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RESISTING HATE AND NAVIGATING AGITATION:


Perspectives and Voices of Public Library Staff & Librarians Against Reactionary Responses to LGBTQ+ Materials

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Executive Summary

- 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with public library staff for this study during June-October 2024, including 19 staff in managerial roles and 7 in non-managerial roles. 3 interviews with external stakeholders were also carried out in this period.
- Public libraries in Ireland aim to make their spaces welcoming and inclusive for all, including the LGBTQ+ community, by curating diverse collections and events. This often includes themed collections, displays, and partnerships with local LGBTQ+ organisations, ensuring representation and fostering a sense of belonging.
- Libraries provide a range of LGBTQ+-themed programmes—such as book clubs, film screenings, and youth events—frequently aligned with key calendar events like Pride Month. Some libraries reported challenges with community engagement and balancing budget constraints for inclusive programming.
- Public library staff made a distinction between agitators and those who made complaints regarding LGBTQ+ materials.
- Agitation took the form of organised and coordinated disruption, incorporating both digital and physical harassment, with a targeted focus on LGBTQ+ specific programmes and materials.
- Social media were seen as aggravating the disruption, through posting videos and agitating for action against libraries
- Public library staff expressed diverse views in relation to training and their preparedness to deal with complaints - whereas some felt prepared, others felt as though the training they received was lacking and that they depended upon on-the-ground experience.
- The implementation of comprehensive safety measures in libraries has become paramount in response to increasing agitation and disruption. This includes the development of safety plans with staff input, installation of panic buttons, and fostering connections with local Gardaí. A buddy system has also been established in some areas, particularly for rural branches, to ensure immediate support during incidents.
- Public libraries have prioritised preparing for potential resistance by developing tailored safety plans with staff input. Library managers have worked to identify staff members' comfort levels with confrontation, ensuring that those less equipped to handle such situations are shielded from direct involvement or trained to manage them.

This proactive approach includes role-playing potential scenarios to build staff confidence and actively monitoring far-right agitators online to anticipate disruptions.

- The actions of agitators have significantly impacted public library staff's emotional and mental wellbeing, with many reporting feelings of anger, frustration, stress, and trauma, caused either by direct experiences of being aggressively challenged by agitators in the library, or by the fear that it might happen to them in future.
- Library staff reported a pervasive undercurrent of anxiety and unease in their workplaces relating to agitation and disruption across public libraries, which has been amplified by social media posts, media reporting, and accounts of incidents in other libraries, shared amongst colleagues and library networks.
- Disruptions in public libraries caused by agitators have, in some cases, strained relationships between library staff. Librarians reported that tensions have emerged, particularly between colleagues with differing or opposing views on the agitators' actions and the ideology behind them, which some staff members partially support.
- However, while tensions exist, the disruption has had a predominantly unifying effect on the library staff, who reported that colleagues pulled together to support each other, presenting a strong and united front when dealing with the agitators and preparing for future potential issues.
- Some library staff expressed frustration and disappointment with the response of upper or sectoral management to the crisis, which they perceived to be inadequate or overly aimed at appeasing the agitators through actions. Instances of this frustration emerged in relation to reclassifying contested materials or cancelling events that could potentially be targeted, although understanding of the need for risk management to ensure workplace safety was also expressed in this regard.
- Public library staff are doing a fantastic job in the wake of these unprecedented challenges. They need to be supported at all levels as they continue to ensure that public libraries remain a democratic and inclusive environment for all.

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For Everyone

A Note from Community Partner LGBT Ireland

LGBT Ireland is delighted to be the community partner for this timely and important research. Through our support services and advocacy work, we have seen first-hand the significant impact rising hate and hostility is having on communities across the country.

This research crucially centres the voice of the public library staff and librarians who have been on the frontline of an organised campaign to have LGBTQ+ materials removed from public libraries. This report helps us to understand these experiences and respond accordingly. This report also sets out the global and local context and crucially captures the chronology of the agitations.

It is concerning to see the significant impact the actions of agitators have had on the emotional and mental well-being of library workers. It's important to acknowledge the anger, fear and frustration that has been felt. No one should be subject to abuse at work. Public sector workers must be protected from these attacks.

What is also clear is the secondary impact that social media and video sharing have had on librarians. There is an understandable anxiety about being filmed and this content being shared out of context online. It's crucial that online safety is enhanced.

It's worrying to hear that LGBTQ+ events have been cancelled and materials unnecessarily reclassified in reaction to agitation. It's important that libraries continue to cater to LGBTQ+ readers and host LGBTQ+-related community events.

At the same time, it's positive to see the solidarity and support workers offered each other. These local-level support networks are key and need to be fostered.

It's crucial that policymakers implement this report's findings, particularly its calls for more training and closer ties with LGBTQ+ community groups.

On behalf of LGBT Ireland, I would like to thank the team at UCD for the care and attention they have given to this important report.

Paula Fagan



The LIBRARY ASSOCIATION of IRELAND

Cumann Leabharlann na hÉireann

Representing
librarians and libraries
in Ireland

Statement from the Library Association of Ireland

The Library Association of Ireland (LAI) is a professional body representing librarians and libraries in Ireland. According to its constitution, some of the main purposes of the Association are:

- (a) To advance and **improve the services** provided by all kinds of information agencies by promoting high standards of library services and the profession of librarianship;
- (b) to promote the **free flow of information and ideas** in the interest of all the people in Ireland and a thriving culture, economy and democracy;
- (c) to maintain the **professional standing of librarianship**;
- (d) to promote the **career development** of persons engaged in library services and information provision, and to foster their professional and paraprofessional interests and aspirations;
- (e) to promote a high **standard of education** by evaluating and according recognition to degrees and courses as appropriate;
- (f) to **represent the interests of members**, the Company, library services and the profession to government, other organisations and the community;
- (g) to encourage people to **contribute to the improvement of library and information services** through support and membership of the Company;

The Constitution expressly precludes the support of any functions that would make the LAI a Trade Union.

The LAI has had a long-standing role in the promotion of knowledge, intellectual freedom, and the values of equity, diversity and inclusion. A statement issued by the LAI in 2023 affirmed the LAI's belief in the right of individuals to receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers as enshrined in Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

The LAI believes that libraries play a vital role in providing access to diverse information, fostering reading, literacy and understanding, and creating inclusive spaces for all members of society. Public Library services are provided based on equality of access for all, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, language, social status, or any other characteristic ^[1]

Library staff, as custodians of knowledge and information, play a vital role in upholding the values of intellectual freedom and safeguarding the diverse collections they curate. They are dedicated professionals committed to providing unbiased access to information and supporting and celebrating the diverse communities they serve. The LAI commends the courage and dedication of library staff who tirelessly advocate for the preservation and promotion of inclusive collections and who defend the rights of library users to access a full range of library resources and services. Library staff should remain free to carry out their valuable work without fear of harassment or intimidation.

Recent attempts to censor collections undermine the principles of intellectual freedom and threaten the very essence of what libraries represent. As a professional body, the LAI stands firmly against any attempts to restrict or censor library collections or services and to intimidate library staff.

Libraries should remain welcoming inclusive spaces that all members of our communities can enjoy without interference. The LAI is committed to working with all relevant bodies to ensure continuing access to diverse collections and services and the creation of an environment where both library staff and all library users feel welcome, respected, and represented.

^[1] IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto [IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022.pdf](#)

1 | Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Libraries have become contested spaces over the last number of years in relation to LGBTQ+ materials. In 2019, for example, the American Library Association's (ALA) top ten challenged books for that year included eight books that were challenged on the basis of "LGBTQIA+ content," all of which were written for children and/or youth audiences (ALA, 2019). These issues have not been confined to North America. Notable instances have also occurred in Irish public libraries, where the removal of materials and/or cancellation of events provided for the LGBTQ+ community, and often LGBTQ+ youths specifically, have risen. In 2019, for example, Dun-Laoghaire-Rathdown libraries cancelled a drag story time event, which had been advertised publicly on social media. A formal statement subsequently issued by the library noted that *"The cancellation was due to our significant concern at the high level of degrading, inappropriate comments on social media about the performers and library staff."* Given the online abuse directed towards the library and the drag performers, the library staff ultimately decided that the event posed a safety risk to both performers and library patrons, warranting cancellation (Gilmartin, 2020). In 2020, Cork City Libraries experienced similar controversy, when library staff removed Susan Kuklin's book *Beyond Magenta*, which contained six interviews with trans teenagers, from the library shelves in the children's section. Since then, this book has become one of the most banned books in America (Hunt, 2022). Following receipt of an anonymous letter, Cork libraries decided *"to remove the book and reprocess it for 'adult/YA lending' which requires an adult's consent."* The decision to reclassify the book drew criticism from Irish LGBTQ+ services, with LGBT Ireland noting that the decision *"will only act as a barrier to a deeper understanding of issues experienced by some in the transgender community"* (Donohoe, 2020). A common thread running through these cases is that none of the removals nor cancellations were instigated from within public libraries themselves, nor by queer youth, but occurred in response to external complaints.

As the cases of drag story time and *Beyond Magenta* demonstrate, the provision of LGBTQ+ materials in public libraries for young people in Ireland has the potential to be contentious and to be met with resistance. Since 2022, a coordinated campaign of direct agitation and disruption has targeted several public libraries across Ireland, specifically targeting LGBTQ+ materials, in particular programming and books aimed towards LGBTQ+ youths (O'Brien, 2023). Cormac Fitzgerald (2024) notes that this targeting of LGBTQ+ materials followed similar patterns of agitation that occurred as anti-vaccine protests during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Hope and Courage Collective's *"Greater than Fear"* report similarly identified COVID-19 as a tipping point, where the removal of public health measures brought the focus of the far-right back onto transphobia and homophobia, resulting in a *'resurgence in explicitly anti-LGBTQIA+ hate'* with *'widespread disruption, intimidation and attacks in libraries across the country'* (2023, 12). One of the earliest indications of this specific targeting of LGBTQ+ materials in Ireland happened at a *"Drag Queen Story Hour"* in Westport in 2022 at the Tertulia

Bookshop, where all associated with the event were accused of ‘grooming children and being paedophiles’ (Hope and Courage Collective, 2023). This incident in the Westport bookshop quickly pivoted towards Irish public libraries and targeted the provision of books for LGBTQ+ youth, such as Riyadh Khalof’s *Yay! You’re Gay! Now What?*, Owl and Fox Fisher’s *Trans Teen Survival Guide*, The School of Sexuality and Education’s *Sex Ed: An Inclusive Teenage Guide to Sex and Relationships*, and the more frequently targeted books, Juno Dawson’s *What’s the T?* and *This Book is Gay* (O’Brien, 2023).

While agitation, disruption and complaints were recurring issues around LGBTQ+ books for young adults, the targeting of public libraries prominently entered the public sphere in March 2023 and remained thereafter, especially into the Pride season of that Summer. The first very public event to be reported in mainstream media and disseminated across social media occurred in Cork City Libraries, closely followed by an incident in Swords Public Library in Dublin (Linehan, 2023). These initial protests were led by groups organised under various names, primarily the Natural Women’s Council, the Irish Education Alliance, and Parents’ Rights Alliance and political parties Ireland First and The Irish People (Fitzgerald, 2024), who coalesced to express their viewpoints about LGBTQ+ provision for young people (Feehan, 2023). The protests quickly fostered a social media component, with agitators recording the disruption in public libraries on their phones. In one such incident in Cork, a group of agitators tore up Dawson’s *This Book is Gay* in front of library staff, passed it around, and posted the act on X (formerly Twitter) to provoke further engagement and agitation. A key element of these early campaigns was the use of social media sites, such as X and Telegram, to ‘encourage parents to borrow books it deems unsuitable for 12- to 17-year-olds and then contact the person in charge of the library, report the book to the local garda station, and ask the garda to start a PULSE number on the case’ (Feehan, 2023). A PULSE number is a computer generated identifier allocated to a crime or incident in the Garda computer system. For much of the subsequent months, a number of public instances occurred where there was a marked escalation in the disruption. For example, in Tralee Public Library, during a story time event held as part of Kerry’s Kingdom Pride celebrations, protestors stormed the library, pushing past an individual on the door and disrupting the event, screaming at the library staff that ‘it was immoral to read filth to children’ (Fernane, 2023). The agitators recorded the disruption on video, posted it online, and their networks quickly re-shared it. The event involved two female-to-male drag kings, who were both Garda vetted, reading from a fairy tale book, *Prince and Knight*, which is aimed at 4-8 year olds and contains no representation of sex or anything unsuitable for children.

The disruptions in public libraries towards LGBTQ+ materials were the actions of a small number of determined agitators or, as the Hope and Courage Collective (2023) noted, ‘a small activated network’. The Collective underlined that, while the agitators are small in number, they have ‘capacity to orchestrate from afar’ and can ‘infiltrate, influence and achieve a significant scale through the use of digital channels and platforms’. The spreading of mis- and dis-information via social media infrastructures was a by-product of much of the disruption and resulted in many public libraries being subjected to expressions of concern, complaints, and disruption based on misinformation being spread about LGBTQ+ materials in Irish public libraries. Following the Tralee incident for example, US-based conspiracy website InfoWars reposted the video with the loaded heading: “Epic Video: Tightly Guarded Drag Queen Grooming Event Exposed by Outraged

Father". Elon Musk, CEO of X, also posted the video on his social media (O'Byrne, 2023). These two instances are indicative of the broader global far-right infrastructures in place around these issues.

One of the most egregious escalations of the agitation and disruption occurred in Cork City Library, located in the city's central street, Grand Parade and the targeting of satellite libraries, including Tory Top and Holyhill (Foxye, 2023). When crowds gathered to express that '*there are only two genders, male & female*,' this disruption forced the library to close its doors (Fitzgerald, 2023). Cork City, in particular, became the site of rolling protests, and the incident led to the formation of counter-protests in support of librarians and a march through Cork City, demanding protection for library workers. Because of the protests, library staff not only had their work disrupted, but also found themselves dealing with issues that were beyond the everyday remit of their jobs.

