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# Equitable access: Information seeking behavior, information needs, and necessary library accommodations for transgender patrons

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## A B S T R A C T

This study highlights the unique accommodations integral to welcoming transgender library patrons. Research shows transgender people have unique needs which differ from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals, and experience substantial barriers to obtaining quality library service. Most studies in the past exploring the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender library users focused exclusively on LGBQ users. This study surveyed adult transgender individuals ($n = 102$) with an online questionnaire. The majority of participants were white, designated female at birth, and under 40 years old. Survey respondents needed libraries to make accommodations for them to feel safe ($p < 0.001$). The top 5 accommodations needed were recent transgender literature, gender identity or expression as part of library nondiscrimination policy, gender neutral, single-stall bathrooms where a key did not need to be requested, recent LGBQ literature), and an established remote process for name change.

## 1. Introduction

Libraries are meant to be places where all individuals can gain equitable access to the information they seek (American Library Association [ALA], 2008a). Librarians have a professional obligation to provide all members of their community with equal access, regardless of sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation (ALA, 2008b). They must strive to remove all possible barriers to equitable access and create a welcoming environment for each individual. While many subgroups are well defined and commonly recognized, transgender individuals are often overlooked and misunderstood by society as a whole. Library resources for and concerning the transgender community are scarce, and few research studies examine the unique information needs of this population.

Cisgender (cis) people are individuals who identify their gender as the same gender they were designated at birth, regardless of their gender expression (Grant et al., 2011). Transgender (trans) people are broadly defined as individuals who identify their gender as different from the gender they were designated at birth (Coleman et al., 2011). This can include transgender women, transgender men, non-binary[1] individuals, and people with other gender identities (James et al., 2016). Many transgender individuals experience gender dysphoria, which is distress caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender

identity and the gender designated at birth (and the associated gender role expectations and primary and secondary sex characteristics that go along with that designated gender) (Coleman et al., 2011). Often transgender people transition to a different gender than the one they were designated at birth. Transition can include change in gender role and expression, psychotherapy to facilitate identity integration, hormone therapy, and surgeries (Coleman et al., 2011). Transition is a process spanning many years and is best viewed as a continuum rather than set stages, which is in direct contrast to the stages of coming out for LGB individuals (Beiriger & Jackson, 2007; Garner, 2000; Taylor, 2002; Thompson, 2012).

## 2. Problem statement and research questions

The transgender community is a vulnerable group with complex information needs. However, their unique needs have rarely been studied or understood, and therefore have rarely been accommodated. This lack of research is often attributed to the invisibility of transgender individuals as a population; invisible populations are notably difficult to locate and engage in research studies (Beiriger & Jackson, 2007; Taylor, 2002; Thompson, 2012). Only two peer-reviewed studies have specifically examined transgender individuals in relation to libraries and their specific information needs and they "represent[ed] very

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[1] Individuals who identify their gender as "not exclusively male or female, including those who identify as no gender, as a gender other than male or female, or as more than one gender" (James et al., 2016).

specific and relatively small sample sizes" (Thompson, 2012, p. 5). Thompson's (2012) review of the literature noted that transgender individuals have specific and often overlooked information-seeking behavior and needs, enforcing the need for further research.

While there are many resources and studies aimed at addressing the needs of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) library users, most studies have focused exclusively on gay, lesbian, and occasionally bisexual individuals, despite the presence of transgender individuals in the acronym. Libraries and library professionals need to gain better understanding of transgender individuals' information needs. Research shows that transgender people have unique needs, which differ from LGBQ individuals,[2] and in many environments they experience substantial barriers to obtaining quality library service (Beiriger & Jackson, 2007; Taylor, 2002; Thompson, 2012).

This study adds to the growing body of research on the demographics of transgender individuals and their need for library accommodations. Additionally, it provides an overview of transgender individuals' information access and needs, particularly regarding transgender-specific issues; it does not purport to be a thorough investigation of the overall information seeking behavior of transgender individuals. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- Are transgender individuals able to find the information they need, regardless of source?
- What sources do transgender individuals use when they need information? and
- In what ways do libraries need to change to better accommodate transgender individuals?

