Archivaria
The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

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Archivaria 98 (Fall 2024), pp. 136-63

Cite this article:

Wagner, Travis L., Allan A. Martell, and Shannon M. Oltmann. "'It's Not the Materials Themselves, It's the Attitude of the Donors': The Role of Community Accountability in the Sustainability of Queer Archives." *Archivaria* 98 (Fall 2024): 136-63. https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13995

"It's Not the Materials Themselves, It's the Attitude of the Donors"

The Role of Community Accountability in the Sustainability of Queer Archives

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ABSTRACT This article reports on findings from semi-structured interviews with 25 archivists and curators who work with LGBTQIA+-related collections and materials about the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Specifically, it reports on how these practitioners define and engage with ethical practices, access-based obligations, and community relations in creating and sustaining their archives. The article focuses on how participants, including practitioners from various community and institutional archives of varying size and scope across the United States, understood community accountability within their work. This emphasis on community accountability necessitated that practitioners reframe archival ethics, reconsider subjective and embodied collection and curation work, and prioritize community well-being over quantitative collection building. In response to these findings, the article identifies theoretical and practical implications for queer archives related to methods of archival production, approaches to community outreach and engagement, and the intersecting impact of these implications and approaches on questions of archival sustainability for queer and other historically marginalized histories.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article rapporte les résultats d'entrevues semi-structurées avec 25 archivistes et conservateurs.trices qui travaillent avec des collections reliées aux communautés LGBTQIA+ et du matériel sur l'épidémie de VIH/SIDA. Plus précisément, il rapporte comment ces professionnel.le.s définissent et s'engagent dans des pratiques éthiques, des obligations basées sur l'accès et des relations communautaires, en créant et en prenant soin de leurs archives. Cet article se concentre sur la façon dont les participant.e.s, incluant des professionnel.le.s provenant de diverses communautés et centres d'archives de diverses tailles et portées à travers les États-Unis, comprennent les responsabilités communautaires de leur travail. Cet accent sur la responsabilité communautaire nécessite que les professionnel.le.s recadrent l'éthique archivistique, reconsidèrent la subjectivité du travail de conservation et de formation des collections, et priorisent le bien-être communautaire plutôt que la quantité associée au développement de collection. En réponse à ces résultats, cet article identifie des implications théoriques et pratiques pour les archives queers, principalement reliées aux méthodes de production archivistique, aux approches communautaires qui stimulent la mobilisation et l'engagement avec les archives, et l'impact transversal de ces implications et des ces approches sur des questions de durabilité des récits queers et provenant de communautés historiquement marginalisées.

Introduction

Divisions in practice binarize the work of LGBTQIA+ archiving into two categories. One side demands institutional accountability in supporting the preservation of long-overlooked accounts of LGBTQIA+ individuals and their activism through the established practices of archival curation and recordkeeping.[1] Another side asserts that providing contextual care to naming queerness within archival records requires explicit participation from queer communities.[2] Yet scholars and archivists continue to curate queer history vis-a-vis archival documents, as evidenced by special issues of journals focusing on queer archival work, conferences centring the theory and practices of queer archives, and manuscripts concerning queer archival praxis.[3] Despite these evolutions, the complexities of representing LGBTQIA+ identities within a cisheteronormative society persist. Both the residual trauma of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and queer embodiment's inherently complicated relationship to institutions uniquely impact archives.[4] As such, archival practitioners need to be more explicit concerning how they ethically and practically navigate the creation, curation, and sustainment of identity-based archives.[5] Embodied identity offers one site

1 Maigen Sullivan, "Invisible No More: LGBTQ History & Archiving Projects at Universities in the US South" (PhD diss., University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2022).

2 Diana Wakimoto, Christine Bruce, and Helen Partridge, "Archivist as Activist: Lessons from Three Queer Community Archives in California," *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 293–316.

3 Examples of this include *Archivaria*'s own foundational 2009 special issue on queer archives, the Invisible Histories' biannual Queer History South conference, and focused book-length case studies of queer archives via works like Rebecka Taves Sheffield's *Documenting Rebellions*. See Rebecka Sheffield and Marcel Barriault, eds., "Special Section on Queer Archives," special issue, *Archivaria*, no. 68 (Fall 2009), https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/issue/view/450; Invisible Histories, "Queer History South," Invisible Histories, accessed December 10, 2023, https://invisiblehistory.org/qhs/; and Rebecka Taves Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2020), https://litwinbooks.com/books/documenting-rebellions/.

4 Marika Cifor, *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022); Travis Wagner, "Reeling Backward: The Haptics of a Medium and the Queerness of Obsolescence," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 16 (Winter 2019): 67–79.

5 Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81; Gracen Mikus Brilmyer, "'I'm Also Prepared to Not Find Me. It's Great When I Do, But It Doesn't Hurt If I Don't': Crip Time and Anticipatory Erasure for Disabled Archival Users," *Archival Science* 22, no. 2 (2022): 167–88; Ricardo Punzalan, "Archival Diasporas: A Framework for Understanding the Complexities and Challenges of Dispersed Photographic Collections" *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (2014): 326–49.

for examining ethical archival praxis. In the case of queer archival holdings, embodiment informs one's attention to and care for unique moments of queer materiality.[6] While HIV/AIDS and anti-queer discourses inform the impetus for, or avoidance of, producing queer archival holdings, understanding embodied and communal perceptions of queer history and of its archival production still requires nuance.[7]

Our research reflects on how curators of LGBTQIA+-related collections – and more specifically, collections related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic – understand their ethical roles, access-based obligations, and queer community relations within their work. Utilizing insights from semi-structured interviews with 25 US-based queer archives practitioners, we focus on how these practitioners understand community accountability. We highlight how these practitioners, through reframing archival ethics and acknowledging their own embodied identities, produce a metric of community accountability that precedes and informs understandings of their collections' physical and digital sustainability. While such accountability has long been a staple of queer intersectional activist work, we argue that the archivists interviewed offer radical approaches to accountability, which refigure archival ethics. Specifically, participants place their archival production in conversation with more methodical archival work and identify community collaborations as valuable in cementing meaningful ties between historically marginalized communities and those institutions tasked with reconciling said marginalization.[8] The article concludes by reflecting on how community accountability functions within queer archives and interrogating how such accountability informs archival sustainability.

