Expanding Our Conceptions of Embodied and Affective Information Interactions with Queer Theory

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ABSTRACT

Embodiment and affect are understudied in information science work to date. Literature that engages with embodied information interactions typically focuses on physical bodies, while work on affect largely centers people's emotional experiences in formal knowledge institutions like libraries. Room therefore exists to grow in our understanding of embodiment and affect, particularly in terms of theorizing how bodies and feelings factor into a wide range of information experiences from non-dominant standpoints. This panel centers queer experiences and queer theory in order to expand conceptions of and connections between embodied and affective dimensions of information interactions. Panelists will present a range of research that examines queer people's practices and experiences with information in historical, archival, creative, and health-related domains. Bodies and emotions are essential components of critical queer theoretical perspectives, meaning that scholarship which centers queerness and its intersections with constructs like race has great potential to expand many branches of information science further beyond their normative bents. In concert, topics discussed should spark conversation among attendees about the theoretical and practical benefits of deeply studying embodiment and affect and further utilizing critical theory in multiple domains within the information science discipline.

KEYWORDS

Embodiment; affect; queer; information interactions; theory.

INTRODUCTION

Embodiment and affect are generally understudied in information science literature, and this limits our ability to understand people's information interactions (Floegel & Costello, 2021; Ocepek, 2018; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). We use "information interactions" here as an umbrella term that encompasses information behaviors, practices, creation, and other human-information phenomena (see Fidel, 2012). Neglect of embodiment and affect are indicative of core limitations that have been pointed out across our discipline, including its long-standing cognitive focus (Savolainen, 2007) and tendency to binarize people and information systems or technologies (Floegel & Costello, 2021; Lloyd & Olsson, 2019). Moreover, embodiment and affect tend to be rendered most clear in non-normative contexts (Ahmed, 2004; 2006; 2013), meaning that trends in information science including marginalizing work from scholars of color (Cooke & Kitzie, 2021), white-ism (Mehra & Grey, 2020), and cis/heteronormativity (Floegel & Costello, 2019; Wagner & Crowley, 2020) all feed into under-theorization of embodiment and affect. This panel argues that information science would do well to consider how bodies and feelings—and in particular, marginalized bodies and feelings—factor into information interactions if the discipline is serious about embracing epistemics and scholarship beyond white, Western, and cis/heteronormative standpoints.

"Embodiment" broadly refers to practices, interactions, and experiences that are somehow corporeal (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017), and many argue that all practices, interactions, and experiences are fundamentally embodied (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2016). However, in literature to date, embodiment often translates into practices that involve the physical body, like touching food in a grocery store (Ocepek, 2018), using tools to restore cars (Lloyd & Olsson, 2019), writing lists (McKenzie, 2020), and providing care to patients as a nurse (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011). "Affect" broadly refers to emotions or feelings (here, we consider affect to be synonymous with emotions and feelings rather than a separate construct; see Ahmed, 2013). Emotions are perhaps less commonly—or at least less specifically—

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discussed in literature beyond that which examines people's feelings within formal knowledge institutions like libraries and schools (Julien & Fourie, 2015; Krakowska, 2020; Kuhlthau, 1988; Nahl & Bilal, 2007) or beyond psychological takes on information seeking (see Savolainen, 2015). Affect may be less explicitly discussed than embodiment because emotions are stereotypically feminized and therefore not often considered "significant" elements of people's experiences (Ahmed, 2004, 2013; Doty, 2016).

However, outside of information science, both embodiment and affect are used within critical theoretical spaces to understand how marginalization operates within our everyday lives and institutions. Queer theory, in tandem with critical disability studies and critical race theory, provides compelling theoretical and empirical takes on embodiment, affect, and their ties to power (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015; Puar, 2012, 2017). Generally, queer theory seeks to destabilize or reorient what seems to be normal or status quo with the goal of shifting power relations away from institutionalized whiteness and cis/heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2006; Puar, 2017). In terms of embodiment and affect, queer theory specifically points to ways that queer bodies and emotions have been inequitably regulated over time, particularly along racialized, gendered, classed, and national lines (Puar, 2017; Schuller, 2018). Queer theory further highlights how members of queer communities use embodied and affective practices to counter regulation and related oppression (Halberstam, 2011; McKinney, 2020). Moreover, queer theory draws underarticulated connections between embodiment and affect, and argues that we cannot separate the two constructs (as we tend to do in information science work). Ahmed (2013), for example, calls affects "embodied cognition" and argues that feelings are binarized from bodies only because of institutionalized misogyny wherein masculinized physicality is prioritized over feminized emotions. This further calls into question the divide between embodiment as purely physical and affect as purely mental; queerness's anti-binary stance lends credence to the argument that we cannot separate bodies from feelings (see Jagose, 1997).

