ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	INFORMATION AVOIDANCE IN THE ARCHIVAL CONTEXT
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Information avoidance (IA) has been researched across several disciplines like psychology, economics, consumer health informatics, communications, and the information sciences, but the exploration of this phenomenon in archives is nearly non-existent. As information professionals, IA should be seen as a relevant concern to archivists as it may impact how people interact with archival materials, and more importantly how they may avoid certain materials, or the archives altogether. My study provides an extensive overview of IA in the archival context with a systematic literature review across disciplines and through qualitative interviews with 12 archivists across the United States of varying experience levels and from varying institution types. The aim is to explore how they think about IA in archives and how they may have experienced it in their work to answer the two research questions: 1) What abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives? 2) How do archivists experience IA in their daily work? Thematic analysis and synthesis grids were used to converge the transcripts into five key themes and findings about who is susceptible to IA, the contributing variables that impact

and are impacted by IA, how IA manifests, real life applications of IA, and specific archival practices and concepts that impact and are impacted by IA in the context of archival work and research. Interpretations of this data resulted in theoretical models and implications that draw on existing understandings, as well as new understandings of IA that impact the information lifecycle of archival records and how people interact with them. These contributions to the archival and IA literatures can be used as a roadmap that will allow archivists to approach their work with a more mindful, and hopefully empathetic, ethic of care in handling information, understanding the costs and benefits of those decisions and actions, and better serving their patrons.

INFORMATION AVOIDANCE IN THE ARCHIVAL CONTEXT

by

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Preface

As my study examines a phenomenon (information avoidance), I applied a phenomenological framework as a logic model and one of the steps to this framework is to "bracket out personal experiences" (Creswell & Baez, 2020). I am providing this statement as an acknowledgement to the fact that I have approached this study with my own abstract ideas and experiences with IA in the archival context, thus making it impossible for me to completely remove my previous knowledge and experience from this study.

I first learned about IA two years ago in my first semester of my graduate studies, only I did not realize that what I was reading for my class was about IA because the phrase was not used. In particular, we were reading user studies that addressed the information seeking behaviors of particular demographic groups. Although the studies I was reading were in the context of information seeking behavior, I was struck by the notion that some of the participants in those studies were not accessing some information due to a variety of factors, such as cultural differences or perceived irrelevance among others. The following semester, I decided to dive into IA and how it may impact the lifecycle of information with a broad literature review. I was surprised to find so much literature on IA, along with several similar terms and concepts, and the deep psychological research that existed.

At the same time, I was working in the University of Maryland College Park's Special Collections and University Archives in the instruction and outreach department, and two things started to stand out to me: 1) That a lot of the literature I was encountering, despite being about *information* avoidance, was not coming from the library, archives and museum (LAM) sphere despite being considered *information* professions, and; 2) That a lot of what I was reading from other disciplines could certainly have implications for the archives that I was working in.

In my approach to the interviews for this study, in the spirit of naturalistic inquiry, I did intentionally begin the interviews by providing only a broad definition of IA. Some of the interviewees did ask for additional information in which I would point out some common principles of IA that I knew existed from my review of the literature. I also tried to refrain from providing input based on my previous experiences during the conversations with the interviewees. Interviewees would sometimes falter on providing answers to some of the questions, in which case I would either move on to another question and let them revisit the unanswered question later if something came to mind. Although it was rare, there were times where the interviewee would ask for an example. I would attempt to avoid providing my own examples and would try to use examples provided by other interviewees instead to see if those ideas resonated.

After the interviews were completed and it was time to analyze everything, I continued to try to bracket out my previous experiences with IA by trying to identify themes that applied to the literature I had found rather than relying on my own examples. This also allowed me to bracket out my own feelings about whether I agreed with what the interviewees were saying or making judgments about whether the anecdotes and hypotheticals they provided were "good" or "bad." I felt that doing so may have been perceived by the interviewees as accusatory or conflicting, in which case their demeanor and candor could have changed. The use of qualitative data analysis software and synthesis grids (Miles et al., 2020) also helped to compare transcripts against one another to identify common findings, rather than comparing them to my own experiences. I was also careful to not take an ethical stance on IA in looking at instances of IA which may have been applied in a useful and positive way vs a limited and negative way. For example, employing IA for the sake of protecting culturally sensitive information or for the sake

of self-preservation may be the "right" thing to do in some cases, but in other cases could set the stage for detrimental interpretations or skewed narratives of some histories.