6 Marika Cifor, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair: Examining Affect and Embodiment in Trans Archives," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 645–49; Jamie Lee, *Producing the Archival Body* (London: Routledge, 2020).

7 Cifor, *Viral Cultures*; Harrison Apple, "'I Can't Wait for You to Die': A Community Archives Critique," *Archivaria*, no. 92 (Fall 2021): 110–37.

8 Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, "Toward Slow Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 87–116; Travis L. Wagner, "'We Are Openly, Proudly Subjective . . . This History Is Important to Our Contemporary Survival': Queer Embodied Knowledge and the Curatorial Work of ICT-Based LGBTQIA+ History Content Creators," *Journal of Documentation*, ahead of print (2024), https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-01-2024-0025; Vicki Hines-Martin, Fannie M. Cox, and Henry R. Cunningham, eds. *Library Collaborations and Community Partnerships: Enhancing Health and Quality of Life* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Literature Review

Institutional versus Community Archives

Archives, once sites of neutral state knowledge production, evolved to contend with more objective questions of community identity-making.[9] This evolution toward communities and identities within archives meant that non-normative identities began rightfully contesting archival order. Post-colonial scholars, for example, observed how archives emphasized the value of textual, documentary evidence, even when those with access to the production and use of said documents tended to be those with elite, Eurocentric identities.[10] Further, archivists observed the limitations of institutional archives, which both intentionally and accidentally destroyed records documenting historically violent actions. Verne Harris, as an example, observed that both the wilful ignorance and the malevolent intentions of the South African government produced what he identified as a "sliver of a sliver of a sliver" of evidentiary documents.[11] Those most impacted by these actions, whether through the explicit or implicit destruction of archival records, pushed for tools and archival practices that centred their experiences and combatted what Michelle Caswell identifies as the "symbolic annihilation" of communities within archives.[12] While the history, practice, and form of community archives remain contested, scholars generally agree that community archives play a foundational role in combating institutional gaps while innovatively producing methods and forms for community-affirming history.[13]

9 Terry Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms," *Archival Science* 13, no. 2 (2013): 95–120.

10 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht, NL: Springer Netherlands, 2002), 19–27.

11 Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 63–86, 65.

12 Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26–37.

13 Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 151–76; Alex H. Poole, "The Information Work of Community Archives: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Documentation* 76, no. 3 (2020): 657–87.

Queer Archives Theory and Praxis

As Jamie Lee observes, queer-focused archives produce bodies of knowledge but also wrestle with and interrogate how bodies are themselves sites of knowledge for the past, present, and future of queerness.[14] For Lee, queer ways of knowing inform one's ability to bring forward hidden LGBTQIA+ histories. Indeed, the eponymous Invisible Histories project, a queer digital history project located within the American South, aimed to redress historical misperceptions around the perceived absence not only of queer history but also of its intersectionality.[15]

Mapping queerness into the archival record, in turn, becomes about seeing and naming LGBTQIA+ identities across a variety of embodied, spatiotemporal contexts. Take, for example, the complex curation of lesbian identity, which historically disavowed female romantic relationships as irrelevant to historical notation as potentially queer, femme sexualities.[16] Cait McKinney suggests that documenting and categorizing lesbian relations challenge institutional institutionalized concepts of queer identity. In their analysis of this, the Lesbian Herstory Archives' bespoke approach to digital curation, McKinney notes that "processing a photograph of a well-known lesbian or event suggests a straightforward routine of identification and classification," which rarely provides the nuance necessary for "the often-anonymous, amateur images of sexuality in the collection."[17] This example reveals the historically fraught nature of an identity like "lesbian" and reveals the benefits of embodied interpretation in alleviating those tensions. In contrast, contemporary archival technologies and descriptive practices remain incapable of nuancing femme queer embodiments, which themselves bleed into overlapping questions of gender identity.[18]

14 Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, 8–9.

15 James L. Baggett, Joshua Buford, Maigen Sullivan, and Catherine Oseas Champion, "The Invisible Histories Project: Documenting the Queer South," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 37, no. 1 (2021): 46–60.

16 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 75–76.

17 Cait McKinney, "Body, Sex, Interface: Reckoning with Images at the Lesbian Herstory Archives," *Radical History Review*, no. 122 (May 2015): 115–28, 115.

18 Travis L. Wagner, "Finding 'Miss Betty' Joe Carstairs: The Ethics of Unpacking Misnaming in Cataloging and Bibliographic Practices," in *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control*, ed. Jane Sandberg (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019): 195–211; Travis L. Wagner, "'She Started Wearing Men's Clothes and Acting More Masculine': Queering Historical Knowledge, Gendered Identity Making, and Trans Potentialities in Visual Information," *International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* 5 no. 4 (2021): 21–42.