Queer theory's relationship to embodiment and affect therefore raises questions about how information interaction literature handles these topics, and points to ways that research may be better attuned to embodied and affective power dynamics going forward. In particular, we believe that queer theory may help us a) understand how queer bodies and feelings have historically been sites of both regulation and resistance in information institutions and within information interactions; b) consider embodiment and affect outside of purely physical practices; and c) draw connections between bodies and feelings that necessarily factor into any information interaction. As early career scholars who are both personally and professionally entrenched in queer spaces, and who have queer bodies and feelings ourselves, we will present four ongoing research projects that engage with questions around queer embodiment and affect in information interactions. Findings and questions raised by our research should spark necessary and productive conversation around embodiment, affect, and how information science can further engage with historically marginalized standpoints, peoples, and practices.

PANEL FORMAT
This 90-minute panel session will proceed as follows:

- Introduction (5 minutes)
- Panelist Presentations: 4 panelists (15 minutes per presentation, 60 minutes total)
- Questions and Discussion (15 minutes)
- Summary and Brainstorm Research Agenda: Panelists will conclude the session by asking attendees to offer suggestions for a research agenda on embodiment and affect, which may lead to further collaborations among panelists and attendees (10 minutes)

We present our credentials and presentation topics below.

Travis Wagner
Travis Wagner is a PhD. candidate in the School of Information Science at the University of South Carolina. Wagner is also an instructor in UofSC's Women's and Gender Studies Department. Their primary research interests include critical information studies, queer archives, and embodied information practices. Their dissertation explores the phenomenological role of gender as a descriptive practice as it relates to catalogers working with visual information. Their recent publications include articles in the *Journal of Documentation*, *Open Information Science*, *Reference Services Review*. They are also the co-creator of the Queer Cola Oral history and Digital Archive.

In their presentation, Wagner will discuss the co-constitutive nature of queer embodiment as it informs the work of information organization within cultural heritage institutions. Specifically, they will understand how the complex visibility of queerness offers sites to explore how information professionals make sense of gender as a normative phenomenon and how this normative ideology can be disoriented (Ahmed, 2006). Specifically, their work expands on critical information studies focused on regulating queer bodies through informational surveillance (Adler, 2017) or discursive limitations (Drabinski, 2013) to explore how practitioners' own lived experiences and phenomenological orientations play into the cataloging of gender diverse embodiment. Further, their work explores

how both queerness as an identity and queerness as a thing encountered operate to destabilize fixed orientations between historical understandings of cataloger and object (Šauperl, 2002) as well as notions of domain and document frames of subject description (Mai, 2005). Their work then theorizes towards what it would mean to make the work of cataloging body-oriented and how this informs not only discussions of a cataloger's positionality (Diao, 2018), but practitioner positionality within LIS more broadly. Wagner's presentation will engage with the following questions: a) How does queer embodiment inform the interpretation of gender within cataloging practices? b) What implications does queerness as an embodied information encounter have for LIS professionals more broadly? and c) Does queer embodiment exist in a practitioner/object binary, or might this binary require its own queer encounter?

Diana Floegel

Dr. Diana Floegel earned their Ph.D. from the Rutgers School of Communication and Information in May 2021. Their interdisciplinary areas of teaching and research include people's information creation practices, sociotechnical assemblages, and social justice in information institutions such as libraries. Their dissertation work used participatory fandom as a context through which to examine how power dynamics are expressed by and enacted within queer people's technologically mediated information creation practices. They have published widely across top information science journals including *JASIS&T, Journal of Documentation*, and *Library and Information Science Research*.