Ultimately, my assumptions that most archivists do not know about IA in a clinical sense, and my own experiences leading me to believe that IA is important and relevant to archives, led to my interest in exploring this topic. This provided an interest in this topic rooted in a social constructivist approach to knowledge sharing and building in which my previous experiences are recalled and scaffolded upon to make new meaning for myself and others (Broussard et al., 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Despite the masking of my personal experiences, the social interaction through the interviews allowed for the interviewees to learn in the moment by recalling their own experiences compared to the new information I provided to them. It is my hope that my constructivist philosophy and subsequent study and findings regarding IA in the archival context will also help other archivists realize how important this topic is in relation to their daily work.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, extended family and closest friends in honor of their unwavering pride and support throughout my graduate studies and beyond: My own personal cheering section. The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without you.

Love you, mean it!

Acknowledgements

I have already dedicated this thesis to my own personal cheering section, but I would be remiss to exclude the faculty and staff at the University of Maryland College Park who inspired and nurtured me through the development and completion of this study.

To Dr. Renee Hill, whose class introduced me to my first user studies, Dr. Jordan Sly who encouraged me to explore information avoidance and pointed me in the right direction, and Dr. Sarah McGrew who allowed me to further explore concepts of information broadly in the context of misinformation and archives: It was you all who inspired me to pursue this topic and the thesis track. Thank you.

To Mr. Neil Dhingra, my academic advisor who answered countless emails and accepted meetings just to talk through options while being nothing but supportive, and to my IACUC team, Dr. Pamela Lanford, Dr. Shannon Stutler, Ms. Renée Kahn, and Mrs. Cecily Holland: It was you all who nurtured me through this process and gave me plenty of time and attention to make it the best thesis I could possibly produce. Thank you.

And finally, to my thesis committee, Dr. Beth St. Jean, Dr. Diana Marsh, and Dr. Sarah McGrew, who agreed to go on this wild adventure with me, reading hundreds (thousands?) of frantic emails, questions and versions of various sections of this thesis: It was you all who got me to the finish line, and your fortitude and patience through this process will be fondly remembered. Thank you.

I would also like to thank all of the archivists who participated in this study, and also the colleagues, professors and acquaintances who participated in pilot interviews. I cannot list your names in the interest of privacy, but you know who you are, and these findings and implications would not have been possible without your generous participation in this study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Information is a message that is of interest to the recipient" (Fugmann, 2022, p. 4). This was the generic definition offered in a short reflective, but well researched paper asserting that the nature of information is subjective and that the meaning of "information" can vary depending on the discipline due to embedded concepts. Definitions even vary within a discipline, creating an even more puzzling roadmap. Fugmann's definition also opens the floor for some questions. What about messages that are *not* of interest to the recipient? Are these uninteresting or irrelevant messages no longer considered "information"? Are uninteresting or irrelevant messages not informative and evidentiary? The idea of information as evidence, in which data, texts, numbers, objects and events can be considered as situationally informative (Buckland, 1991) is an appropriate rebuttal to Fugmann's definition because it considers the fact that each receiver's situation is unique. It also accommodates the notion that information can denote knowledge imparted, the process of information, and information as a thing that is informative, whether it is interesting or factual (or not), all of which can impact behavior and decisions regarding information seeking.

The way people approach information is frequently referred to as information behavior, which can be defined as "the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use" (Wilson, 2000, p. 49). This encapsulates information seeking behavior, which Wilson (2000) differentiates from information searching behavior and information use behavior, and is defined as "the purposive seeking for information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal" (p. 49) in both analog and digital formats. Allegedly born from the world of libraries with an emphasis on information sources and systems rather than the human interaction and utility of

information, the topic has expanded its reach to researchers and scholars in a multitude of other disciplines. A shift to user studies to understand methodology of storage and retrieval behaviors is still widely popular in library and information science research today. Many of these may touch on the antithetical concept of when people might *not* engage in purposive seeking. This can be labeled as "information avoidance" (IA), although this term is not always utilized and receives less exposure in the library field than its cousin, information seeking (Foust & Taber, 2023; Sweeny et al, 2010;).