In response to the escalating disruption at the time, several stakeholders provided support to the public library sector. Fórsa, the trade union representing library workers, has been very active in terms of supporting library workers in the face of agitation and disruption. The union's *Local Government Attitudes Survey Report* (2024), which included participants from various levels of library staff, found the following:

Eight in every ten workers who interact with members of the public in the course of their work have had to deal with aggressive or abusive service users, leading workers to feel vulnerable in the workplace. Almost 60% did not receive access to additional support from their employer following violence and aggression in the workplace, while similar numbers stated that no risk assessment was conducted after incidents of abuse. There is a legal and moral obligation on the employer to ensure the safety and welfare of their employees, and any failure to do so is a clear dereliction of their duty.

The union have been central in terms of calling for the '*law to be changed allowing library management to bar (via a court injunction) members of the public from entering a library branch if they repeatedly engage in abuse and confrontational behaviour with staff*' (Doyle, 2023). In addition to this, Fórsa and union representatives in libraries throughout Ireland have been central to mobilising support and providing guidance in the face of agitation (Walsh, 2024). In the case of far-right agitation in Cork City libraries, union officials from Fórsa collaborated with library workers in Cork to develop a counter-rally in response to the agitators (Fórsa, 2024). The Queer Library Alliance (QLA), a group of LGBTQ+ library staff and allies, was also founded in efforts to tackle censorship in libraries and to demand protections for queer library staff, patrons and LGBTQ+ literature (Queer Library Alliance, n.d.). The QLA was formed as a direct response to disruptions in public libraries around Ireland and gave concerned staff a venue to discuss their experiences of agitation and their experiences of the responses of public libraries to the disruptions. Elsewhere, a guidance document was issued in August 2023 by the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) to county and city librarians, to assist library staff in dealing with protests and disruptive behaviour on library premises. The document contained advice regarding the installation of safety measures in libraries, as well as guidelines on how to respond to agitators, including suggested responses to use in different scenarios, such as being

filmed without consent or receiving an abusive phone call. It also included advice on dealing with aggressive people in general, as well as those under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Additionally, in late 2023, the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) issued a powerful statement which condemned the attacks on inclusive collections and services and reaffirmed its call for the upholding of intellectual freedom. Under the heading “*Libraries are for Everyone*” and coinciding with Library Ireland Week 2023, the statement emphasised the vital role of libraries in providing access to diverse information, fostering reading, literacy and understanding, and creating inclusive spaces for all members of society, and stressed that library staff should remain free to carry out their valuable work without fear of harassment or intimidation. The statement noted that,

“Recent attacks on inclusive library collections and services undermine the principles of intellectual freedom and threaten the very essence of what libraries represent. As a professional body, we stand firmly against any attempts to restrict or censor library collections or services and to intimidate library staff” (Library Association of Ireland, 2024, 15).

It is crucial to understand library experiences in Ireland in the wake of agitation around LGBTQ+ materials, since public libraries have now become central battlegrounds for social and political discourse, particularly regarding the visibility and representation of marginalised communities. Instances of disruption, as seen in the cancellation of events like Drag Story Time and the removal of LGBTQ+ materials, such as *Beyond Magenta*, reflect a growing challenge to public institutions’ roles in fostering inclusive spaces. These disruptions, while driven by a relatively small group of agitators, underscore the significant impact of far-right organising and digital misinformation. As demonstrated by incidents in libraries across Ireland, the targeting of LGBTQ+ materials, especially those aimed at youths, follows broader international patterns of resistance to LGBTQ+ visibility, linked to the rise of transphobia and homophobia. While varying stakeholders in the Irish public library sector have responded to disruption and agitation, the voices and experiences of librarians have not been at the core of this dialogue. Research into these experiences can reveal how libraries navigate their mission to provide diverse, inclusive materials and information in the face of increasing resistance. It can also help illuminate strategies for protecting both staff and patrons while maintaining their commitment to intellectual freedom and public service. Understanding these dynamics is essential for ensuring that libraries remain safe, inclusive spaces for all, particularly for marginalised communities, such as LGBTQ+ youth.

1.2 Project Purpose

Irish public libraries and their staff face significant challenges due to increasing agitation and disruption regarding materials aimed at the LGBTQ+ community. This project seeks to explore the impact of these reactionary responses on libraries, librarians, and the communities they serve. By examining how these disruptive events directly and indirectly affect the operations and environments of public libraries, we aim to bring attention to the experiences of librarians and enable their voices to be heard.

Our collaboration represents a timely and necessary partnership between UCD, LGBT Ireland, and public libraries throughout Ireland. The research aims to leverage this partnership to provide a community-led voice against the growing threats of agitation in public libraries. The urgency of this collaboration is underscored by troubling statistics. In addition to the background contexts provided in this report, recent research has shown that 76% of LGBTQ+ students report feeling unsafe in schools (BelongTo, 2022), alongside a notable rise in physical and online harassment against LGBTQ+ individuals. In addition, the 2024 Being LGBTQI report from Trinity College Dublin and BelongTo reported that 23% of the LGBTQ+ community experienced anti-LGBTQI+ hate speech either online or in public media within the last year and that this was most prevalent among the youngest age group and trans and gender non-conforming participants. Furthermore, 59% witnessed anti-LGBTQI+ hate speech either online or in public media within the last year (TCD and BelongTo, 2024). The LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020 highlighted the need for future governments to ‘create safe environments’ for LGBTQ+ youth, ensuring equitable access to resources and institutions.

1.3 Research Questions and Aims

With the aim of exploring the experiences of public librarians, the research team developed a central research question: ***How do public libraries in Ireland navigate disruption and agitation in relation to LGBTQ+ materials, and what impact does this have on library staff?***

A number of sub-questions facilitated more detailed exploration of the experiences of public library staff in relation to the disruption and agitation:

1. How do public libraries in Ireland select, develop, and maintain inclusive collections and programming for the LGBTQ+ community, particularly for youths?
2. What are the experiences of library staff in managing and responding to public complaints, agitation or disruption concerning LGBTQ+ materials and programming?
3. How do library staff perceive the impact of disruption and agitation regarding LGBTQ+ materials on their workplace safety, professional responsibilities, and broader library community?
4. How do library staff feel about the disruption and agitation and how has this affected them personally?

1.4 Research Project Team and Partners

The research was undertaken by a team at the School of Information and Communication Studies at University College Dublin (UCD). Four of the team members are qualified librarians holding MLIS degrees, who have professional experience of working in a range of library settings. Two of these team members also hold PhD degrees in Library and Information Studies. A further two team members have established expertise in social media and the activities of far-right social actors. LGBT Ireland was the formal community partner for the project, with Pádraig Rice the lead collaborator from the partner organisation.

A Steering Committee was established at the beginning of the project to provide strategic oversight and guidance throughout the project's development and implementation. This committee was composed of key stakeholders and experts who brought diverse perspectives and expertise relevant to the project's goals. Members collaborated to ensure that the project's objectives aligned with community needs, institutional priorities, and best practices within public libraries and LGBTQ+ advocacy. Additionally, the Steering Committee facilitated communication and collaboration among participating organisations, fostering a network of support and resource sharing. By leveraging the collective knowledge and experience of its members, the committee aimed to enhance the project's impact. The members of the Steering Committee included:

- County Councillor
- Rita Wild, Lesbian Activist
- Niamh McDonald, Hope and Courage Collective
- Public Librarian in a Library Branch
- Kathleen Moran, JCSP Demonstration Library Project
- Richy Carrothers, Fórsa

All relevant library stakeholder groups within the Republic of Ireland were approached to join the Steering Committee.

1.5 Research Funder

The research was funded by the Irish Research Council (now Research Ireland) under the New Foundations award scheme, as part of the 2023 call. This report aligns with the IRC's New Foundations Strategy and objective in supporting 'research actions, the development of networks and consortia and capacity building for interdisciplinary collaboration.'

1.6 Report Outline

- Section 2 of the report consists of a brief literature review to provide context for the research and to situate the project within the current discourse around libraries and LGBTQ+ representation, social media's role in the spread of ideological campaigns, and public librarians' experiences of work-related trauma.
- Section 3 describes the methodological approach taken in the project.
- Section 4 presents the findings that emerged from the interviews with library staff working in public libraries in Ireland and their experiences of agitation and disruption.
- Section 5 consists of a broader discussion and analysis of the project's findings.
- Section 6 provides the key recommendations arising from the project.

2 | Review of Literature

2.1. Public libraries and LGBTQ+ inclusion and representation

In the National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027, *The Library is the Place: Information, Recreation, Inspiration*, the Department of Rural and Community Development (in conjunction with the City and County Management Association and the Local Government Management Agency) stipulates that the mission of public libraries is “[t]o enrich the lives of people and communities in Ireland by providing universal access to information and resources to promote reading and enjoyment, lifelong learning, life skills, education and cultural engagement” (p. 24). This statement reflects much of the literature surrounding public libraries and their role as a vital source of information for not only the LGBTQ+ community, but also for other minority groups.

The provision of LGBTQ+ specific materials and services can greatly affect the perception of the library as a space of inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community (Curry, 2005; Chapman, 2013; Drabinski, 2013; Bittner, Ingrey & Stamper, 2016; Hicks & Kerrigan, 2020). In particular, Drabinski suggests that, instead of revising the classification of LGBTQ+ materials in the library's catalogue, the library might task a member of staff to act as a liaison with members of the LGBTQ+ community to educate them on how best to search for material pertinent to themselves and their lived experience (Drabinski, 2013). McAuliffe (2021) suggests that, in practice, this may prove difficult given the contemporary logistics of librarianship; however, they also stipulate that “[i]f librarians do not engage with critical practice – consequently upholding traditional power structures – they are putting their patrons and library peers, especially those who identify with minority groups, at risk of feeling othered, excluded, and ultimately, unwelcome in traditional library spaces” (p. 215). Downey, Antell & Strothmann (2013) warn of the trappings of self-censorship in relation to LGBTQ+ materials, using the United States as their example. The self-censorship they describe can take many forms including the following: not knowing where to access LGBTQ+ materials; fear of the backlash facing the library for their provision of LGBTQ+ materials; or, belief that the community would not benefit from the inclusion of LGBTQ+ materials as a result of low circulation of materials and lack of awareness of their LGBTQ+ patron base.

CILIP: The Library and Information Association provides information for libraries and librarians regarding best practices in relation to the LGBTQ+ community, from building inclusive collections to making the library an inclusive workplace, and ensuring that LGBTQ+ staff are supported in the workplace (CILIP, n.d.). Given their role as the representative body for libraries in the United Kingdom, this further galvanises the idea of inclusion and representation for the LGBTQ+ community, and their ability to see a place for themselves in the library. Other studies highlight the ways in which librarians and library staff can positively or negatively impact their patrons, including the LGBTQ+ community, in their interactions through the ways they interact with the library's patrons (Stewart & Hamer, 1995; Curry, 2005; Vincent, 2015). These studies show how interactions within the library – whether direct exchanges between

staff and patrons or librarians' attitudes, such as reluctance in providing services – can shape patrons' perceptions of the library. They offer valuable insights into best practices for preventing personal biases and preconceptions from affecting patron experiences. Ambivalence towards the LGBTQ+ community, or the sense that their LGBTQ+ identity is a private or personal matter that does not belong in a library (Vincent, 2015) can also greatly affect desire to make use of the library and its services.

2.2 The Role of Social Media in Amplifying Ideological Campaigns and Intimidation Tactics in Public Libraries

The targeting of LGBTQ+ materials in public libraries has been platformed largely by social media. Although specific literature on the intersection of far-right agitation, social media, and the targeting of LGBTQ+ materials is still limited, research has shown that social media amplifies ideological campaigns and facilitates intimidation tactics used by far-right agitators. Previous research on social media, misinformation, and hate speech has identified three key social media attributes that feed into the creation and circulation of toxic content: (i) the ability of social media content to spread quickly and become viral (Jenkins et al., 2013); (ii) social media architectures that incentivise influencers to act as ideological entrepreneurs, enabling them to make a living by promoting political ideas (Finlayson, 2021); and (iii) content moderation regimes that prioritise the unhindered circulation of information, rather than the safety and wellbeing of users (Siapera and Viejo-Otero, 2021). In particular, social media revolves around interactions between users, all of whom are connected in loose networks. For Jenkins et al. (2013), the importance of social media lies in their connective attributes that enable users to participate actively through creating and sharing contents. Viral contents build on these attributes and scale up, based on factors, such as emotional resonance and fit with broader cultural narratives. Because social media platforms rely on user content, they promote and encourage users to create and share content. Finlayson (2021: 69), studying YouTube, argues that this has drastically changed the public sphere, affecting who “*can set up stall there, what they can say, who they say it to, how they say it and why*”. This has led to the emergence of “*ideological entrepreneurs*” who speak to a variety of political positions. If successful, these political influencers can earn their living through revenues generated by their presence on platforms.

Political support in this context takes the form of fandom, and depends on identification with the values and general morality and ethos that the ideological entrepreneur personifies. Ideological entrepreneurs of the far right are able to mobilise values connected to the heterosexual family and traditional ideas of gender roles, cultivating an ethos of moral conservatism and cultural purity that resonates with ideals of stability, tradition, and hierarchy within society (Dunne and Siapera, 2023). Finally, the content moderation systems of very large platforms often contribute to propping up such contents, because their focus is on removing only the ‘top tier’ of illegal contents while leaving other varieties of toxic contents untouched. The key values of most platforms centre on ideas of free expression and voice for communities, which makes them unresponsive to demands to remove contents unless they are illegal or clearly violate their community guidelines (Siapera and Viejo Otero, 2021). Additionally, because of their interpretation of the right to freedom of expression, they rarely

remove accounts or channels, preferring to remove individual pieces of content unless they repeatedly violate their terms of service. This allows ideological entrepreneurs to make adaptations, often through the use of metonymies and other rhetorical devices (Siapera, Moreo, and Zhu, 2018) without ever being ‘deplatformed’.

In this manner, social media enables and facilitates ideological entrepreneurs or political influencers of the far right to build and sustain a campaign of intimidation against libraries and LGBTQ+ informational materials. They develop hybrid campaigns, often filming themselves going to libraries, and spreading them online using very large platforms, including both Facebook and YouTube. The platforms enable them to reach many users with messages that ostensibly aim to protect the family and children, but which directly affect and limit the rights of LGBTQ+ people to access information that caters to their needs. Moreover, the videos, which follow a ‘citizen journalist’ style of live and unediting recording/witnessing (see Allan, 2013), remain online long after the protest events, acquiring an afterlife that reaches more and more users. Despite requests to remove them, platforms keep such content and videos posted as long as they do not violate their community standards, notwithstanding the harm they are causing.