The transgender body within the archive proves to be inherently "anti-history," given, as K.J. Rawson notes, the desire to remove oneself from one's past embodiment.[19] As Rawson and others observe, archives reinforce cisnormative biases through acts of deadnaming or misgendering – meaning that finding transness within archives is often a doubly alienating experience for those identifying as trans and non-binary.[20] By inviting rather than stigmatizing the complexities of transness within archives, institutions like the ArQuives open up and extend possibilities of transness within collections.[21] Aaron Devor, the founder of the University of Victoria's Transgender Archives, furthers this approach, noting, "It is wise to remember that archives mean different things to different people: personal information and collective identity, documents and old books, memories and evidence, physical buildings and non-circulating materials, all of these act as sites apart from – or a part of – one's life."[22]

Devor's navigation of the duality of archival identity and archival spaces offers an important duality itself. For Devor, accountability to queer communities takes precedence within archival labour, yet histories of trans exclusion mean that accountability requires practitioners to have a keen awareness of their own positionalities and practices in this work, returning the labour of queer archives once again to sites of embodiment. Marika Cifor explores accountability and embodied proximity to queerness in her reflection on processing the archival holdings of sex worker and trans activist Victoria Schneider. Highlighting the seemingly banal nature of a brush held within Scheider's donations, Cifor explores how the hair left within the brush signals the presence of trans identity within the archive through a startling reminder of its broader absence from historical discourse. Cifor contends that her queer embodiment, while divergent from Schneider's, affords her the unique positionality to speak to and advocate for nuancing queer identity where other practitioners might see irrelevant debris.[23] Though our

19 K.J. Rawson, "Accessing Transgender//Desiring Queer(er?) Archival Logics," *Archivaria*, no. 68 (Fall 2009): 123–40, 126.

20 Rawson, 123–40; Wagner, "She Started Wearing Men's Clothes and Acting More Masculine."

21 Elspeth H. Brown, "Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive," *Archivaria*, no. 89 (Spring 2020): 6–33.

22 Aaron Devor, *The Transgender Archives: Foundations for the Future* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Libraries, 2016).

23 Cifor, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair."

analysis focuses on queerness as a site of accountability, the realities of intersectional embodiment extend rather than challenge the observations of scholars like Cifor. Queer embodiment affords a degree of extrasensory engagement with archival objects about queerness.

Community Accountability in Archival Work

Questions of accountability within archival description and access are oriented toward evidentiary truth, suggesting that the work of archivists is devoted to upholding traditional historiographic paradigms.[24] However, following the paradigm shifts explored by Terry Cook, questions of archival accountability now acknowledge historical injustices like colonialism and anti-queer legislation.[25] While these varying theories of accountability situate archival records in relationship to users, questions of accountability to donors and those communities represented by material broadly extend new understandings of the role of archival work. Community needs often diverge from the daily tasks and processes of archives; those working with communities often find themselves in the position of activists, stepping into these communities and their sociocultural contexts more broadly.[26] Brilmyer et al. conceptualize this idea of activist accountability in curating histories of marginality as an act of reciprocity. For archives professionals within and outside institutions, reciprocity means sharing their resources and skills to serve community needs, whether or not this produces tangible archival records.[27] Accountability within the context of queer archival holdings challenges notions of production, thus questioning the heteronormative underpinnings of curational notions of visibility and use as successful archival work.[28]

24 Jim Suderman, "An Accountability Framework for Archival Appraisal," *Esarbica Journal*, no. 23 (2004): 51–61; Laura Millar, "An Obligation of Trust: Speculation on Accountability and Description," *American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (2006): 60–78.

25 Daniela Agostinho, "Archival Encounters: Rethinking Access and Care in Digital Colonial Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 141–65; Marika Cifor, "Aligning Bodies: Collecting, Arranging, and Describing Hatred for a Critical Queer Archives," *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 756–75.

26 Wakimoto, Bruce, and Partridge, "Archivist as Activist"; Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci, "'What We Do Crosses Over to Activism': The Politics and Practices of Community Archives," *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (2018): 69–95.

27 Gracen Brilmyer, Joyce Gabiola, Jimmy Zavala, and Michelle Caswell, "Reciprocal Archival Imaginaries: The Shifting Boundaries of 'Community' in Community Archives," *Archivaria*, no. 88 (Fall 2019): 6–48.

28 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

Accountability within archives uniquely impacts queer communities by raising ethical questions around archival practice, which include, but are not limited to, reimagining paradigms of queer archival description within the contexts of trans and non-binary holdings, challenging the notions of usability concerning obsolete and fragile queer audiovisual artifacts, and disrupting the notion that digital access to queer materials is holistically favourable.[29]

Information science scholars' emphasis on the importance of engaging with and centring the embodied experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons also informs questions of professional practice.[30] These scholars identify intentional modes of ensuring that resource provision and description remain as affirming and inclusive as possible – either by employing practitioners who are themselves queer within libraries and archives or by working with queer community liaisons.[31] Within archives, this work extends to collection development, inclusive identity curation, and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Further, this embodied approach understands that archival production remains about "activating" communal history making rather than extracting documents.[32]

Sustainability in Archives

Laura Millar observes that archivists simultaneously serve as auditors, protectors, historians, and advocates for collections. While each responsibility overlaps and differs from the others, Millar believes these responsibilities ensure that archives and archivists uphold and, when necessary, challenge historical discourses.[33] Implicit in Millar's categorization are notions of sustainability. Sustainability

29 Laura Peimer, "Trans* Collecting at the Schlesinger Library: Privacy Protection and the Challenges of Description and Access," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 614–20; Wagner, "Reeling Backward"; Julia Gilmore, "Be Kind Rewind: Navigating Issues of Access and Practising an Ethics of Care for Magnetic Media from Vulnerable Communities," *Archivaria*, no. 96 (Fall/Winter 2023): 70–95.

30 Bharat Mehra, ed., *LGBTQ+ Librarianship in the 21st Century: Emerging Directions of Advocacy and Community Engagement in Diverse Information Environments* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019).

31 Alexis Pavenick and George Martinez, "Hearing and Being Heard: LGBTQIA+ Cross-Disciplinary Collection Development," *Collection and Curation* 41, no. 4 (2022): 109–15.

32 Krista McCracken, "Community Archival Practice: Indigenous Grassroots Collaboration at the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre," *American Archivist* 78, no. 1 (2015) 181–91; Alexandrina Buchanan and Michelle Bastian, "Activating the Archive: Rethinking the Role of Traditional Archives for Local Activist Projects," *Archival Science* 15, no. 4 (2015): 429–51.

