject metadata

can make LGBTQIA+ materials challenging to find within a library's catalog, restricting users' access to the materials and the ideas they contain.

Scholars concerned with the bibliographic invisibility of LGBTQIA+ materials have primarily focused on subject access related to adult and/or young adult library materials (e.g., Adler, 2009; Bates & Rowley, 2011; McClary & Howard, 2007). In this study, we focus on materials for children—specifically, we analyze the subject metadata associated with picture books read during drag storytimes. The analysis reported here builds on a larger, multi-phase project examining drag storytimes in public libraries. Previous phases of the study included a survey of library staff and interviews with library staff and drag performers related to their perceptions of and experiences with drag storytimes (Barriage et al., 2021; Kitzie et al., 2022; Oltmann et al., 2023), as well as a content analysis of diversity in picture books read during drag storytimes (Barriage et al., forthcoming). We acknowledge that our focus on picture books read during drag storytimes differs from the inclusion criteria of studies like Adler (2009) and Williams (2017). We believe that our approach uniquely captures the spectrum of LGBTQIA+ narratives present in children's picture books through its cultural and community context. This method embraces a wide array of themes, from overt LGBTQIA+ identities to subtler explorations of difference and self-identity, offering a comprehensive view on LGBTQIA+ representation in children's literature.

## **2. Literature Review**

Incorporating diverse books within storytime programs is one way that children's librarians can work to address bias and oppression by offering programs that reflect the diversity of today's world, part of the critical competencies of the profession (Association for Library Service to Children, 2020). One strategy that library staff, drag performers, and patrons alike may use to identify picture books with LGBTQIA+ characters and/or themes is through subject searches in library catalogs. Subject headings, such as Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Children's Subject Headings (CSH), provide standardized terms that describe the subject matter of a particular item, and librarians will assign these to items while conducting a subject analysis during the cataloging process (Hoffman, 2019). Subject headings provide an access point for users when looking for information in various systems (Joudrey & Taylor, 2018). Yet, determining the "aboutness" of an item is a subjective conceptual activity (Hauser & Tennis, 2019), one that is often taken for granted and rarely critically examined (Holley & Joudrey, 2021). Scholars who question how subject headings are developed and applied argue that their seeming neutrality often hides sociopolitical biases (Olson, 2001; Drabinski, 2013). The failure to adequately include LGBTQIA+ identities in surrogate records results in information becoming "either unfindable or unusable by members of marginalized groups" (Dobreski et al., 2022, p. 490-491).

Not all contemporary information systems assign subject access points using a controlled vocabulary, however. For instance, the online social cataloging platform LibraryThing allows users to apply their own tags to items. Tags are composed of single words or phrases that users apply to items to describe their content (Rolla, 2009). This kind of uncontrolled vocabulary provides a way to move beyond traditional subject classifications based on literary warrant to ones based on ‘user warrant’ and the language of the end-user (Moulaison & Bossaller, 2017). Comparative studies of applied LCSH and LibraryThing tags have found that there tends to be a disconnect between the two schemes when used to classify LGBTQIA+ materials (Adler, 2009; Rolla, 2009). Although the reasons for this disconnect need further evaluation, one reason might relate to what Wagner (2022) argues is catalogers’ hesitation in describing humans in surrogate records because of “given societal complexities around identities” (p. xii). This observation, in part, reflects how the political and ethical landscapes associated with cataloging practices ultimately lead to the increased invisibility of marginalized identities.

Although subject headings and tags have received much attention in scholarly literature, little work has focused explicitly on subject metadata assigned to children’s literature. One example of such work is that by Williams (2017), who analyzed the subject headings assigned to books for children and young adults with diversity-related content (specifically, books focused on topics related to race/ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and disability/illness). Nearly 86% of the 120 books analyzed in Williams’ study included at least one subject heading explicitly related to its diverse content. However, a higher proportion of the records for LGBTQIA+ books lacked explicitly diverse subject headings in their catalog records compared to the records of books focused on race/ethnicity and disability/illness. Williams (2017) noted that some of the catalog records for the LGBTQIA+ books instead contained what they termed “fluff” subject headings, “ambiguous or seemingly meaningless” subject headings that do not explicitly communicate the diverse content (p. 17). Williams (2017) suggests that applying such ‘fluffy’ subject headings instead of those that explicitly reflect a book’s diverse content may reflect a move towards normalizing LGBTQIA+ content; however, it may also make these books more challenging to find in a library’s catalog.

### **3. Research Aims**

This study aims to compare the inclusion of subject metadata that explicitly highlights diversity and “fluffy” elements in the subject headings of bibliographic records in the Library of Congress Catalog with those of user-generated tags on LibraryThing. The analysis will focus on a selected collection of picture books featured in drag storytime events. Specifically, our analysis aims to answer the following:

RQ1: What frequency/percentage of picture books read during drag storytimes have explicitly diverse subject headings, fluffy subject headings, and other subject headings assigned to their bibliographic records in the Library of Congress catalog?

RQ 2: What frequency/percentage of picture books read during drag storytimes have explicitly diverse tags, fluffy tags, and other tags assigned to their metadata records in the LibraryThing catalog?

RQ3: How prevalent are explicitly diverse, fluffy, and other subject metadata for picture books reading during drag storytimes in the Library of Congress catalog versus LibraryThing?

#### **4. Methodology**

The research team generated a list of picture books read during drag storytimes via : 1) a review of news articles and professional/scholarly literature on drag storytimes to identify specific titles of picture books read during drag storytime events; 2) a review of existing transcripts of interviews with drag performers and library staff working at libraries that have hosted drag storytimes for mention of specific titles of picture books read during drag storytime events; and 3) a brief survey of library staff who have hosted drag storytimes in the past. This process resulted in a list of 103 picture books after we removed duplicates and book titles that were either generic or did not match any record in WorldCat (a bibliographic database combining data about items in library collections worldwide [OCLC, n.d.]).

We then obtained subject headings from the Library of Congress catalog, recording both the LCSH and/or CSH listed in each book's bibliographic record in a spreadsheet. We also obtained the LibraryThings tags assigned to each book manually (as the API has been discontinued). Once each book's metadata record was located, we used the "show all tags" and "numbers" filters, indicating the frequency with which each tag was applied. We recorded all tags for each book in a spreadsheet and then sorted tags by frequency, keeping the top ten tags for each title. In some cases, there were more than ten tags for a book when the tenth place had a tie (i.e., all tags that tied for the tenth place were included in our analysis). In other cases, we included fewer than ten tags as we only selected tags that two or more people had applied.

All subject headings and tags will be coded for the presence of subject metadata that are explicitly about LGBTQIA+ topics and/or themes (coded as "explicit"; for example, the subject heading "Gay parents"), those that are more generalized and/or implicit (coded as "fluffy"; for example, the subject heading "Individuality"), and those that are unrelated to LGBTQIA+ topics and/or themes more generally (coded as "other"; for example, the subject heading "Board books"). Two research team members will independently code the subject headings and tags for each book. The research team will then meet to discuss all discrepancies.

After we have resolved coding discrepancies, we will then generate frequencies across the three main coding categories for LCSH/CSH headings and LibraryThing tags (explicit, fluffy, and other). The proportion difference for each coding category will also be calculated.

## 5. Conclusion

Through a detailed comparative analysis, we will consider the limitations of using traditional subject headings in capturing the diversity of LGBTQIA+ themes and if the application of user-generated tags offers a more nuanced reflection of content. We expect the findings will support calls for reassessing cataloging practices and emphasize the importance of adopting user-informed metadata to enhance discoverability and accessibility of diverse materials within library collections.

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