2.3 Public Librarians and Trauma

Turning to the broader landscape of librarians’ experiences of trauma, recent research points to an increasingly endemic problem, in terms of the extent to which frontline library staff in particular are expected to handle or de-escalate aggressive, intimidating and stressful encounters as part of their roles, often without targeted training or adequate structural support (Dudek, Comito and Zabriskie, 2022). The issue of “mission creep” in public libraries, whereby staff are expected to perform services outside the traditional scope of librarianship, has been highlighted in recent years and is vividly accentuated by reports of public librarians in the US having to administer Narcan (an opioid overdose reversal medication) to patrons who overdose on or near the library premises (Ettarh, 2018). Incidents involving homeless patrons, or those dealing with mental health or substance abuse issues also require public librarians to often assume social support roles for which they are not trained (Kendrick, 2020). This contributes to a wider picture of a challenging work environment that is in conflict with “*the commonly held idea of the public library as an idyllic workplace that is quiet and free from distractions that hinder relaxing days of reading to one’s content*” (Kendrick, 2020, 3). In fact, in some cases, the opposite appears to be true: “*many times the things that make librarianship great - open spaces and our social infrastructure support - are also the same things that leave library workers vulnerable*” (Dudek, Comito and Zabriskie, 2022, 4).

Some examples of recent research underscore this growing insight into the nature of public library work. For example, the *Trauma in the Library Project* is an ongoing study, which purports to investigate the prevalence and extent of traumatic incidents and PTSD in library staff in the United States. This extensive project encompassed a nationwide online survey of 1000+ participants across all library sectors, as well as in-depth interviews with 67 librarians, to explore their experiences of trauma in their work. The findings to date paint a clear picture of rising stress and trauma in library work, with 80% of the trauma incidents reported in the online survey occurring within the past five years. While the causes of this trauma are

multifaceted, and include intra-staff conflicts as well as issues relating to library patrons, incidents associated with censorship challenges were notably highlighted in the findings:

“While Covid19 was a major source of staff trauma at the outset of this study and still remains; the increase in censorship and book bans is an increasing source of library trauma that library staff (especially public and school) are not widely prepared to contend with that is having ongoing major effects, from harassment to leaving the workplace” (Trauma in the Library, n.d.).

The study also found that the most frequently reported types of traumas were verbal abuse and physical assault, and that the resulting health problems most often reported by library staff were anxiety and depression. Additionally, the librarians expressed concerns about a perceived lack of managerial and institutional support, and feeling unprepared to deal with the aggressive and sometimes violent incidents arising in the course of a working day. An unspoken assumption that frontline library staff will automatically handle these incidents in their roles emerged strongly as a major stressor: *“Library staff are unacknowledged for their roles as vital frontline workers and libraries are not provided with financial support and mechanisms to support this role”* (Trauma in the Library, n.d.).

A smaller study into low morale among Canadian public library staff by Kendrick (2020) found that participants reported incidents of verbal abuse, including *“lying, public shaming, microaggressions, castigation, scorning, ephemeral or unfounded complaining, disinforming, or snitching”* as well as physical abuse, involving *“hitting, punching, shoving/pushing, charging, throwing items, and formal or crude weapons usage”* (pp.9-10). Another US-based project, the *Urban Libraries Trauma Study*, which used a survey, focus groups, and a national forum to explore public librarians’ experiences of trauma, found that *“traumatic experiences happened frequently for many respondents, and that many of the incidents involved verbal abuse, physical assault or abuse, or harassing or inappropriate behavior”* (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022, 13). Once again, a lack of adequate managerial support, and a sense of individual powerlessness in the face of these incidents was a strong emergent theme in this study. The librarians spoke of their desire *“to feel the validation of having their experience heard”* (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022, 22) and to have their trauma acknowledged by those in a position to do something about it.

While this short review offers a mere snapshot of the emergent research landscape concerning the key issues at the centre of this research project, it provides important context for the interpretation of our findings within the current discourse.

3 | Methodological Approach

3.1. Introduction

The research team chose a qualitative research approach for the project, and employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection. Qualitative methods were selected to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' personal and professional experiences, offering rich, detailed insights into how public responses to LGBTQ+ materials impact library staff, the overall work environment, and the public library sector as a whole. The semi-structured interview format provided a flexible framework, allowing participants to share their experiences openly, while enabling the interviewers to probe specific areas of interest relevant to the study's objectives. This approach is particularly suited for complex topics where nuanced, individualised responses are essential for understanding varied perspectives across different library roles and their responses to disruption and agitation. Semi-structured interviews are useful for exploring detailed perspectives and allow for long and complex responses, which generate very rich data (Bertrand & Hughes, 2018, 98).

Semi-structured interview schedules were developed and employed for three sets of participants: library staff working in non-managerial positions; library staff working in managerial positions; and library stakeholders. Interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom video conferencing, offering flexibility and convenience for participants to select a time and date that suited them, which also helped increase participation rates. Each interview was recorded with participant consent, ensuring accuracy in capturing the full depth of their responses. All interview participants received the schedule of questions in advance, giving them time to reflect on the topics to be addressed in the oral interview. Following each session, transcripts were generated by the video conference software and corrected, a process that preserved the authenticity of participants' voices and allowed for a detailed analysis. Transcription also enabled an initial examination of recurring themes and nuanced patterns in responses. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was anonymised during transcription, and transcripts were stored securely in accordance with university's data protection protocols. This rigorous approach to recording and transcribing the interviews contributed to the reliability and validity of the findings, laying a strong foundation for the subsequent coding and analysis stages.

Given the sensitive nature of this research and the potential vulnerabilities of participants, ethical approval was obtained to ensure the highest standards of participant protection and ethical research practices. The study received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at University College Dublin, under Research Ethics Number:

HS-LR-23-178-Kerrigan. This approval process included a thorough review of the study's design, recruitment strategies, and data handling procedures, with particular attention given to confidentiality, informed consent, and the well-being of participants. These ethical safeguards were essential to protect participants from potential risks associated with discussing experiences of public responses to LGBTQ+ materials in public libraries, ensuring their comfort and security throughout their involvement in the research.

3.2. Data Analysis

The initial coding process involved a collaborative effort among five team members, who worked together to analyse the codes and identify key themes relevant to the research objectives. This collaboration allowed for diverse perspectives and expertise to inform the analysis, enhancing the depth and rigour of the findings. To facilitate this process, three detailed codebooks were developed for the three interview cohorts, outlining the definitions and criteria for each code. These codebooks served as a reference tool, guiding the team in their thematic analysis and helping to ensure consistency in the application of codes. Each team member individually coded 5-6 transcripts, using the relevant codebook. To enhance the rigour of theme generation in this way, inter-coder reliability was employed, in which the five coders blindly re-coded a subset of the transcripts (approximately 20%), then compared them with the original coding, to ensure consistency and minimise subjective bias in the coding process. High agreement between coders in all cases demonstrated consistency of approach.

This process involved initial meetings to establish a shared understanding of general findings and themes that emerged in the interviews and reading the transcripts. Each coder independently reviewed the data, and the results were compared to assess agreement on code applications. Where discrepancies arose, the coders discussed and refined code definitions, ultimately reaching a consensus on the themes. This practice helped to validate the reliability of the coding process and strengthened the credibility of the identified themes. By ensuring a level of inter-coder reliability, the study produced robust themes that accurately represent the central findings on library staff experiences and public responses to LGBTQ+ materials.

As the analysis progressed, broader top-level themes were identified, synthesising the initial codes and highlighting the central findings of the research. This structured approach not only clarified the data but also enabled a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by library staff in relation to LGBTQ+ materials.

3.3. Participants

The research included a diverse group of public librarians across various regions in Ireland, ensuring a comprehensive representation of perspectives within the field. Participant recruitment primarily took place via the personal and professional library networks of the research team, as well as assistance from members of the Steering Committee. Project details were disseminated through varying means via Ireland's public library network and prospective participants contacted the research team to express their interest in taking part in the project.

Participants were given an anonymised identifier once an interview time had been set up and they had confirmed their participation. The participants were categorised as managerial or non-managerial library staff, to reflect the differing levels of responsibility involved, and to facilitate a deeper understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by librarians at both levels, particularly in terms of direct contact with members of the public. The project team referred to FÓRSA's scales for local government (Fórsa, 2024) to determine how the library staff grades corresponded with the extent to which their work incorporated managerial or non-managerial duties. Non-managerial staff are typically Grade 3 or Grade 4 whereas managerial staff are typically Grade 5 and above. The project team confirmed this understanding of the respective grades and how they corresponded with managerial and non-managerial roles with the Steering Committee, as well as with each participant at the start of their interview. The participants had varying years of experience, with some serving for over a decade while others were relatively new to the profession, ranging from 2 to over 10 years of service. Where deemed relevant to the analysis, we also identified the libraries as urban or rural, although this classification was not a principal focus of this project. This diversity in roles, experience, and geographical location allowed for rich, varied insights into how agitation and disruption surrounding LGBTQ+ materials affect public libraries and their staff.

It was necessary to keep the participant details general in this context to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of individuals involved in the study. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, which addresses public responses to LGBTQ+ materials, maintaining participant privacy was paramount. By avoiding specific identifying information, the project aimed to create a safe space for librarians to share their experiences candidly without fear of repercussions or backlash from their communities or institutions. This approach not only upholds ethical research standards but also encourages a more honest and open dialogue. Overall, this generality ensures that the focus remains on the collective experiences and insights of the librarian community rather than on individual participants and specific libraries. Additionally, the interview quotations presented in the findings section do not include identifiers or participant tags. Although the material has been de-identified and anonymized during transcription, this extra layer of security further protects participants, ensuring that specific quotations cannot be traced back to any individual.

In total, 26 interviews were carried out with public library staff across the Republic of Ireland. Seven of these were with non-managerial staff, while the remaining 19 were with staff in managerial roles. The sample in this instance is skewed more towards the managerial. Managerial staff may have had more flexibility in their schedules or felt a greater responsibility to participate in the research, making them more accessible for interviews. In addition, given their oversight roles, managers may feel responsible for addressing or mitigating the challenges related to far-right agitation or other disruptive phenomena in libraries. This sense of responsibility may drive a stronger interest among managerial staff to participate in studies addressing such issues. Non-managerial staff might face more scheduling constraints, making it harder for them to participate. In some instances, non-managerial staff disclosed to the research team that they were not permitted by their line manager to participate and in other instances, they simply could not schedule the time to do so. In these cases, there was an element of organisational gatekeeping, where managers had say on whether their staff could participate and in this instance, many managers could have participated in their place.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant*	Location	Years	Role
LIB1	Urban branch	2-5	Non-managerial
LIB2	Urban branch	2-5	Non-managerial
LIB4	Rural branch	2-5	Non-managerial
LIB5	Urban headquarters	2-5	Non-managerial
LIB7	Rural branch	5-10	Non-managerial
LIB8	Rural branch	10+	Non-managerial
LIB9	Rural branch	2-5	Non-managerial
LM1	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM2	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM3	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM4	Urban headquarters	5-10	Managerial
LM5	Urban headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM6	Rural headquarters	2-5	Managerial
LM7	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM8	Rural branch	2-5	Managerial
LM9	Rural branch	2-5	Managerial
LM11	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM12	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM13	Urban headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM14	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM16	Urban headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM18	Urban headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM20	Rural branch	5-10	Managerial
LM21	Rural headquarters	10+	Managerial
LM22	Rural branch	5-10	Managerial
LM23	Rural branch	10+	Managerial

*Participant codes missing from this table, where numbers appear to skip, refer to interviews that were scheduled, but which ultimately did not take place.

Figure 1 below provides a detailed breakdown of the frequency with which participants interacted with the public as part of their daily responsibilities. This table was essential for establishing a baseline of typical public engagement levels among library staff, allowing for insights into the regularity of public-facing duties and any potential correlation with exposure to disruptive incidents.

Figure 2, on the other hand, focuses specifically on the frequency of disruptions caused by agitators within the library setting. By examining this data, we can better understand the extent to which agitator presence impacts library staff and operations.

