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Abstract: How successful are controlled vocabularies at describing transgender topics? This work explores the use of hierarchical taxonomic structures to describe people's often-fluid gender and sexuality identities, particularly the lack of accurate and appropriate language in most commonly used subject thesauri, and how the lack of this accurate and appropriate language can affect potential users. Specifically, I am referring to individuals who identify as gender-nonconforming. This term, as defined by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, refers to “people who do not follow other people's ideas or stereotypes about how they should look or act based on the female or male sex they were assigned at birth.” The phrase is frequently used as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of gender identities, including transsexual, drag queen, genderqueer, and butch.

Many standard vocabularies, including the Library of Congress Subject Headings, have a long and thorny history with regards to prescriptive access points about marginalized groups and sexualities. This work offers a historical overview of the ways in which authorized vocabularies have differed from vernacular language commonly used by community members and LGBTQ scholars to describe their own lives, and explores well- and lesser-known subject vocabularies such as LCSH, MeSH, IHLIA's Homosaurus, and tags assigned by LGBTQ people when describing their personal collections.