## 3. Literature review

Conservative estimates indicate transgender individuals comprise approximately 0.3% (~700,000) of the US population (Gates, 2011), yet they experience discrimination, violence, incarceration, homelessness, and unemployment at vastly higher rates than the general US population (James et al., 2016). A data analysis of the 2014 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System of select US regions showed that transgender individuals had higher than average rates of poor physical and mental health, and were more likely to lack healthcare coverage (Meyer, Brown, Herman, Reisner, & Bockting, 2017). However, individuals in this dataset did not differ from the general US population in terms of rates of chronic diseases, cancers, depressive disorders, or in health behaviors (such as smoking, binge drinking, or wearing seatbelts) (Meyer et al., 2017).

In 2016, the substantial findings from the results of the largest nationally representative survey of over 27,700 transgender individuals were released (James et al., 2016). The unemployment rate for transgender individuals was three times higher than the unemployment rate for the general US population, and these rates were four times higher among transgender people of color. Thirty-one percent of transgender people reported being verbally harassed or disrespected in places of public accommodation such as hotels, restaurants, buses, and government agencies. Forty-three percent of those who went through airport security experienced a problem related to being transgender. Nearly one in three (30%) reported being homeless at some point in their lives because of their gender identity or expression; one in eight (12%) experienced homelessness in the year prior to the survey. Of the 2% of respondents who reported arrest in the past year, 22% reported arrest strictly due to police bias against their gender identity or gender expression. In K-12 settings, high levels of verbal harassment (54%), physical assault (24%), and sexual violence (13%) were reported, leading to more than one in six (17%) of transgender individuals

leaving school (James et al., 2016). Given the degree of discrimination transgender individuals confront, libraries should be intentional in their efforts to make safe spaces where transgender individuals can access needed information.

Transgender individuals' needs often change over time; their needs can include questions about legal rights, finding a culturally competent healthcare provider, name and gender marker changes on various legal documents, and physical effects of hormone therapy (Taylor, 2002; Thompson, 2012). Because of the nature of the information being sought, information resources must be both definitive and current. Libraries often fail to meet transgender patrons' informational needs because of outdated or missing materials, or even because they lack materials completely (Garner, 2000).

## 4. Procedures

### 4.1. Research subjects

Study participants were those who self-identified as 18 years or older and transgender. A transgender identity was defined for this study as someone who self-identified as a different gender than the one designated at birth. The eligibility requirements were purposefully broad to include as many transgender individuals as possible, given the small percentage of transgender individuals within the general US population.

### 4.2. Methods

Potential participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling via social media, at transgender conferences in Connecticut and Pennsylvania, and through leaders in the transgender community. The survey was available exclusively online in English for four months (from April 26 to August 26, 2014). This delivery method was chosen because research has shown that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals spend more time online than heterosexual, cisgender individuals, and it also removed geographical barriers to data collection (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Magee, Bigelow, DeHaan, & Mustanski, 2012; McInroy, 2016; Witeck-Combs Communications & Harris Interactive, 2001). The survey was anonymous and all participants were informed the survey would not collect any identifiable information. The cover letter and survey were both approved by Southern Connecticut State University Institutional Review Board.

### 4.3. Instruments

The survey comprised 60 separate questions and sub-questions. Fourteen questions pertained to demographic information such as age, state of current residence, current school enrollment, race and ethnicity, yearly household income, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Many of these demographic questions were taken directly from the *American Community Survey* of the US Census Bureau (2012). The sexual orientation question was adapted from the Fenway Institute (2013). The gender identity questions were taken from the most recent guidelines regarding sensitive, culturally competent data collection (Fenway Institute, 2013; GenIUSS Group, 2014). Another 14 questions pertained to information-seeking behavior; these were adapted with permission from Beiriger and Jackson (2007). For half of these questions, participants were asked to review a list of 13 potential information sources (e.g., the Internet) and to select their top three sources according to how often those sources were used for finding information on various topics. For the other half of the questions, participants were asked to select all options that applied regarding their reasons for using chosen resources. There were seven questions pertaining to information needs; these were also adapted from Beiriger and Jackson (2007). Participants responded to these questions using a five point Likert scale. There was one multiple choice question asking about reasons for library use;

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[2] Transgender people can identify as heterosexual or straight as well as LGBQ, so they may belong to both groups.