Fig.1 . Frequency with which participants engage with the public in their day-to-day job

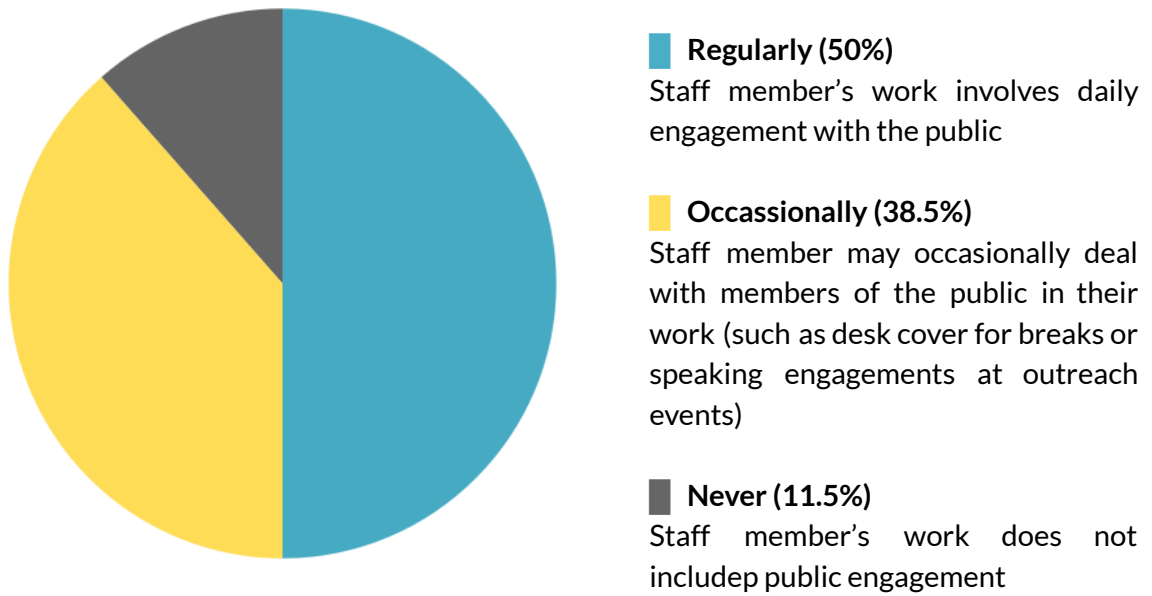
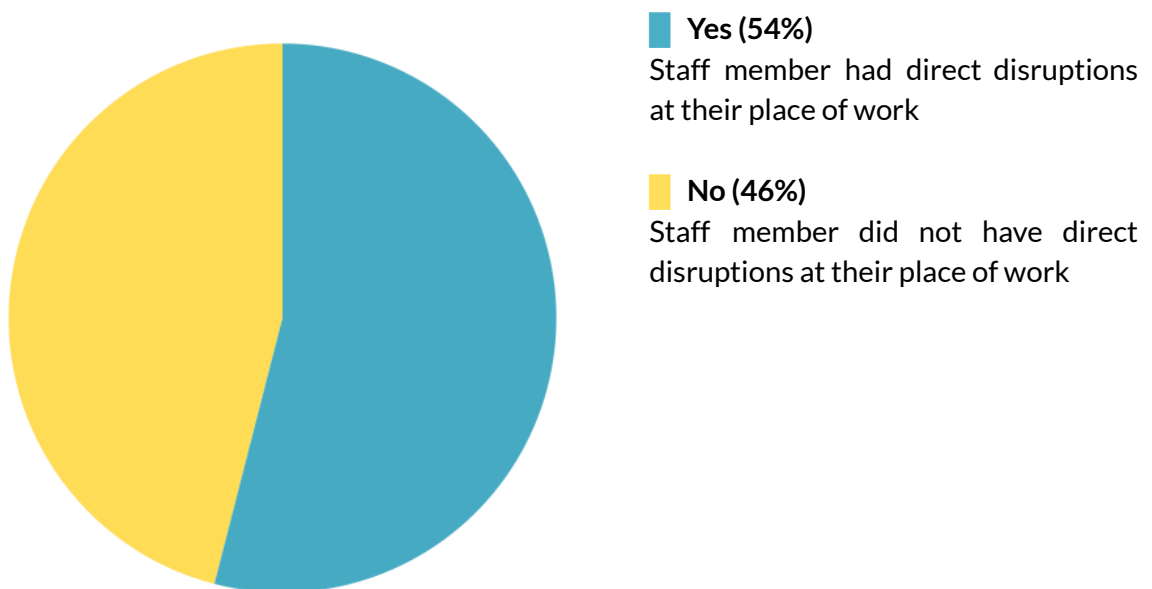


Fig. 2 . Frequency through which participants experienced disruption from agitators in public libraries



4 | Findings

4.1. Collection and Programme Development

4.1.2. Collections and Programming in Public Libraries for the LGBTQ+ Community

Public libraries in Ireland reported that they offer collections and programming that is inclusive of their communities, including the LGBTQ+ community. Through a variety of approaches, public librarians explained how they aim to create safe spaces that incorporate LGBTQ+ diversity. As one librarian observed, inclusivity is the primary goal of the public library:

“Everybody would be welcome. We do have a selection of books specific[ally] themed around that topic, but we would have it themed around every other topic. I suppose we just try to make our space as welcoming as possible for everybody ... I don't feel we specifically try to make it more welcoming for one group or another, but for everybody.”

Collections and programmes were often developed in conjunction with the LGBTQ+ community. Libraries played a central role in broad community activities to support LGBTQ+ visibility and advocacy, bringing together multiple stakeholders, such as the local City Council, the Rainbow City Network, and GOSHH (Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health, HIV), to meet community needs through collections. Libraries also signalled their support of the LGBTQ+ community and their commitment to libraries as safe and welcoming spaces, by flying the rainbow flag and offering Pride Week book displays.

Libraries located in rural areas reported more limited outreach to LGBTQ+ communities. While collection development supported provision of specific LGBTQ+ content, collections aimed at the LGBTQ+ could remain a challenge. As one librarian explained,

“Traditionally, we haven't [provided services to the LGBTQ+ community], because it's... a lot of the branches are very rural. They're in small towns. There wouldn't be... Like Pride. Parades have only started really happening in [location X] in recent years. It's not been kind of something happening for a long period of time.”

One library manager outlined a specific two-pronged approach to supporting communities, such as LGBTQ+ groups:

“Really, I suppose, our support of any minority community in the sense that we will try to have, you know, reading material that is appropriate for them, and that they are involved in the selection of [collection materials], and also then we would have, like, events for them, you know, programs for them, events for them, and some kind of informal, you know, social support, like social prescribing [an] element to what

we do in terms of support for them, and reaching out for isolated kind of minorities, too.”

4.1.3. Collections for the LGBTQ+ Community

Collection Content

Public libraries described how they prioritised diverse collections, though they may not explicitly prioritise the LGBTQ+ community. Collection content included LGBTQ+-themed books aimed at different age groups, and a range of topics covering issues relevant to this community. Fiction and nonfiction materials for the LGBTQ+ community were most often found as physical books, though additional formats, such as audio books, DVDs, and e-books, were sometimes reported as available in public libraries. As one librarian observed of the rationale behind collecting physical books, *“We just have the book format, and I suppose it's what probably would be [sic] borrowed more frequently.”* Librarians also referred to tools, such as the Borrow Box service, as supporting access to particular formats of materials for the LGBTQ+ community.

Collection Development

Many libraries reported a top-down approach to collection development, in which the library's county headquarters identified and purchased the majority of library materials, as much as eighty to ninety per cent of titles gathered at a library's headquarters for branches. The Healthy Ireland collection, which includes items about health and well-being, followed this acquisitions approach and offered a range of materials, including LGBTQ+ items for library customers in every Irish public library. Other structured approaches to developing collections included the Words Will Change Words project, which resulted in the placement of LGBTQ+ fiction and nonfiction books across a library's branches. Librarians often described a top-down collection development process as providing high quality, inclusive content; however, they also often noted that they did not understand the processes following in centralised decision making for collections.

Librarians often reported supplementing centralised collection selection with their own acquisitions to support their communities, including the LGBTQ+ community. To do this, they followed their collection policies to be as inclusive as possible, representing their community broadly. As one librarian described:

“In all of our collections, be it for children, or be it for adults, we'd be trying to be as inclusive as possible. And that's part of the collection development policy. And then how we buy into [Location X] is each branch buys, each branch has their own budget, and they buy according to the needs, either so that'll be things like looking at best sellers, looking at ... maintaining a wide - diverse range of content for everybody, and also then what requests come in from the general public.”

Librarians reported several means of gathering potential titles for the LGBTQ+ community. For example, some librarians acted as champions of this area of their collection, identifying and proposing items for purchase. Some staff also noted that they are encouraged to propose titles

for the LGBTQ+ community for their library's collection. Librarians further reported that they purchased titles suggested by members of their communities.

At branch level, librarians noted a need to balance budgets while still collecting diverse materials for their communities. This meant that small budgets might be used to support collection development that satisfied demand. As one librarian explained:

"If people were asking me or if, like, teenagers were asking me for books, or like magazines or manga, and things like that, that [would] usually inform my book purchasing. But I have for my 3 libraries, I have about 5,000 [euro] a year to spend on books. So my budget is tiny. So I would be very targeted in what I'd buy, and generally it would only be things that I know people are going to borrow."

Collection Policies

Librarians frequently referred to collection policies, as well as a code of conduct to guide library customers' behaviour in the library. The process of creating and implementing collection development policies, which normally underpin selection and management of content in libraries, varied among library systems. Librarians sometimes described challenges around identifying and accessing clear collection development policies, because of book selection by library headquarters.

Those who undertook identification and purchase of items for their branch collection themselves reported that they proactively purchased new titles, e.g., new queer titles, subscription streaming services, and items that specifically reflected LGBTQ+ topics, to ensure that collections reflected the diverse needs of the LGBTQ+ community. Alongside developing their collections, libraries collaborated with queer authors during Pride month, as well as throughout the year.

Librarians further advocated classification of collections that facilitated access to materials by library visitors. The placement of LGBTQ+ titles in the collection by age did not always provide an ideal classification and collection challenges negatively affected the placement of materials. For example, one library manager described what happened in their library:

"I felt that the library was caving to intimidation. So what I mean by that is that whereas before all of these books were just on the floor within their correct category. So some of them were sort of 12 year old books, some of them 14 year old... You know. They were all taken off, and the age range was raised, and also it was made very obvious, or it became a big thing that we needed to make sure that parents consented to policing their children's literature and what they were taking up."

Librarians linked collection policy with inclusive and diverse collections. For example, one library manager noted that they instructed staff to ensure the collection holds a range of fiction and non-fiction books for the LGBTQ+ community, as well as to promote these materials via the library website, especially during events, like Pride Week. Another library manager shared that their library had established an internal working group to promote equality,

diversity, and inclusion (EDI). This group gathered staff feedback to guide services and ensured the needs of all minority groups were considered in decision-making.

4.1.4 Programmes for the LGBTQ+ Community

Public libraries reported offering a range of programmes centred around the LGBTQ+ community, with some libraries offering programming throughout the year while others held programmes occasionally. While some libraries actively rolled out programmes, others expressed a desire to engage further with the LGBTQ+ community through events. Programmes were often aligned with calendar events in the wider community, such as Pride Month, and involved collaboration with community organisations which delivered programmes in libraries.

Examples of programmes included LGBTQ+ book and film clubs and reading groups, drag story times, workshops and events, talks featuring LGBTQ+ authors and themes, coffee mornings, and youth drop-in sessions. Programmes and activities themed around LGBTQ+ topics, such as badge-making, name-that-tune events, and LGBTQ+ themed Bingo, were open to the public and were positioned to foster inclusivity, safe spaces, and community engagement in libraries. Librarians reported supporting Pride events in their areas; for example, one library hosted meetings for the first-ever Pride event in their community.

Not all programming resulted in public engagement. Some librarians observed that their attempts to create programmes that promote inclusivity and community engagement, such as LGBTQ+ visibility days and LGBTQ+ History Month, did not have strong community participation. In addition, libraries were sometimes hesitant about community reception of events, such as drag story times, given recent challenges and protests. Librarians noted that risk assessments proved essential to assess potential issues around events.

4.2. Dealing with Complaints

Librarians reported a strong sense of the differentiation between complaints made by members of the public and regular library users (those who frequented and made use of library services regularly), who abided by the complaints process laid out by libraries and local authorities, from the actions and complaints of agitators in relation to materials and programming aimed at the LGBTQ+ community. Members of the public and regular library users were recognized as acting within their rights to voice concerns and file complaints by either informally reporting issues to staff or using the formal complaints process. In contrast, agitators disregarded these procedures, choosing instead to protest and disrupt, which left staff feeling unsafe and vulnerable.

Library staff reported three types of complainant:

1. **The member of the public or the regular library user:** This is someone who makes a complaint in line with the library's code of conduct and customer charter directly to the library desk or via email.

2. **The agitator:** This is someone who circumvents the library's code of conduct and customer charter by foregoing the complaints process and organises an agitation/disruption to library operations where they confront library staff.
3. **Witnesses to the agitations/disruptions on social media platforms who then visited the library to confirm for themselves what they had witnessed online:** Complaints made by these complainants often reflected the misinformation spread by agitators online through social media, where the complainant entered the library and specifically sought out the disputed materials before confronting library staff about the material's inclusion in the library.

Many library staff mentioned that they were accustomed to dealing with complaints, however infrequent, from concerned regular library users. Complaints of this nature included the user's disagreement with the library's promotion of programmes and collections in and around Pride month in June, as well as concerns around the content of LGBTQ+ materials. Staff reported that many of these complaints aligned with the user's discomfort around the provision of sexual information in general, not simply in relation to LGBTQ+ materials - it was reported that some of these complaints coincided with recent changes to Relationship and Sexual Education curriculum in schools. As an example of this, one participant detailed how a library user they were familiar with who had previously voiced their complaints about the provision of materials containing sexual information in the Young Adult section, approached them to advise them that they disagreed with the LGBTQ+ materials being provided in a book they had found in the library and would be bringing the book home with them and not returning it:

"The incident that I came across was a regular person. They're not a protester by any means. They're just a normal parent. They come into the library every week with their child. They came in purposely and went straight for that section and they went straight for the Young Adult, and they picked up a certain book and they say to me "do you think that this is appropriate?" and I approached them because I was at the desk at the time, I went around and I approached them. I actually know them, and I spoke to them. I said, "Hi, how are you?". We chatted and because we're familiar with each other, there was no confrontation as such. It was more of a chat. They picked up the book and they said "This is not coming back".

Other participants spoke about their experiences in relation to the promotion of collections and programming of LGBTQ+ events, and how they had received complaints by members of the public in relation to these:

"People would come in off the street and just say, "it's a shame...". You know, "shame on me' for having a rainbow pride flag up, and that we shouldn't be pushing this on people..."

The actions of agitators are further outlined in the section below. After in-person disruptions and agitations in libraries, staff reported that complaints often followed - many of which appeared to have been prompted by the social media coverage of the agitations themselves. It was reported that complaints made after agitations (such as over the phone, by email or through social media comments) were disproportionately higher to the numbers of agitators

present in physical agitations, giving staff the sense that complaints being made after an agitation were as part of a targeted campaign driven by social media outrage. These complaints were often formulaic and worded very similarly. The complaints often cited Article 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child 1989 (The Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2024) as well as the Children First Act 2015 (Office of the Attorney General, n.d.), deliberately misinterpreting these and their purposes by deeming material that libraries were providing for the LGBTQ+ community, especially young adults, as the provision of pornography to minors.