33 Laura Millar, "The Spirit of Total Archives: Seeking a Sustainable Archival System," *Archivaria*, no. 47 (Spring 1999): 46–65, 49–51.

here includes those methods for ensuring that collections receive ongoing use, reflect current description paradigms, and foster long-term value to their users.[34] When considering the roles and needs of community archives, sustainability exists as a set of non-hierarchical curation practices that ensure multiple individuals moderate and have access to the digital contents of the archives while simultaneously collaborating to train users on the constraints placed on their work by copyright law and platform-based rules and restrictions.[35] In the context of institutional and community archives, sustainability also examines how centring and affirming the reciprocal needs of those within the community foster a collection's expansion and development. Reciprocity also sheds light on the observations of Katrina Fenlon, who argues that sustainability is a unique challenge at the intersection of digital curation and community archives. Fenlon reflects upon digital humanities projects whose tenets include a commitment to remaining "in service to communities,"[36] thus surfacing structural inconsistencies between those responsible for managing collections and their (often inaccessible) design and the needs identified by the community. For Fenlon, sustainability offers both a site of critical failure within current digital humanities work and a site for examining how questions of community accountability play into the digital archives' infrastructure.[37] Taking up Fenlon's challenge within the broader landscape of LGBTQIA+ archival creation, curation, and sustainability, this article explores how practitioners working within a variety of queer archival contexts make meaning of community accountability. Before examining these findings, the article reflects on its methods and methodologies.

34 Keith L. Pendergrass, Walker Sampson, Tim Walsh, and Laura Alagna, "Toward Environmentally Sustainable Digital Preservation," *American Archivist* 82, no. 1 (2019): 165–206.

35 Sarah Baker and Jez Collins, "Popular Music Heritage, Community Archives and the Challenge of Sustainability," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 5 (2017): 476–91.

36 Katrina Simone Fenlon, "Sustaining Digital Humanities Collections: Challenges and Community-Centred Strategies," *International Journal of Digital Curation* 15, no. 1 (2020): 9.

37 Fenlon, 9–12.

Methods

Positionalities

Given the nature of this research, it is important to contextualize our relationships not only with LGBTQIA+ communities but also with the work of archives and archivists. Identifying our positionalities serves as an attempt to contextualize the scope of our interpretation and the potential biases and limitations informed by our lived experiences. Travis Wagner is a white, gender-queer, queer person with a PhD in information sciences. Their work focuses on how LGBTQIA+ communities represent and are represented within various cultural and archival contexts, explicitly identifying the roles of tools and technologies in this work.[38] Additionally, they have worked in archives and helped co-found a queer community archive, which offers them insights into the roles of community and institutional buy-in within such work. Allan Martell is a cisgender afro latino born and raised in a Latin American country, who holds a PhD in information. Their work focuses on the role of affect in shaping memory activism in cultural heritage institutions. Their interest in LGBTQIA+ history stems from a desire to reveal the structural violence that shaped the memories of queer communities. Formerly a media producer, Martell was once a memory activist who worked with rural communities to raise awareness about the legacies of war violence. Shannon Oltmann is a white, butch lesbian with a PhD in information science, raised in the midwestern United States. Her work focuses on access, censorship, and information-ethics issues across various institutions and settings, often addressing questions of visibility and voice for marginalized communities.

Theoretical Framework

We deploy social constructivist traditions, which understand a person's sense of meaning, reality, and truth to be rooted within lived experiences and contextual sites of embodiment.[39] We understand the work of the practitioners interviewed to be deeply rooted in their realities and aim to reflect their truths rather than to judge their practices. However, since our work engages with

38 Wagner, "We Are Openly, Proudly Subjective."

39 Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 105–17, 109.

and deploys key concepts within queer praxis, theory, and history, we contextualize our constructivist work within the broader phenomenon of anti-queer social ideologies. Simply, while we understand that these practitioners engage in personal experiences and archival interpretation, they do this work within and against cisnormative and heteronormative ideologies. In turn, the constructivist paradigms informing this work also account for and, when necessary, call attention to how queerness produces sites of contestation. Whether or not our participants explicitly name challenges related to ongoing normative ideologies related to LGBTQIA+ identities, individuals, and communities, we understand such challenges to be implicit within this analysis, thus queering this constructivist framework.[40]

Data Collection

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval from our respective institutions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 archivists and curators who worked with HIV/AIDS collections in some capacity. Both archivists and HIV/AIDS collections were broadly defined to include various archives types and collection endeavours, such as oral history projects, which often fall under the purview of archives. Due to the limitations of IRB rules regarding data privacy and institutional requirements for participant compensation, our recruitment focused only on United States–based archives and archivists. The recruitment of participants occurred through purposive sampling based on a recruitment spreadsheet built by Oltmann, who then shared it with Wagner and Martell to review and provide additions. The spreadsheet included results from Oltmann's Google searches utilizing terms and phrases like *HIV/AIDS archives* and *oral histories of HIV/AIDS*. We also used our shared knowledge of LGBTQIA+-related archives to build the recruitment list further. We then split the spreadsheet between us and sent initial recruitment emails to the individuals on the list, inquiring about their interest in participating in our project. If a participant agreed to participate, they received a formal follow-up email that indicated methods for scheduling interviews based on preferred practice. For example, Wagner scheduled interviews via Calendly, whereas Martell and Oltmann preferred to schedule interviews via email. In the formal recruitment email, each participant was provided with a

40 Denise Levy and Corey W. Johnson, "What Does the Q Mean? Including Queer Voices in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Social Work* 11, no. 2 (2012): 130–40.

