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Structural and Symbolic Limits of Dublin Core Implementations for LGBTQIAPN+ Representation

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Abstract

This study critically examines the need for the qualified use of Dublin Core for representing LGBTQIAPN+ identities, in light of the Knowledge Organization literature and specialized initiatives. To this end, a qualitative and analytical-critical approach is adopted, based on a conceptual and critical-interpretative analysis of Dublin Core, considered alongside its possibilities for local refinement and institutional implementation. The analysis is organized around three axes: self-naming and authorial naming, contextual relevance and privacy, and ethical interoperability through local application profiles and governance mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that rigid implementations of Dublin Core treat authorship and identity as stable categories, compromising the representation of trans identities. It concludes that a fairer representation depends on contextual metadata policies, rectification mechanisms, complementary vocabularies, and ethically responsive local infrastructures.

1.0 Introduction

Information organization within digital environments operates as the structural foundation that enables the identification and retrieval of information resources in memory ecosystems, such as repositories and libraries. In this scenario, the Dublin Core Metadata Element Set (DCMES) has established itself as one of the most influential international metadata standards for the description of electronic resources due to its markedly minimalist and flexible architecture. Conceived as a deliberately generic matrix aimed at universal communication across distinct systems, the standard optimizes global interoperability flows. However, its application in specific social contexts necessarily depends on local constructions, which require the formulation of application profiles and

metadata governance policies capable of accommodating more complex semantic demands.

This minimalist nature, which favors Dublin Core interoperability, also generates tension when the description extends beyond the generic identification of resources to involve subjects, biographical trajectories, and historically marginalized identities. Notably with regard to LGBTQIAPN+ identities, knowledge representation involves not only the existence of broad elements of authorship or subject matter, but also the possibility of operationalizing name variations and social dynamics continuously in transformation (Sumner et al. 2023). However, when this need is transposed to the reality of institutional repositories, for example, the scarcity of specific policies perpetuates the invisibility of dissident authorial production (Covello et al. 2025). This institutionalized violence is both administrative and epistemological, as the uncritical pursuit of standardization neutralizes the emancipatory potential of participatory indexing and description practices (Park and Lu 2009; Drabinski 2013; Díaz-Jatuf 2021).

This dynamic becomes even more complex in light of contemporary debates on queer data, which demonstrate that gender and sexuality records transcend the dimension of technical variables or stable universal categories (Guyan 2022). The language employed in these systems actively participates in the production of dignity, where the use of inadequate or static nomenclatures compromises both the consistency of the retrieval and the very integrity of the representation (Meyer and Millesen 2022). From this point, an ethical paradox emerges: the flexibility of metadata, while enabling visibility and recognition, also strains the boundaries of consent and demands local mechanisms capable of protecting it against compulsory exposure in digital environments governed by bureaucratic permanence.

Given this scenario, there is a clear need for critical discussions articulating the Dublin Core limitations in relation to its respective institutional implementation dynamics, especially in the context of the tensions emerging when confronting universal standardization with demands for self-identification and informational justice. More than pointing to a supposed normative insufficiency, the issue lies in which ways local policies and metadata governance structures respond, or fail to respond, to the need for representation of LGBTQIAPN+ identities in situated contexts. In this sense, the objective of this study is to demonstrate the need for the qualified use of Dublin Core for representing LGBTQIAPN+ identities, in light of the literature on Knowledge Organization and specialized initiatives.

2.0 Metadata and LGBTQIAPN+ representation in digital environments

In the field of Information Science, the theorization of metadata increasingly challenges the classic and reductionist formula of "data about data," as Riley (2017) points out, repositioning these structures at the heart of information mediation and representation processes. From a broader perspective, metadata can be understood as the set of information that can be stated about an object or information resource at different levels

of aggregation, reflecting its dimensions of content, context, and structure (Gilliland 2016). Therefore, metadata is not merely auxiliary data about resources, but descriptive structures that actively participate in their authentication, intelligibility, findability, and use in digital environments. Thus, the view of metadata as mere adjacent technical supports is rejected, validating them as active and intentional instances of representation (Sayão 2010). It is precisely this capacity for semantic modeling that governs the conditions of visibility in the digital infrastructure, transforming the descriptive record into a critical arena for determining what becomes accessible and recognizable.

Operationalizing this capacity in digital environments depends, in turn, on the structuring of metadata into formal schemas, composed of semantically defined elements, description rules, and architectures capable of ensuring the consistency and intelligibility of informational resources. From this perspective, a metadata schema constitutes a structured set of precisely defined descriptive elements, intended to support information mapping and retrieval in different application domains (Rahm and Bernstein 2001; NISO 2004). Far from being passive elements, such arrangements operate as complex mediation devices (Gilliland 2016) whose capacity to promote technical interoperability does not occur automatically. As Baker et al. (2002) and Haslhofer and Klas (2010) highlight, data exchange requires the planned articulation of records produced in different contexts, actively mitigating the structural and semantic heterogeneities that emerge across heterogeneous systems. Thus, standardization transcends the mere requirement of infrastructure, consolidating itself as the normative instance that validates the legitimacy and feasibility of integrating complex information flows.