In line with this, staff identified that it appeared as if some complainants voiced their complaints directly as a result of social media coverage of agitations - having been radicalised to agree with far-right agitators in particular social media spaces. The actions of these complainants were often seen as much less intense than those of the agitators present for disruptions, in many cases, the complainant visited the library to confirm what they had witnessed online (such as seeking out the materials being challenged by agitators or repeating the language used by agitators at librarians):

"They weren't aggressive in any way. They told me about the different laws that we were breaking and having pornography in the library, and I knew by what they were saying, cause they had a sheet in front of them, it was very prompted. They were reading what they were telling me about. Also I didn't recognise them from being in the library previously, and because we're in such a rural area, you would have a fair idea of your kind of local people and local parents that would come in with issues".

Public libraries in the Republic of Ireland operate under the remit of the County Councils and Local Authorities, which means that they observe the complaints processes of local governments. Although this varies depending on the local government (timeframes in particular can vary drastically), the complaints process usually follows a number of steps that include discussing the concern at the point of service, as noted by one participant:

"What we do generally is... It's the same as we have generally done in the branch, but we'd always refer people queries up to the Branch Manager, and like, at the end of the day we have the right to purchase whatever we want to purchase for our libraries. I suppose what we just do is, if they feel very strongly, some people will just send an email or will informally talk to a member of staff, and they'll be referred to the Branch Manager. Or, if they have.. If they want to put in an official complaint, It's an official form through the County Council, the same as a complaint for the traffic wardens, or the parking, or whatever it is. We just keep keeping our procedures the same".

Staff reported that when they initially started to work in libraries, they received training in relation to dealing with complaints and recognised that this training was insufficient to deal with agitations. This training often included guidance in de-escalating conflict and making staff aware of the complaints procedures in place within the library. Staff also explained that their on-the-ground experience in the workforce was more applicable and relied upon in addressing complaints:

“The training has just been like, you know, “okay, if you want to make a formal complaint, they would fill out your form”, and then that would be sent to senior management in HQ and then, in terms of [X]. We have been given brief training on if they arrived as well”.

Staff identified specific training they had received beyond this, such as Aggressive Customer Training, and were divided on the relevance of this training in relation to the extreme actions of agitators. Whereas some staff believed that specific training beyond the Aggressive Customer Training was necessary, others believed that the Aggressive Customer Training was sufficient (particularly if their library was situated in an urban centres):

“It's a disruptive person, at the end of the day, or a disruptive group of people. I suppose our concern is always the public as well as the staff themselves and the public. Then, if there are families, and if there are young children present, and this all kicks off in the branch managing that, really. But it was, just again, techniques like managing difficult people. And you know no different in some ways than people coming in drunk or on drugs, or something like that. So we would have had that type of training.”

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that libraries' responses to agitations varied from county to county, particularly in relation to training and guidance staff received in relation to dealing with agitators. In some counties, libraries specifically sought out external training for their staff to prepare them to deal with agitators, whereas staff in other libraries felt that the response from management was lacking and that the guidance they were given to address complaints from agitators was insufficient:

“So, we haven't really received any training. We were given a guidance statement quite recently. I'd say a year and a half ago could have been maybe a little after. It was when it was... When the kind of the filming in the libraries were taking place, and you know there was people going in, and we were given a statement after... sorry, guidance after that, of what to do in an instance. But again it was... It was basically if people were coming in filming and being disruptive, there was no specifics about if it was against LGBT materials or anything like that”.

In light of agitations and disruptions, some libraries developed stock responses and issued these to staff to address complaints in relation to contested materials when it became apparent that complaints, agitations and disruptions were specifically targeting specific materials:

“Now, at this stage, we have a kind of form response, because the complaints tend to be of a similar nature, and 99% of them are about [X]'s books. So, the response that we always give again as we would if any book was challenged is, “it's part of a representative collection”.

4.3. Managing Agitators: Librarians' Approaches and Reactions

4.3.1 Preparing for Resistance

In the wake of the agitation and disruption, many of the public libraries reacted by focusing on the importance of being prepared for potential future agitations. As part of this, many managers worked to identify if and when the agitators might come again, and when programming LGBTQ+ events, they were particularly cognisant of staff who would be more conflict averse:

“One of the things that we discussed when we were going through this was the scenarios. Something we did when we had the drag story time on was to know who would rather not be on the floor... so being conscious that someone else might not be able to deal as well with the confrontation as others, and just to be prepared for that and ensure that it doesn't escalate further. A staff member [not knowing] what to do in the scenario makes it worse. I will give my managers credit for that, they did look at how good people are at dealing with a scenario like that.”

This non-managerial staff member emphasised that not everyone in the library was equally equipped to handle these tense situations, and recognising individual capacities is key to preventing further escalation. By assessing the strengths of staff and ensuring those less comfortable with confrontation are shielded from direct involvement, libraries can manage potentially disruptive situations more effectively. This also reveals the proactive measures taken by library management, as they acknowledge the need for tailored responses based on staff readiness. Preparing for various scenarios—by designating staff who can confidently manage confrontations—prevents confusion and mitigates the risk of escalation. This highlights how scenario planning emerged in libraries as a response to agitation.

Much of the agitation led to managers wanting to role play potential scenarios of agitation, with the aim of building up the confidence of staff in relation to the more extreme scenarios that could emerge:

“My direct staff that I supervise, that's what I kind of said to them. Sit down with the staff. Talk about what you'll do. Who's going to do what? Who are you going to call...I would actually do a role play because you don't know what's going to come through the door”.

In efforts to prepare for potential disruptions, many public libraries reported that both managerial and non-managerial staff began actively monitoring far-right agitators online. This involved tracking online activity to gauge the likelihood of future visits from agitators. In some cases, librarians also monitored social media to anticipate possible incidents, proactively alerting other library branches when a visit seemed imminent. These preparations for resistance were sometimes informal, with librarians doing this in their own spare time and tracking. In other instances, this had been formalised into designated task-based activities as part of a librarian's formal working arrangements. In one instance, a library manager noted that they discovered that the agitators were using the social media and instant messaging service Telegram to organise:

“I had never downloaded Telegram until the protesters were using Telegram to organise themselves. And I was like, “I need to be on Telegram because I need to know where they’re going tomorrow”.

While preparing for resistance in this was a significant trend across the data, it was not without its challenges. The tracking of social media and sharing of videos to other library branches was considered a potentially inflammatory issue, as one library manager described:

“I’m just sending on these videos... [X] might come up to us. And I said [X] maybe you want to share them on...She said, “oh, we’re not going to share them on...That’s only fear mongering and scaremongering people by sharing them. I was like, I don’t believe that. I believe if you watch the videos, you can see they do the same thing when they go to every library. The same spiel, the same words and I felt that if staff watched it, they would know, “well this is what they’re going to say to me”. They’re not going to be surprised if they get called a paedophile.”

The practice of preparing for resistance through online monitoring, while beneficial in building situational awareness, presented significant challenges and internal disagreements between library staff. This insight suggests that while there were valid concerns about escalating fear among staff, there was equally a need for practical preparation to help individuals handle these confrontations with less distress. By familiarising staff with common intimidation tactics, library managers hoped to equip staff to respond calmly and professionally, recognizing the agitators’ strategies as rehearsed performances. However, the opposing view—seeing video-sharing as an act that could heighten anxiety rather than reduce it—highlights a crucial tension in workplace support strategies: the balance between preparedness and unnecessary alarm.

This difference in perspective underscores the complexity of developing a standardised approach to support staff in resisting far-right agitation. It points to a larger conversation within public libraries about how best to foster resilience and provide resources that align with individual comfort levels and needs. Developing a shared protocol for response training, while offering options that allow staff to opt-in based on their comfort with exposure to sensitive content, might present a viable solution. Ultimately, the debate over preparedness versus fear-mongering illustrates the importance of creating an adaptable, supportive environment in which staff can both protect themselves and uphold the library’s commitment to inclusivity and resilience.

4.3.2. Safety Measures

Many of the managerial librarians who spoke with us noted that the development of safety plans, with the input of staff, was crucial. To that extent, the agitation resulted in many libraries installing panic buttons at the desk, which they can press if a situation escalates in a library. In accordance with this measure, further efforts to develop connections with local Gardaí in the community were deemed crucial, in terms of implementing this safety. In terms of more

complex cases, especially for managers with responsibility for both rural and urban libraries, solutions such as a buddy system had to be implemented:

“We have implemented a buddy system...Most of those smaller branches would have a local larger library, but not that close to them. Often they could be ten miles away. Anyways, we would have a contact person [X] for somebody to come in case the smaller library got a head up that [X] was on the way.”

In other instances, health and safety and risk assessments were recurring issues for both managerial and non-managerial staff, with many reporting that the agitation has made them far more conscious around ensuring that risk assessments take place and that more robust protocols are in place: *‘we’re much more health and safety aware and risk aware than we were’*.

Safety measures were also encouraged in libraries through instruction around how to interact with agitators if and when they came into a particular library. Many non-managerial participants noted that their manager informed them that the best approach to deal with the agitators is to ignore them:

“You need to be silent. You can’t engage with these people. They’re not going to listen to what you say and that’s really difficult. I think standing in silence while people are saying this to you is important.”

For staff members, the idea that *“standing in silence...is important”* suggests that the most effective response might be passive resistance, aimed at minimising confrontation and denying agitators the interaction they seek to record or misrepresent. However, this approach is not without its emotional toll. Being silent while facing harassment requires considerable restraint and emotional resilience, particularly when accusations are personal and inflammatory. Silence, in this context, can be a double-edged sword: while it may prevent escalation, it can also amplify feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and vulnerability among staff.

The importance of safety also emerged in terms of library workers wanting to protect patrons within their libraries:

‘I’m not leaving the people. If there’s children in the library, I’m not leaving them alone in the library.’

This experience underscores the protective stance that many library workers felt obligated to take, prioritising patron well-being even amidst challenging and potentially dangerous encounters. This perspective reflects a profound commitment to the role of libraries as safe and welcoming spaces, where the presence of children or vulnerable patrons necessitates an extra level of vigilance. This protective stance goes beyond the typical responsibilities of library staff however. For many library workers, this commitment is rooted in a sense of duty to ensure that patrons, especially minors, are shielded from disruptive and potentially distressing situations. The decision to stay with patrons, however, introduces practical challenges related to staff safety and situational management. The unwavering commitment to patrons’ safety sometimes places staff in difficult positions where they must balance their own well-being with the responsibility they feel toward library users. This dynamic highlights a need for clear

policies and support mechanisms that empower staff to protect patrons while minimising risks to their own safety. Furthermore, ensuring that all staff members are equipped with conflict de-escalation training and have access to a supportive management structure can help navigate the delicate balance of protecting patrons without exposing themselves to additional harm.

4.3.3. Mitigating Agitation and Disruption or a Chilling Effect?

In some instances, agitation and disruption to LGBTQ+ materials resulted in libraries making decisions to reduce risks to both their patrons and their staff. In one instance, a manager noted that an event that was originally scheduled to take place in a library face-to-face was moved online out of interest for the safety of the guest speaker but also to ensure that patrons who were attending the event were safe:

“We eventually decided we would put it, make it a Zoom. We wouldn't pull it, but we'd make it a Zoom for safety...That worked well. They weren't happy, you know. The agitators just were not happy. It was our only choice at the time was to do a Zoom”.

This mitigation was often often prompted by managers becoming targets of abuse by agitators online. In one instance, a manager noted: *‘I had to go off Twitter/X altogether because I got a barrage of insults and [my family] was targeted as well’*. Often, librarians mitigated this disruption and agitation by removing themselves from platforms, to avoid being targets of abuse, but also, to avoid seeing content produced by agitators.

In some instances, having LGBTQ+ related programming and events was considered as far too much of a risk. As one participant noted

A lot of my colleagues were happy for the Pride event to go ahead. But [more senior staff] were not happy that the event was going ahead. They said you should never plan [an event like this]. I think they were being overly cautious with all the protests. They didn't want to unnecessarily attract any negative publicity.

A number of participants noted that when wanting to plan an LGBTQ+ related event, they were advised by senior staff and senior management in their library branches that removing reference to sexual and gender diversity would be advisable so as to not attract any protests. This cautious approach by senior staff and management, while intended to mitigate risk, is suggestive of an emerging *chilling effect* that impacts the library's commitment to inclusivity and diversity. The reluctance to support LGBTQ+ programming reflects a larger tension: on one hand, there's a responsibility to ensure the safety of staff, patrons, and the overall library environment, especially in light of aggressive protests and disruptive events. On the other hand, this avoidance strategy runs the risk of compromising the library's role as a space for diverse, open access to information and community representation.

4.4. Actions of Agitators

The actions of agitators tend to be of three main types: the first is organised disruption in the form of groups coming into the library filming, disrupting the library work-flow, and being abusive to staff; the second type, associated with the first, is abuse and agitation via social media and other means of communication; the third takes the form of individual complaints on specific books or activities aimed at the LGBTQ+ community. These actions are aggressive, often threatening, using slurs and offensive language, as well as making false accusations.

4.4.1. Organised and Coordinated Agitation and Disruption

In particular, the most aggressive type of agitation involves organised groups of individuals entering libraries in a coordinated manner to intimidate staff or disrupt events. Examples here include groups of people aggressively confronting staff, recording them, and making threatening accusations during pride displays or events. Occasionally, smaller confrontations would escalate to larger, organised protests, leading to library closures.

“Then we did a few pride story times and we had [X] and his crew set up on the library, filming everybody. We did a couple more pride story times later that summer, and then kind of people were just kind of coming off the street and be shouting abuse at the people trying to at staff trying to do the right story times, and also at the parents for bringing their children to events like this as well. So yeah we have people coming in to complain about pride, displays, and pride, story times, and just our general collections as well. It was quite intimidating to be honest, and you know, because they would come in in groups, and you kind of they'd immediately kind of come up and just be kind of in your face, and they'd be recording, and they'd be coming in very aggressively. And you know they would be accusing library staff of being paedophiles [...].”

“shortly after that little [X] got involved, and we started getting in-person ambushes, visits. So there was several of those at. Then there was going to be a protest outside on [X]...So a lot of protests and things would go on outside. It's generally not a problem. There had been a Garda liaison at this point, and they felt there was actually severe potential for violence on that day. So the decision was made that the library would have a power cut about half 10 in the morning and closed down. That was a very, very strange day.”