consent form and optional demographic form, which inquired about details like their age, gender, and years of archiving, as well as the type of archive they ran, how long their HIV/AIDS collection had existed, and the geographic location of their archive. We conducted interviews between May and August of 2023. All interviews were conducted over Zoom, and with participants' permission, interviews were recorded. We kept only the audio from recordings of interviews and used a combination of Otter AI and manual transcription to clean transcripts. Participant transcripts were anonymized, and each participant was given either a pseudonym of their choosing or two randomly generated initial pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Once all transcripts were anonymized, we generated separate inductive and deductive codes. Inductive coding pulled in, directly from participants, quotes and ideas about both their work as archivists and the challenges they faced working with LGBTQIA+-related materials and topics and with materials relating to the history of HIV/AIDS. Deductive codes emerged from broader theoretical concepts and our own interests as a research team, as well as from concepts pulled from archives theory and queer theory.[41] After independently generating coding, we met as a team to share coding ideas and identify gaps and overlaps between codes. Following this, Wagner generated a codebook, which the team then utilized to code a portion of the transcripts to achieve intercoder reliability.[42] Following this, we utilized Dedoose to code a portion of the transcripts, each focusing on transcripts for which we had not been the interviewer, to help ensure that an additional layer of data interpretation occurred with the coding. Table 1 presents a set of codes, their definitions, the code types, and examples of participant quotes representative of each.

41 Johnny Saldaña, *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

42 Cliodhna O'Connor and Helene Joffe, "Intercoder Reliability in Qualitative Research: Debates and Practical Guidelines," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, no. 19 (2020).

TABLE 1 *A sample of codes, their definitions, the code types, and representative quotes from participants*

CODE	DEFINITION	TYPE	SAMPLE
AIDS quilt	A participant or participants discuss the AIDS quilt within or in relation to their archive.	Inductive	"I saw the quilt. It really struck me about like, the scale of devastation that was represented in that quilt. And then like the sheer size of it, but I do think that – I think that people remember it because it was done, it was completely done by community people. It was a national effort. We didn't have outside help doing it was all an inter-community project, where we were allowed to tell our own stories. And we put those stories together. And I think that moment really is a moment of pride for people, that we haven't forgotten the people that we've lost. And here is a physical representation of that." JD
Archival anxiety	Borrowing from Mellon's *library anxiety* (1986) and Yakel's *archival intelligence* (2003),* this refers to general discussions of perceptions that archival users avoid archives due to not knowing how to use them or feeling unwelcomed within them.	Deductive	"Like. I don't know if this collection is intimidating, or if it's just that the [COLLECTION] is pretty big, and it's very impressive, but it could feel a little intimidating." Hanna

Formats	A participant or participants discuss donors and their relationships to archival holdings.	Inductive	"It was a community-based response to the crisis. And I had been tasked with migrating our computer system. And these are 1989 computers. And these are 1989 nonprofit computers. So they were really terrible computers. And there was a list on there that wouldn't transfer, and migration meant copying stuff to a five-and-a-quarter-inch floppy and uploading it in the new computer from the floppy disk, and this file wouldn't transfer." SH
Affective responses to materials: AIDS-specific	A participant or participants discuss having emotional responses or particular feelings when engaging with AIDS-specific materials.	Deductive	"God, the tears. Oh my god. There, there are names that I can name right now of people, you know, the folks on the oral histories, you know, tearing up when they're talking about their friends, tearing up in the classroom in front of students, you know, telling students passionately, 'Don't be cavalier about this.'" Frost

[*] *See Constance A. Mellon, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development,"* College & Research Libraries *47, no. 2 (1986): 160–65; Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise,"* American Archivist *66, no. 1 (2003): 51–78.*

Findings

Demographics

Of the participants who disclosed their ages, the youngest was 37, the oldest was 70, and the average age of participants was 51. Additionally, of those participants who disclosed their genders, six identified as men, five as women, and one as queer. With regards to sexuality, six identified as heterosexual or straight, three identified as gay, and two identified as queer. For those who disclosed their race or ethnicity, eight identified as white, one as Latinx, and one as Jewish. Across educational status, most participants possessed graduate degrees – with only two specifying that they held doctorates – and two participants held bachelor's degrees. Years of archiving experience ranged from participants with just

two years of experience to one participant who stated that they had 50 years of archiving experience. Participants had an average of 21 years of archival experience.

Participants noted that their archives existed within the following parts of the United States: four in the Southeast, four in the Northeast, three in the Midwest, one in the Northwest, and one in the Southwest. Moreover, when asked to typologize their archives, eight stated that their collections fell within the category of academic archives, while one identified their archive as a community-led project. Three participants identified their collections as hybrids of academic and community archives. Finally, given the open-ended option, one identified their project as a public media project, which reflected the project's role in curating a particular type of broadcasted content at a national level, here with a sub-collection focused on topics related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Regarding the years that these collections had focused on or collected HIV/AIDS-related materials, two archives shared the shortest existence, with each having collected materials for five years. In contrast, one collection had been gathering materials for 20 years. The average age of the HIV/AIDS collections was 11 years. Finally, it is essential to note that multiple participants indicated when signing up that, while they collected HIV/AIDS materials, this was not an explicit practice per se but an inevitable result of having LGBTQIA+-focused collections.

Community Accountability as Archival Ethics

Participants often challenged the practices and ethics of accessibility when these might contradict accountability to their community needs. Sean, a digital archivist at a midwestern academic archive with a robust LGBTQIA+ media archive, reflected on the disconnects between how donors might imagine their relationships to their materials and how those expectations might misalign with institutional practices. Sean stated,

> I do think that working with the populations to do the archiving is very important, because there's an unspoken history of them being a part of processing of that. Yet there are very specific rules we have in regards to once somebody makes a donation to [UNIVERSITY], because we are a state institution, then it belongs to the state. So unfortunately, then if somebody made a donation, they couldn't just like pull things out and take them home or anything; it becomes state property. . . . There's also

> the thing of, we are not allowed to have anybody do a task here that we would not pay a state worker to do, right. So, people can organize and do stuff as much as they want before they hand us the collection. But once it's given to us, beyond asking them questions for context, here or there, they can't, like, come to the archive and organize things for us.