Within this standardization framework, Dublin Core has established itself as one of the most widespread standards for describing digital resources, as it combines structural simplicity, broad generality, and interoperability across systems. Its adoption in libraries, repositories, and other digital environments stems largely from the fact that it operates as a minimal and flexible schema, capable of supporting metadata exchange in heterogeneous contexts without requiring a high degree of descriptive complexity (Sayão 2010; Harper 2010). In this regard, Suleman (2001) observes that standards such as Dublin Core have achieved significant acceptance in the digital library community precisely because of their generality and simplicity, which has favored their incorporation into interoperable architectures. This condition, however, also implies limitations. As it was conceived as a common and extensible base, the standard does not, by itself, resolve denser or contextually sensitive semantic demands. In these cases, addressing tensions in the representation of social groups and their identities depends less on modifying the pattern itself than on developing local refinements, application profiles, and institutional policies capable of adapting their implementation to specific descriptive contexts.

The critique of this supposed neutrality of descriptive systems becomes even more incisive when one observes that metadata, controlled vocabularies, and classifications not only organize resources but also distribute recognition, belonging, and exclusion. From Webb's (2023) view, descriptive language and metadata schemes reflect social and cultural values, operating as structures that both favor interoperability and reproduce norms that define who can be recognized and under what terms. This reading converges

with Drabinski's (2013) idea, for whom description constitutes an inherently political exercise, and with Roberto's (2011) formulations, which demonstrate how rigid vocabularies, insensitive to the fluidity of gender and sexuality, limit the expressiveness of trans and dissident identities. In the case of LGBTQIAPN+ identities, this issue acquires special relevance, where naming ceases to be a mere technical procedure to directly affect visibility, legitimacy, and discoverability. Thus, the representation issue is not reduced to the presence or absence of terms and keywords but involves the epistemological and social conditions under which subjects and experiences can be described and retrieved in information systems.

This issue manifests itself severely in concrete environments of scientific description and circulation when standardized structures treat biographical categories in a static way. Sumner et al. (2023) show that rigid universal schemes tend to fragment marginalized identities when they do not adequately accommodate name changes, fluid trajectories, and contemporary forms of social recognition. By forcing the correspondence of complex human trajectories to immutable administrative strings, the metadata ecosystem converts the technical protocol into a mechanism of historical erasure. Therefore, this study understands that the issue expands beyond the technical limitations of metadata standards, but involves, above all, the ways metadata standards are implemented in specific institutional contexts. When applied automatically and without consideration to the ethical implications of the description, standardization can restrict forms of recognition and hinder the representation of subjects whose trajectories do not easily fit into stable categories. The challenge of representation, therefore, surpasses the existence of a general metadata standard and becomes directly dependent on how local infrastructures, application profiles, and institutional policies guide the use of these schemas in situated contexts.

The Best Practices for Queer Metadata (Queer Metadata Collective 2024), radicalizes the critique of descriptive devices that exceed the function of access and begins to capture identities in a potentially invasive manner. Instead of advocating the simple expansion of metadata schemes with new identity fields, the document inserts LGBTQIAPN+ representation into the horizon of reparative description, understood as an ethical, contextual practice sensitive to the conditions under which subjects and communities wish or do not wish to be named. Convergingly, specialized controlled vocabularies highlight the possibility of complementing general schemes through more responsive, community-validated terminological repertoires sensitive to the plurality of LGBTQIAPN+ experiences.

This challenge becomes even more complex when the focus shifts from metadata schemes to devices that directly describe people, such as authority records. As Thompson (2016) warns, expanding the scope of these records to include dense biographical descriptions of the creator can have problematic effects when dealing with trans authors, since the mandatory inclusion of gender information and previous names can violate self-identification and expose individuals to forms of forced and non-consensual disclosure of their transition. In this context, the ethical caution advocated by QMDC finds practical support in the findings of Pranav et al. (2026). By demonstrating that

the adoption of visible name change policies and responsive institutional mechanisms drastically reduce citation errors and practices of using the previous civil registry name, the authors reinforce that information justice does not require the dissolution of global interoperability standards. On the contrary, the answer lies in the sophistication of infrastructures through continuous rectification flows capable of simultaneously safeguarding data integrity and the right to privacy.