These testimonies from librarians highlight the escalating use of aggressive tactics by far-right agitators within library spaces, particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ events, displays, and general collections. One of the most disruptive forms of this agitation involves coordinated group actions, where agitators enter libraries with the intent to intimidate staff, disrupt events, and discourage patrons. This approach goes beyond isolated confrontations, involving organised, often intimidating tactics like recording library staff, making public accusations, and sometimes leading to larger-scale protests.

In one of the instances described above, coordinated groups entered the library during Pride-themed story-time, recording staff and patrons while confronting them aggressively.

One participant shared that agitators “*would come in groups...immediately...in your face...recording...coming in very aggressively,*” highlighting the overtly hostile environment created by these agitators. The verbal abuse was directed not only at staff but also at parents who attended with their children, amplifying the discomfort and fear among both library personnel and patrons. This organised group presence and direct, confrontational style represented a clear departure from typical, isolated complaints, revealing an intent to create a hostile atmosphere through aggressive physical and social media tactics.

These incidents also demonstrate how isolated acts of harassment have the potential to escalate into larger, coordinated demonstrations. Initially, small groups entered libraries to verbally confront staff, but some instances quickly transformed into full protests that extended beyond the library walls. For instance, one participant described the progression of events in which smaller “ambush” visits led to a scheduled protest outside the library. Due to the high risk of violence identified by law enforcement on that particular day, library administrators made the decision to close the facility and even implement a planned power cut to limit activity within the library. This decision underscores the extreme measures sometimes required to protect staff and patrons, and it reflects the severity of intimidation tactics employed by organised agitators in public library spaces.

4.4.2. Digital and Physical Harassment

In addition to physical disruptions, agitators increasingly leveraged social media, phone calls, emails, and letters to harass library staff and escalate their campaigns against LGBTQ+ materials in library collections. This approach extended the reach of their intimidation beyond the library walls, creating a constant, pervasive presence that targeted staff both in and out of the physical library space. The nature of this harassment highlights a multifaceted strategy that blends digital and physical forms of intimidation, aimed at pressuring libraries to limit or eliminate LGBTQ+ content.

In one particularly illustrative example, a staff member describes a significant shift in 2023 when “*there was kind of a sea change.*” Social media became a key platform for agitators, who amplified their visibility by targeting specific staff members and library content, including LGBTQ+ titles. When an image promoting LGBTQ+ titles, including a book by Juno Dawson, was shared, it triggered “*an influx of spam ranting on that, and trolling.*” This incident escalated as well-known agitators shared and amplified the content, directing attention to specific staff members, including the city librarian, by name. The quote captures the aggressive personalization of the attacks, as the city librarian became the focus of sustained and targeted online harassment, described as “*quite nasty,*” underscoring the psychological impact of being singled out for facilitating inclusive library programming.

Further emphasising the severity of this harassment, a staff member recounted an incident in which a young caller contacted the children’s department to question the availability of certain books and secretly recorded the conversation. The recording was then posted online, introducing a new layer of vulnerability for staff members who now have to consider the possibility of unauthorised recordings in daily interactions. This tactic of “concealed recording” reflects a deliberate strategy by agitators to manufacture material that could be used to

further stigmatise library staff and to control the narrative on social media, often to portray staff in a negative or inflammatory light.

The hostility extends beyond digital interactions, as the following quote reveals the disturbing intensity of the language and accusations faced by librarians: *“They were furious, but like I stayed on the phone with that lady for ages...just bizarre conversation, and, yeah, straight out calling me a paedophile, calling me a groomer.”* This quote underscores how harassment from agitators crossed professional boundaries and became personally accusatory, using the inflammatory language of paedophilia and grooming—terms designed to evoke fear and societal outrage. This type of harassment not only seeks to intimidate but also to publicly shame librarians, casting them as threats to children in the community. Such accusations are deeply troubling, as they aim to destabilise the professional and personal lives of library staff.

The aggressors also leveraged traditional forms of communication, including written letters to local councils, to formalise their complaints against LGBTQ+ displays and flags. One librarian noted, *“Letters sent into [L] County Council to complain about even a book display an LGBTQ+ book display being there letters to complain about the flag being on display.”* This formalised approach, which invokes council-level complaints, illustrates the agitators’ attempt to politicise library materials and gain institutional traction for their objections. These letters frame the presence of LGBTQ+ materials as a violation of community standards, placing additional administrative pressure on library staff who must respond to these complaints and justifying the library’s collection choices to local government bodies.

One of the more extreme cases involved agitators submitting pseudo-legal complaints and even reporting library staff to the police. A participant shared that *“we’ve received, you know, those kind of pseudo-legal letters, that they send in, you know, like you know, you’re in breach of the Childs [sic] First act by having this book in one of our libraries.”* These pseudo-legal documents present a new kind of challenge: while legally unfounded, they create a veneer of legitimacy and threaten to bring the library’s practices under formal scrutiny. In one incident, a group of agitators *“came in and asked about the books, took the books, and went to the police station to report the staff for having the books in the library.”* This action—taking LGBTQ+ books to the police station—suggests a deliberate attempt to criminalise inclusive library practices, directly challenging the professional authority of library staff and suggesting that simply holding such materials might be considered legally questionable. This approach of invoking law enforcement demonstrates the extent to which agitators are willing to go to censor LGBTQ+ materials, using both legal and social pressures to disrupt library operations.

Taken together, these examples highlight a comprehensive strategy by far-right agitators to control public discourse on LGBTQ+ issues within library spaces through coordinated, multi-channel harassment. This ongoing harassment places library staff in a difficult position, as they are forced to manage these hostile encounters while also fulfilling their professional duties to support diverse, inclusive collections. The constant threat of online and offline harassment not only disrupts the work environment but also challenges the library’s role as an accessible, safe space for all community members. These findings underscore the need for enhanced policies, resources, and support systems for library staff, who are increasingly on the front lines of ideological conflict within public institutions.

4.4.3. Targeted Focus on LGBTQ+ Specific Programme and Materials

Alongside physical intimidation, agitators escalated their efforts by demanding the removal of LGBTQ+ symbols, pride flags, and books associated with or seen as supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. This approach used false claims and inflammatory accusations to mischaracterize library resources and intimidate library staff into compliance.

“So these would be books that would be specifically about social issues. But none of them had any sexual content in them. None of them even mentioned LGBTQ people, but the she came in and just demanded, so that we remove the books, and when I said no, she asked for basically for the information, for someone she could complain to, and that information had been behind the desk, but it had gotten so quiet that it had been removed, and so I had to go and get someone to find it again. And as I was waiting she leaned in, looked at me very closely, and said, 'Yeah, I can tell you're the sort that likes to groom kids.’”

Here, a librarian recounts a disturbing interaction with an agitator who requested that books on social issues be removed, even though the books did not contain any references to LGBTQ+ themes or sexual content. The exchange escalated when the agitator resorted to a personal attack, suggesting the librarian was a “groomer.” This comment highlights the aggressive and baseless nature of such accusations, aimed more at intimidation and character defamation than at addressing genuine concerns about library content.

Pride displays, in particular, became a recurring target for harassment, with agitators attempting to shame and pressure staff for visibly supporting LGBTQ+ communities.

“Yeah, and we had a few kind of pride displays, and that's got...People would come in off the street and just say, it's a shame that you know. Shame on me for having a rainbow pride flag up, and we shouldn't be pushing this on people.”

In this case, agitators actively expressed disdain toward Pride displays, using shaming language to make staff feel that their support for LGBTQ+ representation was inappropriate or unwelcome. The aim of such comments appears to be to discourage librarians from public displays of inclusivity by fostering a sense of wrongdoing or impropriety.

Misrepresentation of books as harmful or inappropriate also became a common tactic for agitators. In many cases, these accusations bore no resemblance to the actual content of the books, underscoring the lack of genuine understanding or interest in the materials themselves.

“But when I was given pride, story, time, I had them come in, and they accused me of teaching kids how to give oral sex and how to have anal sex. And you know, I mean, that's not what stories were about at all.”

“Just what they say about library staff. Every time there's [--] now I feel if there's a story-anything to do with the public libraries it's like the 3rd comment down. Oh, you know it. Libraries are giving out porn to children, you know.”

These quotes reveal how agitators mischaracterise library programs and materials in extreme and accusatory terms. In the first example, the agitator’s accusation about “*teaching kids how to give oral sex*” is a grossly inaccurate representation, aiming to generate outrage and discredit inclusive programming. Similarly, frequent false claims that libraries are “*giving out porn to children*” are used to portray library staff as morally suspect, deterring them from offering diverse materials or programs.

In many instances, these interactions were accompanied by explicit threats, hostility, and false accusations that sought to publicly shame or vilify librarians.

“They were threatening you if you don't remove this book, everybody's gonna see this video. No, you're a paedophile, know. You're a groomer, you're facilitating, grooming. You're facilitating paedophilia, and you're supplying pornography to children. And you know, even down to the wording the language. They used you know that these are teen or YA books.”

Here, the agitators’ approach combines threats with extreme language designed to portray librarians as a threat to children. By accusing staff of “*facilitating paedophilia*” and “*supplying pornography*,” the agitators invoke language that is calculated to invoke fear and moral outrage within the community. The use of recording as a threat further heightens this intimidation, indicating an intention to escalate these accusations in public forums.

Additionally, agitators would fabricate details in live-streamed or publicized confrontations, portraying situations to their followers in deceptive ways to further vilify library staff.

“And what's really funny is [X] was live streaming. [X] You know, for [X] followers, who couldn't see what was going on. [X] was totally, like, fabricating it.”

This instance highlights the deliberate manipulation of facts by agitators for the purpose of inflaming their audience. The agitator’s description of the library event—claiming that two drag performers were “*dressed like prostitutes*”—was a complete fabrication. Such falsehoods serve to mislead audiences and incite public backlash against the library, while reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Together, these examples illustrate how agitators strategically use a range of tactics—public shaming, personal attacks, threats, and blatant misinformation—to coerce libraries into restricting LGBTQ+ content. For library staff, the ongoing harassment creates a volatile and hostile environment, both physically and digitally, that challenges their commitment to inclusivity and places them at the centre of a contentious cultural debate. These findings underscore the critical need for supportive policies, robust mental health resources, and clear communication channels to safeguard library staff and enable them to fulfil their roles as stewards of diverse, welcoming public spaces.

Overall, agitators used physical presence as a form of intimidation, often accompanied by implicit or explicit threats. Protesters entered into libraries, filming, and demanding the removal of certain books or flags. There were incidents where cameras were concealed, with protesters secretly filmed or recorded staff during a confrontation. Agitators further used

media of communication, including social media posts, emails, phone calls and letters, to make demands and intimidate library staff, often using slurs and offensive language.

4.5. Insight into Librarians Experiences and Feelings

The interviews with librarians surfaced a complex range of emotions and feelings, driven by their direct and indirect experiences of disruption and agitation both in their own libraries, and across the Irish public library sector as a whole. The librarians spoke candidly about the effects of recent events on their mental wellbeing and sense of physical safety in the workplace, as well as the impact on their relationships with colleagues and managers. Additionally, the more subtle effect of the agitation on library operations, which manifests primarily as an encroaching nervousness around certain types of events and programmes in libraries, emerged strongly from the data, and is a notable finding. While the librarians' experiences of disruption varied widely, from being directly and sometimes aggressively targeted by agitators, to a more generalised awareness of disruption in the sector, no librarian reported being unaffected by it. Notably, the negative feelings expressed by the librarians were also somewhat countered by a positive sense of resilience and defiance, and a motivating effect to persist with their important work despite the agitators' efforts to undermine and destabilise it.

This section of the report delves into the positive and negative experiences and feelings reported by the librarians interviewed, to provide a clear and powerful insight into the personal impact of the disruption and agitation, through giving voice to the people who were, and still are, at the centre of it.

4.5.1 Effect on Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

The most striking theme that emerged from the interviews relates to the deep impact of the agitator's actions on the librarians' mental state and sense of wellbeing at work, despite the disruption being driven by *"such a small group of people, and the damage that they're able to cause."* Many of the librarians reported intense feelings of anger, frustration, stress, and trauma caused either by direct experience of disruption, or by the fear that it might happen to them at some point in the future, fuelled by social media posts, media reporting, and accounts heard from colleagues in other libraries. One librarian in a non-managerial role, for example, described the feeling of being directly accosted by an agitator in their workplace:

"It's such a confrontational situation, and like there is somebody looking you straight in the face and calling you a child abuser. It's just really difficult to deal with in a way that I didn't appreciate was going to be until I was in that situation...I would count myself as somebody who's quite resilient and quite able to deal with confrontation, but it was hard."

Another librarian, this time a manager dealing with phone calls, reported a similar experience of being personally targeted by agitators, and the debilitating effect it had on them:

*"I spent that whole day being called like a "groomer", and you know the usual s**t that people say and having to deal with people. And it was really, really full-on, heavy, rotten day."*

Several other librarians described similarly upsetting occurrences, sometimes taking place in the presence of children in the library, which intensified the librarians' feelings of distress: *"just, like, having kids in front of me ... I was fit to put my fist through a wall that day, like I just got so angry about the whole situation. I actually got, like, sick a couple of days afterwards."* Aside from the direct trauma of dealing with agitators, librarians also reported the lingering fear that they would return at a later date, which prolonged their anxiety beyond the actual incident: *"there's an element of intimidation and worry. Like, that was the thing for about three or four days afterwards it was: was that person gonna come back?"* Some librarians also referred to a pervasive sense of tension in their libraries due to the disruptive events, which affected their physical wellbeing, *"you know, living with that much adrenaline in your system for a couple of months."* Another librarian emphasised the effect on their mental health of *"having to focus on that much negativity for so long"*.

Although not all librarians had directly experienced disruptive incidents, the stress of worrying whether their library might be next in line produced a heightened state of anxiety. For example, one librarian described how this sense of worry spilled over into their personal time:

"I was very stressed at those few weeks where it was very intense. And we saw down in [location X] that they were in all the time. I'd say, most evenings I spent a lot of time scrolling on Telegram and Twitter and Facebook to see, you know, were they going to be coming in?"

The threat of violence, and fear of being singled out by the agitators, were significant factors, with many librarians referencing this in their interviews. One particular fear related to the agitators' common tactic of videoing the librarians and posting the footage online. This is vividly expressed by one librarian:

"there's a lot of things that, if I'm on a video on one of these channels they will pick apart me, and they'll call me a paedophile. They call me all these things, and that's not nice to hear like that's horrible to hear about yourself and especially like when they'll name you, like".