Sean's comment references an unspoken assumption of LGBTQIA+ communities directly participating in the curation of queer history; however, due to both state policies around donor agreements and further complexities about how volunteer labour unfolds, his institution is unable to work with donors to co-curate, describe, and preserve materials. While Sean reaches out to donors "for context," his reflection implies that there are inconsistencies between acquiring materials and ensuring donors have direct involvement in the utilization of materials. Sean clarifies his goals as an archivist by emphasizing to donors the importance of indicating, before they sign donor agreements, how they want their materials to be preserved and utilized. Sean's accountability to LGBTQIA+ communities requires an act of slowing down the archival acquisitions process with an eye toward meaningful sustainability.

Other participants framed the question of communities and their material contributions to collections in terms of acts of ethical non-extraction. DeTeau, a university archivist at a southeastern university archive, discussed his willingness to avoid taking in LGBTQIA+ collections if taking them means misrepresenting donors' identities or histories. DeTeau noted,

> Rule number one in this process is, I always be honest with people about things. Because, since this is a word-of-mouth business, the worst thing that can happen is that they tell everyone, "I had the worst experience with [UNIVERSITY]." That, that is literally the worst thing that can happen, whether their collection comes to us or not, because you won't believe it, but that word will get around and get around quickly.

DeTeau acknowledges that his practice negates traditional archival methods but concedes that he would prefer to engage in ethically sound acquisitioning. DeTeau's evocation of his work as part of a "word-of-mouth business" reflects an ongoing promotion of community buy-in within identity-based archives work and reflects a practice and structure of community resource sharing that

is uniquely deployed within LGBTQIA+ communities when it comes to seeking and using resources within various information settings.[43]

Hanna, who works as curator for multiple collections at a university archive in the northwestern United States, reflected that she listened more explicitly to what her community wanted during the process of gathering LGBTQIA+ historical documentation, within the context of creating oral histories, stating,

> So in 2020, and actually, just recently, we started these up again, we engaged in in-person story circles, with the [ARCHIVE] and [LOCAL LGBTQ+ ORGANIZATION], and there were several sort of story circles that were conducted. And I was there to support and provide technology and, sort of, we talked about the process and turning it over to the archives. There was one story circle that was focused on intersectionality between LGBTQ members. And for that one, I actually stayed. I didn't participate; I was outside, physically outside of the circle, but was minding the equipment. I came to set everything up, I made sure that they knew how to work the camera and audio recorder, but then I physically left the space to ensure that that space was specifically meant for those communities. . . . So it's, you know, depending on what the community was like, I, I tried to support them in the ways that make sense to them. But I think that's an important part, when you don't identify as a member of a community, that you need to adapt.

Hanna, despite identifying as BIPOC, knew that her other identities as a cisgender and heterosexual woman made her an outsider to LGBTQIA+ communities. While her job involved procuring and curating stories of LGBTQIA+ communities, her accountability to the community prevented her from recording stories any time these communities met. Instead, Hanna was an intermediary, offering the technology and resources to conduct preservation only if it was "what the community wanted." Hanna remained aware of her position as a practitioner within the community and, ultimately, a representative of an institution. Hanna saw her role as informing these communities of

43 Brilmyer, Gabiola, Zavala, and Caswell, "Reciprocal Archival Imaginaries"; Travis L. Wagner, Vanessa L. Kitzie, and Valerie Lookingbill, "Transgender and Nonbinary Individuals and ICT-Driven Information Practices in Response to Transexclusionary Healthcare Systems: A Qualitative Study," *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association* 29, no. 2 (2022): 239–48.

methods they might take to document their experiences should they decide to share their stories.

Community Accountability as Embodied Practice

For some participants, queerness was part of their own identities. However, for most, a queer-identified collaborator emerged at the project's onset and remained vital to gaining legitimacy within the community. For example, those practitioners working within the parameters of university archives reflected on the presence of queer academics and scholars as the impetus for their collections. Frost, a head of collections at a university archive within a small private college in the American Northeast, discussed how having a collaborator who was a community member helped streamline the process of gathering oral histories, which might otherwise have become muddied by the need to build community trust. Frost noted,

> I said it to this professor who was leading this oral history training, and when we were talking about whether we wanted to be the tech person or we wanted to be the interviewer, and I actually said, in a room of people, "Is it possible that, you know, somebody would be more receptive to talking to someone who's a member of the community as opposed –" which I now understand to be completely, you know, but at the time, that's how I felt about it. Like it was very – like, it was troubling to me. And now I realized that people, just from an oral history practitioner standpoint, you're going to tell more stories to people that you have to explain things to than somebody who necessarily understands everything.

Frost admitted to having misgivings around yielding control to community members. However, in seeing her collaborator facilitate meaningful engagement, she accepted the broader qualitative value it brought to her work by stating, "And I think that there's no way that [CITY] could have started something like this without it being affiliated with the community centre and the trust it had. I mean, all of those early AIDS interviews that we got, during early COVID, were people that [COLLABORATOR] had stood in the trenches with for 25 to 30 years."

Frost highlights how such word-of-mouth acceptance allowed for an increase in both interview quantity and interview quality. While Frost explores the role of collaborating with a member of the LGBTQIA+ community for an archives project, other participants surfaced their own embodied queer identities as being integral to curating both existing and to-be-gathered archival collections.

Greene, a director of a university archive in the southeastern United States, discussed how his own identity as a gay man informed his curatorial work with materials both explicitly about queer history and those whose contexts, from his embodied experience, invited queer readings. Of his reading the donations from older gay men against the grain, Greene reflected,

> Beyond the shudder of recognition, it's also the cognition, you know, that if I wasn't saving this little scrap of paper, somebody else probably would not be doing it and, you know, even if it's just clippings of some gay men who had died and it's not a set age, then that's part of a collection. . . . These are important pieces of paper, you know, and I have to tell the processing archivist how to label these – that some older gay man clipped these articles of gay men who had died of AIDS, and it's not saying what it is, in the paper, which, again, is of note.