IA has been researched across several disciplines like psychology, economics, consumer health informatics, communication, and the information sciences. While the literature and research may sound robust, it suffers from a lack of clear theoretical models (Foust & Taber, 2023; Sweeny et al., 2010) that have a universal application. The singular overarching concept that can apply to all IA literature is that IA is a very complex and dynamic phenomenon that can be very difficult to understand and identify. Aligning with Fugmann's (2022) assertion that different disciplines have various embedded concepts, the application and definition of IA also varies across disciplines. As a phenomenon that has clear implications for how people approach information and the close link to information behavior in everyday lives, IA as a specific topic is lacking in literature from the information professions of libraries, archives and museums (LAMs). Even more specifically, the archives literature that could be linked to this phenomenon is nearly non-existent. As information professionals, IA should be seen as a relevant concern to archivists as it may impact how people interact with archival materials, and more importantly, how they may avoid certain materials. While understanding more about IA may help to inform the creation of new frameworks and best practices, the complex nature of IA and the idea that each occurrence of IA will be different makes it difficult to identify, and perhaps even harder to

approach. Nonetheless, understanding IA could also allow us to approach our work with researchers and archival collections with more empathy and mindfulness.

As an archivist, it is for these reasons that I aim to explore this phenomenon in the context of archives in order to make meaning for other archivists by answering the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?

RQ2: How do archivists experience IA in their daily work?

In order to do this, my study provides an extensive overview of IA in the archival context, and yet still barely scratches the surface, leaving ample room for future research opportunities and a hopeful push towards expanding the corpus of literature on archival user studies and theories outside of information seeking behavior models. I conducted a systematic literature review across disciplines in order to outline gaps in the literature as well as similarities and differences between disciplines. Using this literature as a basis for my study, I constructed a conceptual model for IA, the Relational Information Avoidance System (RIAS) Model, to create a visual representation of the complex phenomenon of IA. I also used this literature review to create an interview protocol and interviewed 12 archivists of varying experience levels and from varying institution types to explore how they think about IA in archives and how they may have experienced it in their work.

I employed a thematic analysis and synthesis grids to converge the transcripts into five key themes: 1) *Information Avoidance Susceptibility:* Archivists and researchers are both susceptible to IA when working with archives; 2) *Contributing Variables:* Several factors contribute to IA in archives surrounding the ideas about scoping, self-preservation, access, experience level, bias and worldview, characteristics of the archive itself, obscurity, outside

influences, and resource availability; 3) *Denial vs. Omission:* IA can manifest itself in two ways when working with archives: Denial/misdirection, and/or omission; 4) *Applications:* Archivists discussed real life applications of IA hypothetically and anecdotally, and those who perceive their role as more public-facing tended to provide more anecdotal examples, and; 5) *Archival Practices and Workflows:* Archivists discuss IA in relation to several archival practices and concepts including experience with archival research, collection management, visibility of archives, digital access, description, reference skills, the archivist's training and experience, the archivist's bias, physical access, processing, trigger and content warnings, archival exhibits and public displays, archival arrangement, and metadata. Based on these findings and the literature review, I constructed a conceptual model of IA in archives. I conclude this thesis by drawing on my interpretation of this data to suggest implications that draw on existing understandings of IA and new understandings that apply specifically to the field of archives. I suggest that IA can impact the information lifecycle of archival records and how people interact with them and that archivists can apply the findings and models in my study to their approach to working with archival materials themselves, and when working with others.