3.0 Methodology

This study is characterized as exploratory, analytical-critical, and qualitative in approach. It considers that metadata standards, although operating according to a technical logic, also incorporate cultural, political, and ethical dimensions, affecting the forms of representation, visibility, and recognition within information systems (Campbell 2000; Drabinski 2013). The investigation focuses on the conceptual and critical-interpretative analysis of Dublin Core (version 1.1), selected due to its widespread adoption in Brazilian and international repositories. The analytical approach draws on authors who discuss the political and ethical dimensions of Knowledge Organization and description, such as Campbell (2000), Olson (2002), Roberto (2011), Drabinski (2013), and Díaz-Jatuf (2021), as well as on specialized guidelines and initiatives focused on LGBTQIAPN+ representation, with emphasis on the Best Practices for Queer Metadata from the Queer Metadata Collective (2024), the Homosaurus vocabulary, and studies on institutional practices of naming and name change.

From this perspective, Dublin Core is understood as a minimal, general, and extensible metadata standard, whose ability to respond to more situated representation demands depends on application profiles, metadata policies, and institutional governance mechanisms. Dublin Core is examined alongside its possibilities for refinement and local implementation. The study does not propose altering Dublin Core as a metadata standard but critically discusses the conditions under which its application can be qualified in concrete institutional contexts. Therefore, it argues that a socially responsive representation of human identity requires situated descriptive policies, rectification mechanisms, and governance structures sensitive to identity plurality, self-identification, and privacy, and not merely the expansion of elements of the metadata standard.

To this end, the study employs three main analytical axes. The first refers to self-naming and authorial naming, examining the extent to which descriptive structures and their institutional applications allow subjects to participate in defining the terms by which they are represented. The second axis addresses contextual relevance, privacy, and the limits of biographical description, discussing the risks of identity overcoding, undue exposure, and the use of information that goes beyond biographical relevance. The third axis focuses on ethical interoperability and local implementation, analyzing how metadata application profiles, local refinements, and institutional policies can contribute to reconciling technical consistency, information justice, and the protection of the dignity of the represented subjects.

4.0 Results

The critical analysis developed in this study examines the Dublin Core limitations in representing LGBTQIAPN+ identities, not treating the standard as an isolated normative object, but considering how its minimal and extensible structure is operationalized in concrete institutional contexts. From this perspective, it examines the ways its implementation may or may not accommodate situated demands of self-naming, privacy, contextual relevance, and information justice. To organize this discussion, the findings are arranged according to the complementary analytical axes: self-naming and authorial naming; contextual relevance, privacy, and limits of biographical description; and ethical interoperability through local implementation.

4.1 Self-naming and authorial naming

One of the most sensitive limitations of Dublin Core emerges in treating authorship. Although the standard has achieved wide adoption due to its simplicity, interoperability, and compatibility with international descriptive practices, its modeling tends to aggregate the resource creator into a single entity, creator, whereas other models distinguish types of agents and can decompose this information into more specific elements, such as first and last names (Haslhofer and Klas 2010). In minimal implementations of the standard, especially in institutional repositories, this condensation favors the stabilization of authorship in a simple nominative form, frequently operationalized through elements such as ‘dc.creator’. In principle, this generic structure supports minimal identification between heterogeneous systems. In practice, however, rigid implementations may fail to accommodate the instability of naming processes affected by gender transition, adoption of a social name, or other biographical and political transformations.

From this perspective, the problem is not in demanding that Dublin Core, by itself, become an authoritative biographical system capable of exhaustively recording identity markers, but in recognizing that institutional applications often treat authorial naming as fixed, administratively stable, and dissociated from the subject's self-naming. As Sumner et al. (2023) demonstrate, standardized descriptive systems tend to fragment marginalized identities when they do not adequately accommodate name changes and mutable forms of recognition. In the context of LGBTQIAPN+ authorship, this can compromise not only retrieval but also symbolic recognition and informational presence.

Thus, the issue of self-naming does not point to the need for indiscriminate expansion of descriptive fields. Rather, it highlights the importance of implementation strategies that allow for the sustainability of authorial autonomy through rectification flows, local metadata policies, and application profiles capable of responding to situated naming demands.

4.2 Contextual relevance, privacy, and the limits of biographical description

A second analytical limitation concerns the assumption that more descriptive information necessarily produces a fairer representation. In the case of LGBTQIAPN+ identities, this assumption is ethically unstable. As Thompson (2016) states, regarding authority records, the expansion of descriptive systems from access-oriented functions to denser forms of biographical description can expose trans subjects to situations of non-consensual disclosure, privacy violation, and symbolic harm, especially when previous names, gender markers, or other identity attributes are recorded without contextual relevance or without self-identification consent. The central problem is not simply the lack of fields for gender identity, sexual orientation, or pronouns in Dublin Core. In many institutional contexts, the ethical challenge lies precisely in deciding when such information is relevant, who has the authority to provide it, and under what conditions its inclusion can sustain recognition rather than produce exposure. A bibliographic record does not, by definition, constitute a complete identity profile. When descriptive practices go beyond biographical relevance and begin to capture identity attributes as if visibility were always beneficial, the risk of reproducing the very harm one seeks to correct may occur.