Greene describes here the process of the gathering of HIV/AIDS-related obituaries as significant not only as a collection tied to gay men in his collections but also as something that required him to understand that the materials themselves were about AIDS, even if the obituaries made no mention of the disease. Greene's "shudder of recognition" comes not only from his identity as an older gay man but also from his ties to the town where the archive exists. Stating that he had "process[ed] the collections of [his] dead boyfriends," Greene noted that he had learned to understand his embodied subjectivity as an informational aid in his curation work. Greene took this affective and admittedly disconcerting example and leveraged it to reveal alternative archival narratives and to highlight and sustain community curatorial practices he and others undertook during a historical moment of queer erasure. By leveraging both embodied knowledge and his position as a head archivist, Greene radically adapted his archive's holdings toward community-centred care.

Community Sustainability as a Precedent to Archival Sustainability

Greene, who had already conceded to interjecting his own lived experience into archival interpretations, made clear that his work as the curator of a queer-focused archive was about accountability to the community. Greene asserted that he would have nothing close to a viable LGBTQIA+ archival collection were it not for the commitments and support of queer individuals, stating that, when it comes to constructing LGBTQIA+ collections, "it's not the materials themselves, it's the attitude of the donors." In offering advice to other archivists hoping to make collections accountable to queer communities, Greene stated,

> It's like, hey, everybody, let's put on a musical, you know. And I've done this so many times. You cannot start an archives on your own because it has to exist in perpetuity, and you have no idea of what it takes to keep a building open, keep a collection safe for eternity . . . rather than starting an archives itself. Like, they've already got an extant archives, or they've got a place to store the materials, or they've got, they've already got the professional people that know how to do it, you know, that I would actually, you know, tell them to look at the political environment. You know, is it going to piss off their institution? You know, are they going to have backing? Are they putting themselves in danger? . . . You know, I would certainly encourage the saving of LGBTQ collections, you know, but I would try to be practical enough to say, "Good intentions are not enough." It takes a lot of, you know, material, whatever, you know, brick and mortar, and, you know, and money, etc., to keep up an archive.

Greene's litany of questions read as inherently critical, yet the framing is not dismissive. Greene's argument, like those of other participants, contextualizes what is best for LGBTQIA+ communities beyond the construction of an archive. As Greene notes, ensuring that a collection can "exist in perpetuity" takes a lot more than having materials and requires, among other things, funding, trained staff, and a physical location. Given his own experiences as a curator in "a red state," Greene further contended that, without institutional "backing," the creation of an LGBTQIA+ collection could mean "putting themselves in danger," and while Greene likely means the archives and their archivists, his commitment to supporting the donors of these materials also invites acknowledgement of his community's safety.

Hanna, who believed that institutional support and community accountability might oppose sustaining an LGBTQIA+ archive, declared,

> If you don't identify as members of [a] community, finding those connections, those partners, and working with them in ways that, that would be helpful for building initiative, but then on the back end, having institutional support, making sure that you have capacity in doing this work. If you've done it, be very clear with the community on what you can and can't promise. I will also be as transparent as I can in terms of why we are doing it, and then just make sure that you stay educated on issues making the community, but also issues related to the progression that impacts the initiative.

Synthesizing these practices and their broader role in community-accountable queer archival work, Hanna stated that a sustainable queer archive must be staffed by archivists who are "open to evolution" and suggested maintaining direct lines of communication with these communities. Moreover, while Hanna contended that a trained archivist remains critical to sustaining such collections, she avoided conflating this role with having community buy-in by offering an essential caveat: that all her archive's progression came from "connections to the community . . . who enabled those relationships to take place" and give "meaning" to the archive's work. While community accountability helped foster the sustainability of an LGBTQIA+ archive, for Hanna, that sustainability existed entirely from and through obtaining community buy-in.

Implications

Theoretical

Our findings provide additional evidence of the value of what Christen and Anderson identify as "slow archives" work. Our participants echo Christen and Anderson's call to replace a "more product" archives mentality with "reciprocal and collaborative curation."[44] Materials about and related to LGBTQIA+ communities and their histories cannot be quickly gathered to redress institu-

44 Christen and Anderson, "Toward Slow Archives," 110.

tional gaps, nor can their inclusion occur within exclusionary archival systems. In response, participants intentionally slowed down the acquisition process to find solutions. Participants also identified challenges around describing their collections and making them digitally accessible. While a more nuanced analysis of this particular topic is outside the scope of this article, this article parallels Julia Gilmore's recent critical deconstruction of the digitization of and access to marginalized histories housed on obsolete formats.[45] In conversation with Gilmore's work, our participants emphasized that the visibility of LGBTQIA+ collections without proper contextualization and institutional support could lead to anti-queer antagonism and misuse of materials.

Greene's reflection on processing AIDS obituaries while having an embodied relationship to the artifacts also parallels Cifor's affective responses to finding the hair, potentially Victoria Schneider's, while processing artifacts from her collection.[46] While both were working through different archival processes, they nonetheless came to the same conclusion, which was to utilize their embodied and subjective interpretations of the potentialities of these objects as meaningful queer artifacts to expand their descriptive potential. The participants in this study made clear that such embodiment ought to exist at all levels of the project, including the documentation and gathering of the histories themselves, and Hanna explicitly argued that this helps to ensure that communities provide authentic, queer-affirming records. By both slowing down archival work and overtly affirming subjectivity in archival labour, the archivists and curators we talked to create a praxis of community accountability, which help build and sustain their archival holdings.