The underlying fear that accusations made by the agitators on video would somehow be believed by the public also surfaced in some comments by librarians, who worried about reputational damage, even if clearly malicious, i.e., the belief that there's "no smoke without fire".

It was clear also that a perception that the agitators are volatile and unpredictable in their actions has amplified librarians' fear of a physical attack, especially for one-person libraries or those with only a few staff, for example, in rural areas. Social media footage posted by the agitators was mentioned as a driving factor in this context:

"I think if you watch social media as well and think our staff have watched it and seen how angry the agitators can get, that makes people frightened, you know. If you see them, they'll push people. They'll shove people. They'll push elderly people."

Another librarian described the effect on colleagues living in the same area as the library they worked in, who “were very wary of being outside even during the day” and were afraid of walking to their cars on dark evenings.

To conclude this section, one library manager articulately captured the unexpected, almost paradoxical, effect of these aggressive and sometimes violent incidents taking place in public libraries:

“You always felt kind of safe in a library, you know, like libraries are always neutral spaces, free for all... So, it's a big kind of a shock that, oh now, suddenly, libraries are being kind of targeted and picked out as the place to come and voice a lot of this, so it's a bit of an eye opener in that regard. And people might be a little bit more anxious, maybe, in their role as librarians.”

4.5.2 Effect on Relationships with Colleagues

A strong theme in the data focuses on how the disruption has affected both the librarians' relationships with their colleagues, as well as their perceptions of them in certain cases. While some of this is negative, it was notable that the actions of agitators appear to have had a predominantly unifying effect on the library staff involved, leading them to pull together to support each other, and deal with the incidents and threats. As well as emotional support, several librarians spoke about a kind of collective defiance and determination to overcome the challenges posed by the agitators. For example,

“as a whole, the attitude is, we're not going to be bullied ... and maybe I shouldn't be speaking across for the service for everybody, but certainly the staff I've been speaking to, kind of, it's made us more determined to not buckle and, you know to put the books on.”

Another library manager spoke about the refusal of their staff to remove Juno Dawson's “*This Book is Gay*” from the shelves when challenged by agitators, while another described their staff's unanimous decision to reject a suggestion from upper management that they should stop running events that could potentially be targeted: “Everyone was still totally eager. Everyone was on board. Everyone learned exactly what they had to do.”

The close support and empathy between colleagues were mentioned by several librarians, who described a strong culture of collegiality. According to one librarian,

“We have a great team here, and everyone looks out for each other... it's important that everyone feels part of the team, and that, you know? ... We're all in it together, and we're there to support each other.”

A strong sense of solidarity was mentioned by another librarian, and a “a real desire to look out for one another” although they felt that this was the norm in public libraries anyway. Several librarians mentioned instances of support between colleagues, both in their own libraries, and between staff in different branches – for example, warning nearby branches about the presence of agitators, or arriving in person to help a library currently being targeted.

On the negative side, the issue of division among staff was raised in some of the interviews. Chiefly, this referred to instances where colleagues in a library held different, sometimes opposing, opinions about the ideology underpinning the agitators' action, which created a difficult working environment. One non-managerial librarian spoke with some distress about the effect that this had had on their workplace:

“there were certain things that we couldn't really discuss [with] the staff members, because with each other, which otherwise we possibly would have... could have looked to each other for support, because there was differing views within the staff themselves, not necessarily supportive of the protesters, but certainly there was very much unease about the content and within, amongst other staff members there was support of the content.”

Comparing it to the differences in opinion about vaccination that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, the librarian went on to express their frustration that this type of staff division was one of the aims of the agitators: *“And that's the thing that these agitators want as well. That's why they want to divide. People think that's what they want. And they were, and it was working. Do you know it? Just it made me so annoyed. It really made me angry.”*

Another librarian commented similarly on opposing staff perspectives, but framed it differently, acknowledging that some library staff might feel that their own strong personal beliefs were being challenged:

“There's probably library staff that feel, you know, well, maybe they're right. Maybe these people are right. Maybe those particular books, I've had to look at them, and I don't think, there is some paragraphs in it now... I wouldn't give to my 12 year olds, or whatever.”

This librarian also captured the dilemma clearly felt by some librarians, who want to distinguish between the aggressive agitators and library patrons who feel discomfort with library materials and/or programmes, and wish to question them: *“I feel that there's some people with genuine kind of concerns in there, more moderate people ... There is a voice kind of this getting lost, in the whole thing has been shouted out by the louder, more extreme people that might have genuine kind of concern about it.”*

4.5.3 Effect on Perception of Managerial Support

The final theme in the section shifts towards the librarians' reactions to the approaches taken by both immediate line managers and senior or sectoral managers to deal with the disruption and agitation. While many librarians spoke about the excellent support they received from their line managers, both in situations where they were targeted by agitators and more generally in their work, a sense of disappointment and frustration with the upper management, sectoral or political response to the agitation emerged in some of the comments. Frequently, this was centred on a perception that the response had not been strong enough, or that they had somehow “given in” to the agitators and had failed to adequately defend the libraries. For example, one librarian spoke about what they felt was “token” support:

“It makes you a bit more disillusioned because I don't feel we got support and it was very token support, like, yeah, ... Leo Varadkar sent a letter to all library workers to be like, you're doing a great job. But at the same time, like when protests were happening, guards were like bringing them onto the premises. So, you know there weren't. It wasn't... So, I kind of felt like they were all making very empty promises or empty kind of like talking points. But they actually weren't really doing anything about it.”

Another librarian observed how they felt that the response from upper management had been *“completely reactive. And also, I felt that the library was caving to intimidation.”* This sense of disappointment with the response to the agitators was echoed in comments made by other librarians, who referenced actions such as reclassifying books (e.g., from Young Adult to Adult), moving them to different sections in the library, changing the borrowing rights for Young Adults (now requiring parental permission for a YA library card), or choosing not to run events for the LGBTQ+ community for fear of attracting agitators. This chimes with the *chilling effect* referred to previously. For example, one librarian commented,

“It was very disheartening. Once they started moving the [books], like, I've met a lot of bullies and bullies don't... And these people are bullies... and they don't, no matter how reasonable you are, they're not going to be reasonable with you... I did find it personally very frustrating, because, as I said, I don't think placating bodies works.”

Referencing the change to borrowing rights for Young Adults, another librarian noted that *“it felt like we were taking a little bit of a step back and we were making it harder again for young adults to access what they needed”* while another commented, *“The thing that annoys me about all of this this whole debacle, it's how the [name of organisation] capitulated to the protesters and changed the borrowing rights for young adults.”*

A sense of nervousness and consequential reluctance to run LGBTQ+ events in some of the public libraries was mentioned by several librarians and is a notable subtheme. While the librarians who commented expressed frustration about this, there was also a degree of understanding about how this state of affairs has developed. For example:

“within different libraries we'd have different levels of comfort around events. To do with, you know, like some of our libraries, you know, would be very, you know, active and very strong, and be doing quite a lot around LGBTQI+ and Pride, and other libraries...maybe just there might be a nervousness there, like, you know? Why would we bring it on ourselves, you know?”

“I think it's only a small handful of people who are... And by bowing down and saying, Well, look, we're not going to do anything to aggravate them, is not the right approach, really. But maybe there is a fear among staff about having something that would aggravate them.”

One librarian from a rural library, who described the refusal of upper management to permit a Drag Story Time in one of the branch libraries, spoke about their frustration with this:

"It does upset me in the sense that, like I think we are... we are not serving a part of our community, and it's a conscious choice not to service, but they will like they are just... they won't acknowledge that they just are not providing any service."

The dilemma felt by some of the librarians in relation to this, is summarised by one librarian who referenced the recent moving of one particular book, due to the cover image which depicted two men kissing:

"So, you've got both people's own issues going on, whatever their own issues, prejudices. And then you've got the intimidation by the external thing thinking, Oh, that makes me right to take this off the shelf, because we don't want to be a target. And it just it...Just it's yeah, you know, that's, that it's working. What they're [the agitators] trying to do is working, basically."

While the interviews with librarians revealed some of the traumatic and debilitating effects of the disruption on their personal sense of wellbeing at work - which is still ongoing in some cases - it is also important to acknowledge the resilience and determination of many library staff, who are steadfast in their commitment to their work as public librarians. For example, one librarian spoke about the sense of responsibility they feel towards their library community and how it strengthened their resolve in the face of the disruption:

"All of our borrowers need to feel supported and feel welcome, and you know, if I didn't deal with it, or if somebody didn't deal with it, it would...You'd be sending out the wrong message, and we wanted to send out a message of welcome and support and belonging to all of our readers. So that was part of the reason why we make sure to defend our situation and stand up as best we could to anybody who was causing hassle, or you know, emailing and challenging us as such."

Another librarian described how the disruption *"has made us more aware of the need to be conscious of having events or programming to support people that sends out that message of warmth and welcome to people, you know, to everybody? Because I think that's what the public want."* Concern for their library customers permeated the responses of many of the librarians, who feel deeply about the library's mission and their role in it. Distress at the negative publicity for libraries that has resulted from the highly publicised incidents was also evident in some of the comments - for example, one librarian described their determination to counter this through promoting positive stories: *"So, I suppose in terms of me, I feel motivated to present the positives that we're doing in communities, the positive changes locally, the good connections. So, all of that representation and literature. You know, particularly for children."*

Ultimately, despite the serious challenges posed by the agitators to librarians, the clear message of professionalism and pride in library work that also emerged, serves as a hopeful counterpoint to the trauma and distress reported in the interviews:

"I love the library. I love working in the library. This hasn't put a dent in that at all. It was one of, literally one of the most difficult days of my life. Like it was [...] mental-health wise, dealing with this stress, but I'm glad that I was there, as if I was quite able to do it, that I was able. I was proud of myself, coming out of it, like, because I would support my colleagues quite a lot. It really did, what do you call it,

crystallised in me that this is definitely what I want to do for the rest of my life, like it's such an important service and can make a difference."

4.6. Impact of Agitators Social Media Use on Public Library Staff

The findings reveal that the use of social media by agitators in public libraries has had a significant impact on library staff, introducing a range of stress factors that extend beyond their typical professional responsibilities. Library staff consistently expressed a sense of vulnerability due to the pervasive and unpredictable nature of online exposure. Agitators often recorded staff members during tense interactions, leading to heightened fear that these videos or images might be posted on social media platforms, potentially reaching a wide audience and sparking public scrutiny. As one participant stated, *"Staff would be terrified that...they would end up being plastered all over social media,"* underscoring the apprehension about becoming unwilling figures in online discourse. Concerns over the potential for doxxing – the exposure of personal information, such as names and work locations – exacerbated these fears, with some staff members worried that such exposure could lead to harassment or further targeting.

This anxiety extended beyond the well-being of the staff to concerns for library patrons, particularly families. The public nature of these online posts, paired with the nature of agitator behaviour, influenced the perceptions of parents, some of whom became hesitant to bring their children to the library. A librarian noted, *"parents [were] a little bit nervous about bringing their kids in... any parents [seeing] that on social media is kind of thinking, 'Jesus... not so sure I want to be in the middle of all that.'" This added concern affected the staff's sense of the library as a safe and inclusive space for all, with some worrying that the agitators' actions and resulting social media content could undermine the library's reputation as a family-friendly environment.*

The findings also indicate a complex tension between online and offline interactions, particularly with patrons who were civil in person, but were critical or hostile online. This created challenges for staff, who were left to navigate the dual perceptions of these individuals and adjust their own approach to public service accordingly. One staff member articulated the dilemma, explaining:

"You have a really good conversation with [a patron]... and then you see them, you know, giving abuse or making complaints. You kind of start to think... How do I interact with that person moving forward?"

This dynamic left some staff in what they described as a *"liminal space,"* caught between their professional role and the personal knowledge that a particular patron had criticised, or disparaged them or the library online. This tension added an additional layer of emotional labour, as staff members struggled to maintain professionalism while feeling undermined by patrons who voiced opposing views online.

Staff members also noted generational differences in how they responded to social media criticism, which in some cases created internal rifts or variations in coping strategies. Younger staff often attempted to dismiss or compartmentalise online criticism, viewing it as *"not real life"* and focusing instead on in-person interactions. However, for older colleagues, the impact

was more profound and long-lasting. One staff member recounted the experience of an older colleague who, after encountering agitators recording her at work, found herself unexpectedly disturbed when her family used their phone to take photos at a social gathering. She recalled:

"[My colleague] just started getting really upset. She's like, 'Can you just put the phone away? I just... can't stand the sight of somebody doing that with a phone at the moment.'

This instance reflects how deeply these experiences impacted staff, with the effects lingering beyond the work environment and extending into personal lives and family interactions.

The emotional toll of this exposure to social media criticism also manifested in the form of empathy fatigue and collective stress. Staff described a sense of shared frustration and helplessness as they observed their colleagues, many of whom they described as "soft and gentle people," navigate an unfamiliar and often hostile social media environment. One participant noted the difficulty of watching colleagues go through the stress of public scrutiny and the feeling of wanting to protect one another from these challenges. This empathy-driven strain added to the emotional load, with some staff finding it hard to separate their own stress from the distress experienced by their coworkers.

Overall, these findings underscore the complex, layered impact of social media-driven agitation on public library staff. The emotional burden extends beyond immediate interactions, influencing staff perceptions of safety, professional boundaries, and personal identity.

5 | Discussion

The findings underscore a range of critical considerations for public libraries as they navigate the challenges posed by social media-driven agitation, community engagement, and staff safety. These considerations span library collection policies, library programming, staff training, workplace safety, communication dynamics, and the role of libraries as essential democratic spaces. This section discusses these key areas and suggests strategic directions to address emerging needs.