At this point, the Best Practices for Queer Metadata, developed by the Queer Metadata Collective (2024), offers an important corrective framework. Instead of advocating the unrestricted expansion of metadata schemas with new identity fields, the document inserts LGBTQIAPN+ representation into the horizon of reparative description, guided by contextual relevance, self-identification, and ethical caution. Recent studies have specified these tensions more concretely. Wagner et al. (2025), based on interviews with 29 archival professionals working with finding aids related to LGBTQIA+ materials, show that queer description requires constant negotiations between historically representative terminology and affirmative contemporary language, frequently mobilizing the embodied knowledge of professionals, donors of archival collections, and queer communities. Complementarily, Webb (2023) argues that metadata and descriptive language are not neutral devices, but political practices of naming and recognition, which is why inclusive description must be built with communities, and not just about them. Along the same lines, the Trans Metadata Collective (2022) reinforces that the ethical qualification of description depends on the adoption of community-validated terminology, the rejection of pathologizing vocabularies, and the centrality of self-identification in representation processes.

From this perspective, inclusion is not legitimized by the mere addition of gender and sexuality markers, but by the contextual relevance of the description, by the self-identification of the subjects, and by caution regarding practices that, while aiming to increase visibility, may produce undue exposure and new forms of symbolic harm.

4.3 Ethical interoperability and local implementation

In traditional metadata literature, interoperability is often understood as the technical ability to exchange, reuse, and integrate records between different systems. In the context

of LGBTQIAPN+ representation, however, this principle needs to be rethought to include the ethical conditions under which visibility and recognition are produced. The critical point is that metadata standards do not become more just simply through abstract reformulation. Their ethical qualification depends on how institutions implement them.

In this sense, local implementation becomes crucial. The challenge is to qualify the implementation of Dublin Core through responsive policies and infrastructures. As demonstrated by Pranav et al. (2026), responsive institutional mechanisms reduce citation errors, deadnaming practices, and professional, emotional, and safety harm to trans researchers. Their findings suggest that a metadata practice driven by information justice depends on building socio-technical arrangements that allow for correction, responsiveness, and privacy protection.

A convergent path can also be observed in the use of alternative or complementary vocabularies, such as Homosaurus, whose terminology, validated by communities, expands the representational capacity of general systems without requiring the abandonment of interoperability. From this perspective, ethical interoperability ceases to designate mere database compatibility, signifying instead the capability to sustain fairer forms of recognition within institutional infrastructures.

5.0 Conclusion

The analysis developed in this study showed that the Dublin Core limitations in representing LGBTQIAPN+ identities stem primarily from the ways this framework is implemented in information systems and from its own descriptive scope. Designed to provide an interoperable set of generic elements for the description of resources, the Dublin Core does not intend to comprehensively represent the multiple dimensions of subjects' identities. Aspects such as preferred name, pronouns, gender, name changes, pseudonyms, relationships between identities, and disclosure preferences are traditionally addressed by cataloging policies, authority records, and entity representation models, and not by the standard's basic set of elements. The critical issue emerges when institutional implementations treat authorship, naming, and representation as stable, neutral, and universally manageable categories, disregarding the fact that the identification of subjects constitutes a contextual, relational process traversed by ethical, social, and political choices.

From this perspective, the study argues that LGBTQIAPN+ representation cannot be reduced to the indiscriminate addition of identity markers to records. Issues of self-naming, privacy, and contextual relevance demand a more careful descriptive ethics, capable of recognizing that not all information should be captured, that visibility is not always risk-free, and that metadata standards can reproduce exclusions, even when they appear technically coherent. In this sense, the study's main contribution lies in highlighting that the challenges of representing LGBTQIAPN+ identities do not stem exclusively from metadata standards, but from the set of socio-technical decisions involved in their implementation, governance, and use within information systems.

The initiatives and experiences discussed throughout the text indicate that it is possible to ethically qualify metadata practices without compromising interoperability. Best Practices for Queer Metadata, Homosaurus, and institutional name rectification mechanisms point to a model in which metadata standards can be complemented by local application profiles, responsive policies, and governance structures attentive to identity plurality and privacy. It concludes that the limitations within Dublin Core must be addressed through institutional practices sensitive to identity plurality, self-naming, and the dignity of the represented subjects, reaffirming that information justice within digital environments depends on the articulation between technical infrastructure and ethical and political choices that guide its implementation.

AI Usage Statement

Generative artificial intelligence tools were used to support language revision, translation, and stylistic refinement of the manuscript. The conceptual development, methodological design, analysis, interpretation of results, verification of references, and final content were carried out and reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript.

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