In their presentation, Floegel will argue that when queer people write transformative fanfiction ("fic")—or texts that remix canonically cis/heteronormative media so that it contains queer characters, relationships, and/or themes (Fiesler & Dym, 2018)—they are engaging in both embodied and affective information practices despite the so-called "virtual" nature of writing fic online. Drawing on interview data with 25 queer participants in seven different countries as well as content analysis of fanfiction texts and five social media platforms used by fans, Floegel will discuss overlapping liberatory and oppressive dimensions of embodied and affective elements of information creation. In particular, they will demonstrate how intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1988; Collins, 2000) functions within queer creative practices and the online spaces in which they occur so that white, Western, and cisgender fans experience self-discovery and catharsis through fanfiction while fans of color, non-Western, and transgender fans experience oppression and marginalization (Floegel, 2020; Pande, 2018). Further, Floegel will discuss how elements of social media platforms like their taxonomic systems and content warnings serve to enforce inequitable experiences for queer fans along racialized, gendered, and nationalized lines. Floegel's presentation will raise the following questions: a) How can embodiment and affect be virtual? b) How are embodiment and affect reciprocal forces within information creation, and can we separate them? c) Can embodiment and affect be universalized experiences, and why or why not?

Daniel Delmonaco

Daniel Delmonaco is a PhD student at the University of Michigan School of Information. They are also part of the Graduate Certificate program in Science, Technology, and Society (STS). Delmonaco researches LGBTQ+ health and online information seeking. Their current research focuses on the online sexual health information seeking practices of LGBTQ+ young people and the development of comprehensive and inclusive online sex education resources. They also research the content moderation experiences of marginalized people on social media platforms.

In their presentation, Delmonaco will discuss the embodied and affective nature of LGBTQ+ young people (ages 15 to 25) and their sexual health information seeking practices. This presentation discusses findings from 17 interviews and 3 focus groups with LGBTQ+ young people in which participants discussed their experiences searching for sexual health information and their online sexual health search strategies. Participants expressed a preference for receiving sexual health information in online communities instead of via healthcare providers or LGBTQ non-profits (Delmonaco et al, 2020). This preference often came with feelings of disappointment over needing to turn to online and peer-based resources out of necessity, desires for privacy, and/or safety concerns. Previous research on LGBTQ+ sexual health information seeking does not directly consider the embodied and affective nature of this specific information interaction (Buhi et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014; Steinke et al., 2017, Veinot et al., 2013). Delmonaco's presentation will discuss participants' reflections on their own sexual health information experiences and online search strategies for related information. Findings suggest that both affective and embodied elements of sexual health information seeking impacted participants' search strategies and satisfaction with information they encountered. Delmonaco's presentation will pose the following questions: a) How do affect and embodiment present themselves in the sexual health information seeking of LGBTQ+ young people? b) How might we consider affect and embodiment in the development of sexual health resources for LGBTQ+ young people?

Bri Watson

Bri Watson (@brimwats) is a PhD. student at the University of British Columbia's iSchool focusing on queer nomenclature, histories of information, and equitable cataloging in GLAMS (galleries, archives, libraries, museums, and special collections). They are the Director of HistSex.com, a free and open access resource for the history of

sexuality and serve on the editorial board of Homosaurus, an international linked data vocabulary for queer terminology. Additionally, Watson serves as the Archivist-Historian of the Consensual Non-Monogamies Committee of the American Psychological Association.

Watson will conclude the panel by placing previous presentations into the history of cataloging and classification. As Wagner (above) and others (Adler, 2012; Poole, 2020) have demonstrated, queerness and queer bodies destabilized the rules and historical understandings between catalogers and the catalogued. In the decades following, information professionals, activists and researchers have struggled with controlled vocabularies, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), which have been (rightly) criticized as inappropriate, misleading, or outrightly offensive. Folksonomies and social tagging, once seen as possible remedies by researchers, have been matched by a near-equal amount of research (Floegel, above; Keilty, 2012) that points to how uncontrolled tagging oppresses along sexual, racialized, gendered, and nationalized lines. However, as Floegel and Delmonaco demonstrate, queer people have continued to innovate by engaging in "both embodied and affective information practices," likely out of necessity, as access to information on risk and protection (from HIV/AIDS, for example) can be literally lifesaving. Building on these discussions, Watson's presentation will argue that community developed and supported vocabularies like the Homosaurus (http://homosaurus.org) offer futures which create a place and space of justice for nonnormative, "weird," "queer" and "perverse" bodies. By engaging in "information activism" (McKinney, 2020)—including literally overwriting LCSH—catalogers can create an affective and embodied language in which subjects "can discover themselves existing" (Watson, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Questions that each presentation raises should inspire robust discussion among attendees that could lead to the development of a research agenda that centers explorations of power, inequity, and liberation in the context of embodied and affective information interactions. Further study of embodiment and affect is necessary in information science, particularly if the discipline is to continue to strive for equity, inclusion, and justice in its scholarship.

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