5.1. Strengthening Collection Policies and Community Collaboration to Support Inclusivity

5.1.1. Transparent Collection Policies as a Foundation for Inclusivity

Collection policies are central to fulfilling a library's mission of offering diverse, inclusive materials, yet they are also frequent sources of public scrutiny. For example, a lack of consistency across different public library authorities in terms of how books are assigned to age categories was referred to in several interviews as a point of conflict, especially when seized upon by complainants or agitators to make their arguments. Crafting clear, comprehensive policies around collection development is crucial, as these policies guide patrons in understanding how selections are made, who can access specific materials, and the principles underlying these choices. By openly communicating the library's commitment to inclusivity, librarians are better prepared to address inquiries or concerns from the public. Transparent policies also provide patrons with a structured framework that clarifies the rationale behind diverse, inclusive collections. This transparency helps reduce misunderstandings, as patrons can see the library's dedication to intellectual freedom and accessibility, reinforcing the value of diversity in library offerings. Equipping library staff with tools and resources to communicate these policies effectively is equally essential. When staff can confidently engage with patrons on collection policies, they not only bridge potential gaps in understanding but also strengthen the library's relationship with the community. This proactive approach helps build trust, showing that inclusivity is a deliberate, thoughtful part of the library's mission.

5.1.2. Engaging the LGBTQ+ Community in Programme Development

Public librarians and libraries must be commended as many of the participants in this project have developed very strong partnerships with local LGBTQ+ community groups. Active collaboration with the LGBTQ+ community in designing library programmes and services is an effective way to address and potentially prevent misunderstandings related to the library's priorities. Co-creating programmes with community input ensures that library events and initiatives resonate with local values and reflect the genuine needs of community members,

enhancing relevance and decreasing the likelihood of public pushback. This approach is especially vital for programmes focused on inclusivity, equity, and accessibility, as community insights can make these initiatives more culturally meaningful and impactful. Community involvement in programme development also promotes a sense of shared responsibility and ownership over library resources and spaces. By positioning the library as a partner in collaboration rather than as an isolated institution, this approach helps shift the library's image from a potential target of agitation to a community-centred space that genuinely values and incorporates diverse voices.

5.2. Appropriate Caution or a Chilling Effect?

The “overly cautious” stance that some senior staff within libraries and library management adopted suggests a shift toward self-censorship out of fear of backlash. This reluctance to endorse LGBTQ+ events or visibly inclusive programming may unintentionally endorse the agitators' goal of silencing representation of marginalised identities, creating a barrier to free expression in the library. In addition, removing references to sexual and gender diversity dilutes the meaningful representation of LGBTQ+ communities, sending a subtle message that these topics are controversial or unsafe to discuss openly. This hesitancy may discourage community members from engaging with or feeling included in their library, undercutting the library's mission to serve as an open and inclusive public resource. It must be noted that while there is a chilling effect, public libraries are trying and doing things to be as inclusive as possible with LGBTQ+ materials and for the most part.

However, the cautious response from senior staff is understandable when weighed against the real risks of harassment, aggression, and potential harm faced by both library staff and patrons, which have been vividly reported in this study. For management, the immediate need to prevent hostile interactions and ensure safety may be in conflict with the longer-term objective of fostering inclusivity, particularly when they are tasked with protecting staff from direct confrontation or targeted harassment.

This growing trend raises critical questions about the responsibilities of public libraries in maintaining a balance between ensuring safety and upholding their foundational principles. Without clear institutional support and protocols that allow staff to confidently host inclusive events, there is a risk that these avoidance strategies will become the norm, contributing to an institutional chilling effect where diverse programming is minimised or avoided altogether. To counteract this, libraries may need to adopt more proactive risk management strategies—such as bolstering staff support, providing security measures for events, or coordinating with local community organisations—to ensure both the safety and inclusivity that align with the library's mission.

5.3. The Need for Comprehensive Staff Training

In responding to recent instances of agitation and disruption within public libraries, it is essential to consider the diverse composition of library staff, including volunteers, casual and part-time workers, paraprofessionals, and those holding a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree. Each of these groups plays a crucial role in maintaining the daily

operations and overall mission of the library. However, the varying levels of professional preparation, experience, and responsibility across these roles reveal a significant gap in training, particularly in managing the unprecedented nature and intensity of disruptions that libraries now face, not only in terms of the recent agitations, but more broadly in recognition of the unsupported social roles that public librarians are often required to play in their work.

The urgency of implementing a comprehensive training programme that spans all staffing levels cannot be overstated. Unlike traditional challenges that libraries have encountered, the current wave of disruptions is characterised by a heightened form of social agitation that intensifies previous censorship tactics, making it more confrontational and systematic. Public libraries are now contending with highly organised and orchestrated campaigns designed to provoke responses, escalate tensions, and restrict access to materials based on ideological grounds. This evolving context necessitates a shift in training approaches from sporadic and reactionary measures to an ongoing, strategic programme accessible to all staff members. Equally, there is a strong argument for this type of training to begin even earlier, during librarians' professional education, which includes masters and diploma programmes.

5.3.1. Inclusivity Across All Staff Levels

Library staff range from highly trained MLIS professionals to volunteers and casual workers who may lack formal training in information science or public administration but nonetheless engage with the public daily. Each staff member, regardless of role, is a representative of the library and often the first point of contact for patrons. This range of roles creates unique challenges; for example, volunteers or casual workers might lack experience in de-escalating conflict or responding to ideologically motivated challenges to library resources. Training programmes should therefore be inclusive and adaptable, recognising the unique contributions of each role, while equipping all staff with the necessary skills to handle situations that may otherwise disrupt their work environment.

5.3.2. Strategic and Future-Focused Training

Training in public libraries should be designed not only to address current incidents, but to also prepare for an evolving landscape of social agitation that may affect library operations in new ways. Libraries should prioritise strategic training that can anticipate potential sources of disruption and equip staff to respond proactively. Such training might include understanding the motivations and tactics behind modern disruption, recognizing when agitation is part of an orchestrated effort, and learning effective communication and conflict-resolution skills that can de-escalate tensions while protecting patrons' rights to access information.

5.3.3. Continuous Learning and Accessibility

Given the dynamic nature of public libraries and the shifting social climate, training should not be a one-time effort but an ongoing, adaptive process that keeps pace with changing circumstances. Regular workshops, seminars, and online training modules can ensure that all staff, including new hires and part-time or temporary workers, stay current on best practices. Moreover, making training accessible in various formats—including virtual options—can ensure that all staff members, regardless of scheduling constraints, can participate. Continuous

learning also fosters resilience among staff, empowering them to handle future incidents with confidence and professionalism.

5.3.4. Beyond Immediate Needs: Building a Resilient and Prepared Workforce

The goal of such training is not merely to address isolated incidents of disruption but to build a workforce that is resilient, informed, and prepared to uphold the library's mission in the face of increasing societal pressures. A well-trained staff is crucial for maintaining the library as a safe, welcoming, and open space for all patrons, irrespective of the external forces that seek to challenge this purpose. By investing in long-term, inclusive training, libraries can support staff at all levels, enabling them to respond to disruptions in ways that reflect the library's values of access, inclusivity, and intellectual freedom.

In conclusion, equipping all levels of library staff with comprehensive, future-oriented training is essential to addressing the unique challenges posed by current and emerging forms of social agitation. Such an approach ensures that every staff member—from volunteers to MLIS-trained professionals—is empowered to contribute to a library environment that is resilient, adaptable, and steadfast in its commitment to serving the community.

5.4. Effective Communication Between Managerial and Non-Managerial Staff

Effective communication between managerial and non-managerial staff is vital to maintaining a cohesive work environment, especially during times of external pressure or public controversy. Ensuring that all staff members are on the same page about library policies, crisis management strategies, and community relations can help reduce stress and improve team cohesion. Regular, open communication channels between leadership and front-line staff can also help address any gaps in understanding and ensure that staff at all levels feel informed, supported, and involved in decision-making processes. Improved communication can empower non-managerial staff, giving them a voice in developing policies and responses that directly impact their daily work. For example, the Hope and Courage Collective, an initiative focused on supporting those targeted by online harassment and misinformation, could serve as an invaluable resource for libraries. This collective offers support, strategies, and community solidarity for individuals and organisations facing online hostility. By collaborating with the Hope and Courage Collective, libraries could benefit from specialised resources, such as best practices for online safety, emotional support for staff, and tactics for addressing misinformation. Incorporating these resources into library training and protocols can empower staff to navigate digital harassment more confidently and offer them a broader support network.

The findings suggest that front-line library staff often feel limited in their control over both in-person interactions and online representations in social media environments where they have no control. Collaborating with management to empower front-line staff in decision-making and response strategies could increase their resilience and job satisfaction. For instance, equipping staff with the authority to address specific patron concerns or to request intervention when necessary can help them feel more empowered in challenging

situations. Similarly, encouraging collaborative discussions around policy adaptations can ensure that staff perspectives are included, creating policies that are responsive to real-world interactions.

5.5. Libraries as “Democratic Good” and Our Library Staff as Critically Valued

Public libraries hold a unique and essential role as custodians of epistemic rights. Nieminen (2024) understands epistemic rights as the rights individuals and communities have to access, understand, and critically engage with information and knowledge. These rights encompass the ability to receive truthful, accurate information about issues that impact both public decision-making and personal well-being. As public institutions, public libraries are critical in ensuring equitable access to reliable information and resources across communities. In a landscape marked by information inequality, public libraries offer a vital space that is accessible to all, mitigating the disparities caused by digital divides and providing resources that are free from commercial or political influence. Libraries act as epistemic institutions, supporting citizens' rights to access, comprehend, and utilise information independently and truthfully, fostering democratic engagement and resilience against both lack of information and misinformation. By offering appropriate resources for lifelong learning and media literacy to people of all ages, libraries empower communities and individuals to navigate complex, often polarised, information environments, which is crucial for sustaining democratic equality and the broader public good. This is what is at stake here: the role of libraries as epistemic institutions and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community to have access to information and knowledge to support their personal well being and public participation.

In short, libraries have long been understood as a “democratic good,” committed to equitable access, intellectual freedom, and community service. This foundational role positions libraries uniquely in the face of social and political challenges. Reinforcing the library’s role as a space for diverse ideas, civil discourse, and community-building is critical for sustaining public trust and support. Communicating the democratic values underlying library policies and practices—such as inclusivity in collections, the right to information, and the importance of respectful engagement—can help reaffirm the library as a vital community asset, even amid social media-fueled conflict.

Our study has also highlighted the dedication and resilience of individual library staff, who are deeply committed to their jobs, to the core values of librarianship, and to each other as colleagues. Despite the clear emotional and mental toll taken by the ongoing campaign of disruption, many of the librarians resolutely stated their determination to promote and elevate the positive contributions of public libraries above the noise and negativity created by the small group of agitators. Some of them spoke of their refusal to bow to the disrupters, and their intention to continue to do the job they love to the fullest extent, even when faced with direct aggression and threats of confrontation. In many ways, this vast pool of professional dedication and goodwill is the greatest resource that public libraries have, in the face of these and any future challenges. Acknowledging, supporting and rewarding public library staff for their immense contribution is perhaps the most important action to be taken in this respect.

6 | Recommendations

6.1. Role of Public Libraries

1. The role of public libraries in communities needs greater recognition, so that the public understand the purpose and workings of the library. Transparency is essential. There should be transparency from upper level groups, including high level managers and government bodies, through to local managers and frontline staff regarding the ethos of the public library service. This begins with policies around collections, services, and codes of conduct.
2. The support of the Library Association of Ireland is essential for promoting higher principles that affect public libraries, specifically their commitment to access to information for everyone.
3. Governance of public libraries through government bodies should also support the needs of all public library staff at all levels. There should be a mechanism for public library staff at all levels to have a voice in outcomes for public libraries. The feedback of public library staff is essential for developing and delivering appropriate responses to situations that arise.

6.2. Collections and Community Engagement

4. Collection policies and codes of conduct should be publicly accessible to library staff and the library's community.
5. All library staff should have access to collection policies and codes of conduct, and should be further guided to understand the library's implementation of these policies and procedures. All staff should be trained to understand the workings of collection policies and codes of conduct, so that they may implement policies and procedures, or, at minimum, understand how and why policies created at upper levels have been created and how the process of collection selection at an upper level is cascaded to libraries.
6. Public libraries should continue to engage with the LGBTQ+ community in terms of collections and programme development. Partnering with LGBTQ+ organisations, local advocates, and community members can help libraries gain valuable insights into the specific needs and interests of LGBTQ+ patrons. This can lead to the development of relevant programs

6.3. Training

7. Training should be available to all staff in public libraries, spanning topics from collection development and management that is sensitive to the needs of libraries' communities to safety of all staff and members of the public when in the library. Training should further include collegial support, to provide support that builds cohesion, understanding, and appreciation among staff at all levels.
8. While some library schools on the island of Ireland provide collection development and management training, not all programmes do. We recommend that all library programmes provide training in this essential area so that there is greater understanding around how to put a collection together and deal with materials that might be sensitive. CPD in this area should also be offered to para-professionals and library assistants who do not have formal library training.
9. To strengthen support for front-line library staff dealing with challenging interactions, both in-person and online, libraries should consider partnering with initiatives like the Hope and Courage Collective. This collaboration could provide staff with resources on online safety, emotional support, and techniques to combat misinformation.
10. To foster a cohesive work environment, especially under external pressures, libraries should implement regular, structured communication channels between managerial and non-managerial staff. While many public libraries reported doing this, there were some communication gaps noted. These channels can focus on ensuring all team members are informed about library policies, crisis management strategies, and community relations practices. Improved communication will help bridge understanding gaps, empower non-managerial staff, and allow them a more active voice in developing policies that impact their daily roles.

6.4. Safety

11. Agitators and their views represent a minority. Social media platforms need to take a stronger position towards known agitators and their calls for aggression against libraries.
12. The public library should be a place of sanctuary for all. Procedures and a strategic vision should be created, which enable public libraries to seek external help and, importantly, to have confidence that help will arrive. This includes, for example, a commitment for Gardaí or other security presence when called upon.
13. Public libraries have prioritised the wellbeing of both staff and patrons and they should continue to be supported in doing so. This could be through implementing structured wellness initiatives and providing clear support plans for those affected by challenging interactions or distressing situations.

14. Develop and regularly update security protocols to ensure rapid, coordinated responses to potential threats. This includes staff training on incident reporting, procedures for handling disruptive individuals, and regular reviews of emergency preparedness plans in collaboration with local authorities.

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