Practical

Alongside the theoretical implications, participants' discussions brought forth a series of praxis-based approaches to enacting and ensuring the design of sustainable LGBTQIA+-focused collections. With a nod toward community accountability, many participants reflected on the explicit value of having a community member as a visible project collaborator. With regards to university-based archives, this collaboration often happened through the bequest of a researcher working at the intersections of queer history and culture. For example, Frost's queer-identified collab-

45 Gilmore, "Be Kind Rewind."

46 Cifor, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair."

orator, who had "been in the trenches," provided a shared communal connection to ensure care and consideration within the curation of LGBTQIA+ materials. Archives can learn from and leverage community knowledge and embodied experience to foster substantive and meaningful archives and donor relations. While overcoming systemic histories of exclusion and anti-queer institutional practices remains a broader endeavour, archives might replicate models of community liaisons to foster relationships between institutions and historically excluded communities. This work can borrow from other information science scholars who observe the value of liaison-based work in creating and ensuring access to library resources and health-related information within LGBTQIA+ communities.[47] Identifying and sustaining these liaisons provides two critical interventions into current archival practices. First, it can follow DeTeau's reminder that "word of mouth" goes a long way in ensuring participation in a project.[48] Second, these liaisons also echo the value of embodied knowledge as a uniquely crucial tenet of LGBTQIA+-oriented knowledge work.[49] A queer community archival liaison may help facilitate activities, including by hosting events such as Hanna's story circles and working with participants to decide what, if any, of those events they want to record. Alternatively, a liaison might help work through the tensions of donor agreements and their impact on the community, following models laid out by archivists like Sean. Indeed, following Sean's careful collaboration with his community, archivists might do more long-term thinking about the implications of building and retaining LGBTQIA+ collections and might transparently explain to their communities that collecting and preserving materials may not result in immediate digitization and access and that plans they agree to with one liaison may not be enacted in their lifetime or in the career of a given archivist. As such, even formal documents like donor agreements require a degree of trust and communication built on in-the-moment consent, which warrants intensified care and context. Regardless of their purpose and scope, these liaisons, as imagined here, offer a lifeline between communities and their histories and collections and ensure their long-term sustainability within archives.

47 Mehra, *LGBTQ+ Librarianship in the 21st Century*; Wagner, Kitzie, and Lookingbill, "Transgender and Nonbinary Individuals and ICT-Driven Information Practices."

48 Wagner, "We Are Openly, Proudly Subjective."

49 Vanessa L. Kitzie, "Innovative Information Literacy Landscapes: Leveraging the Specialized Knowledge of LGBTQ+ Communities in Research and Practice," *Journal of New Librarianship*, no. 4 (2019): 387–404.

Archives can also use their impetus to acquire and curate LGBTQIA+ materials as an opportunity to critically re-examine their collections for potential pre-existing queer artifacts. Following the example of Greene and his encounters with AIDS obituaries, archivists might look to collections and ask different questions about their queer potentiality. While it remains impossible to extract a queer identity from an archival document where such an identity is not explicitly disclosed, refiguring documents for their queer subtexts remains a growing practice within both archival discourses and queer historiography.[50] Finally, as part of this undertaking, archives might invite individuals interested in queer history and scholarship to look for hidden materials or offer fellowships and stipends to those engaged in queering the collections.

Limitations

Beyond our focus on LGBTQIA+-specific collections, limiting interviews to a few hours, which required consolidating an ever-growing set of practices that constitute archival labour into a more generalized practice, meant that actions like transferring collections to other institutions, documenting workflows, and maintaining quality control over archival description often became lost in broader concepts. Better understanding the relationships of LGBTQIA+ archives within such spaces and to archivists, and the expanding notion of archival labour, warrants more profound ethnographic work akin to that of Rebecka Taves Sheffield.[51] Additionally, our emphasis on HIV/AIDS, while expansive, likely led to the exclusion of participants who felt that their LGBTQIA+ collections either were not explicitly about this topic or lacked enough content to warrant inclusion. Further, this hyperfocus on a particular moment in LGBTQIA+ history may help explain the relative newness of the archives and special-collections curators interviewed. Indeed, many participants followed up with us to clarify that they collected more than just HIV/AIDS materials and thus felt that they might not fit within the criteria of the study. Confusion on the part of actual and potential

50 Jamie Lee, "A Queer/ed Archival Methodology: Archival Bodies as Nomadic Subjects," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017); Wagner, "She Started Wearing Men's Clothes and Acting More Masculine."

51 Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions*.

participants may explain the absence of more established LGBTQIA+ archives, and altering the recruitment narrative and study scope would likely have alleviated this to a degree. Finally, while this research centred queerness as a point of the study, as many of our participants reminded us, this is but one lived experience. The practices and ethical concerns they raised become more nuanced and complicated when accounting for other intersectional ways of being. The methodological approaches deployed for this study could be extended to interrogate the curation and collection of other historically marginalized histories and the impact of this work on those communities.

Conclusion

This article has reported on research focused on the acquisition, curation, and sustainable preservation practices of archivists working at the intersections of LGBTQIA+ collection building, explicitly focusing on HIV/AIDS history. The topics explored included the impact of archival ethics, communal and institutional obligations, and the question of sustaining community connections and affirming archival documents. Pulling from a pool of 25 participants, this article examined more directly how these practitioners envisioned their work toward LGBTQIA+ archival sustainability as being achieved primarily through community accountability work. We identified unique ways that archivists questioned their ethical obligations to their profession and their institutions and reframed these practices to ensure that their LGBTQIA+ partners and donors experienced as inclusive and affirming an archival presence as possible. While methods for achieving community accountability varied, participants argued for a more methodical and, at times, less product-driven approach to gathering LGBTQIA+ artifacts. Participants signalled the value of collaborators who were themselves part of the community, arguing that their direct proximity to the history on display not only provided insight into the community but also afforded them unique subjective lenses that enriched queer historical knowledge documentation. Though we contextualized these practices and their relationship to community accountability with regard to sustaining and promoting LGBTQIA+ archives, the findings and their implications extend to questions of fostering and uplifting cultures and histories at various interstices of marginality. Findings from our research confirm that one of the best ways to sustain community

heritage is not to expeditiously bring it into an archival space but to instead look outward and ask how such documentation and preservation already occurs within these communities.

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