In the following chapters I will explore the extant literature from the various disciplines that lead the way in IA research, followed by an outline of my methods , an in-depth overview of the findings listed above, and a discussion chapter to cement IA in the archival context. Beginning with the literature review below, each subsection will examine a different discipline and identify common themes of each, as well as comparing each one to the others, identifying gaps and summarizing the chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Several articles included in the literature review had been collected during curricular studies during my graduate studies and served as the basis for developing the topic of this paper. Preliminary, vague searches for "information avoidance" (IA) in both academic and non-academic sources were used to build an overview of IA. I conducted more iterative and more refined searches once the research questions (RQs) were formed. These targeted searches produced literature from academic, peer-reviewed journals in databases centering on the fields of psychology, economics, consumer health informatics, communications, and information sciences as these were identified in systematic reviews used to build the interview protocol (Foust & Taber, 2023; Sweeny et al, 2010). Using Boolean operators, truncation and phrasing techniques, I searched databases with the following combinations: 1) "Information avoidan*" AND "Archiv*"; 2) "Information avoidan*" AND " Librar*", and; 3) "Information avoidan*" AND "Seeking behavior". These combinations generated 178 results across databases (some databases generated repeats of results from others), and sources were selected based on relevance to the data collected in this study and priority was given to more recently published studies (2019-2024) as some theories of IA are older and potentially outdated.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Starting with "information" as a stand-alone concept, there is no universal understanding or definition as each discipline has its own embedded concepts which create various definitions from one discipline to the next (Fugmann, 2022). Thus, definitions and fundamental understandings of IA also vary across disciplines. In fact, in what was perhaps the first systematic review across disciplines, the literature was described as "disjointed, unsystematic, and disorganized" (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 340). Aligning with Fugmann (2022), those

researchers, indeed, inferred that this may be because lines of inquiry from one discipline to another may examine IA in different contexts, and some embedded concepts may apply more to one discipline than another. That is to say that concepts embedded in psychology theories, such as cognitive dissonance, infiltrate several IA studies, but this may not apply to the way health information professionals conceptualize it as studies in this field focus more heavily on emotions. This allows for fluidity in how IA can be contextualized based on what concepts apply to their work or interests.

I applied a broad definition of IA as the basis of my research: "Any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information" (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341). The systematic review that this definition came from organizes some key tenets about IA from different disciplines into what IA is, why and when IA occurs, and who is susceptible to IA. Several of these key tenets apply to some, or even all, of the disciplines, but the authors of this particular systematic review exclude some concepts about IA that others may include, and I will point out these limitations below. In particular, the what, why, when and who of IA do not appear to be dichotomous and do not fit neatly into one box.

2.1.1 What is information avoidance?

To build an abstract for what IA is, Sweeny et al. (2010) assert that:

1. IA can occur when content about the information or outcomes that might arise from receiving the information are known or unknown;
2. IA can have positive or negative outcomes;
3. IA can be temporary or permanent;
4. IA can be active or passive; and
5. IA is not restricted to one's self.

They discussed IA explicitly as a denial or refusal of information and exclude knowledge dismissal, where information is received and then omitted or rejected, as well as inference avoidance, where an individual's interpretation of information may be inappropriate or inaccurate. It is also important to note that they wanted to focus on unknown IA, that which the content of the information is not known to the person encountering it, for this particular review, thus potentially leaving out much literature that may have been valuable. Tying in with the idea that IA is not restricted to one's self, denial, omission and poor interpretations may also impact another individual's potential avoidance, or may be employed to protect another individual. For this reason, I would argue that omission and inaccurate interpretations can be a form of IA, depending on the context.

2.1.2 Why and when does information avoidance occur?

According to Sweeny et al. (2010), individuals measure their own perceived control over final outcomes, perceived ability to cope with the information, perceived ease or difficulty obtaining or evaluating information, and their expectations about the information itself when possibly engaging in avoidant behavior. The authors assert that IA is not characterized by a measure of lack of interest, time, energy or other resources, but I argue that these are important factors that individuals measure in their everyday information behavior. Further, aligning with their own tenant of IA not being restricted to one's self, these are all factors that may be influenced by others and can therefore impact their decisions to avoid information, actively or passively.

Once these measures are considered, the reasons to avoid information are:

1. The information demands a change in beliefs;
2. The information demands an undesired action; or

3. The information causes unpleasant emotion or an abatement of pleasant emotions.

These three reasons may be strategic or purely based on feeling and emotions, they can operate individually or in any combination, and each situation and person will offer dynamic and often unique factors that contribute to their avoidance of information. The reasons can also apply to all of the points outlined in the above subsection. That is, any of these three reasons can be applied to avoiding known or unknown information, the avoidance can have positive or negative outcomes, the avoidance can be temporary or permanent, the avoidance can be active or passive, and the avoidance is not restricted to the self. This can manifest as outright denial of information, omission or poor interpretations of information received, or obscurity of information impacting whether people avoid it.

2.1.3 Who is susceptible to information avoidance?

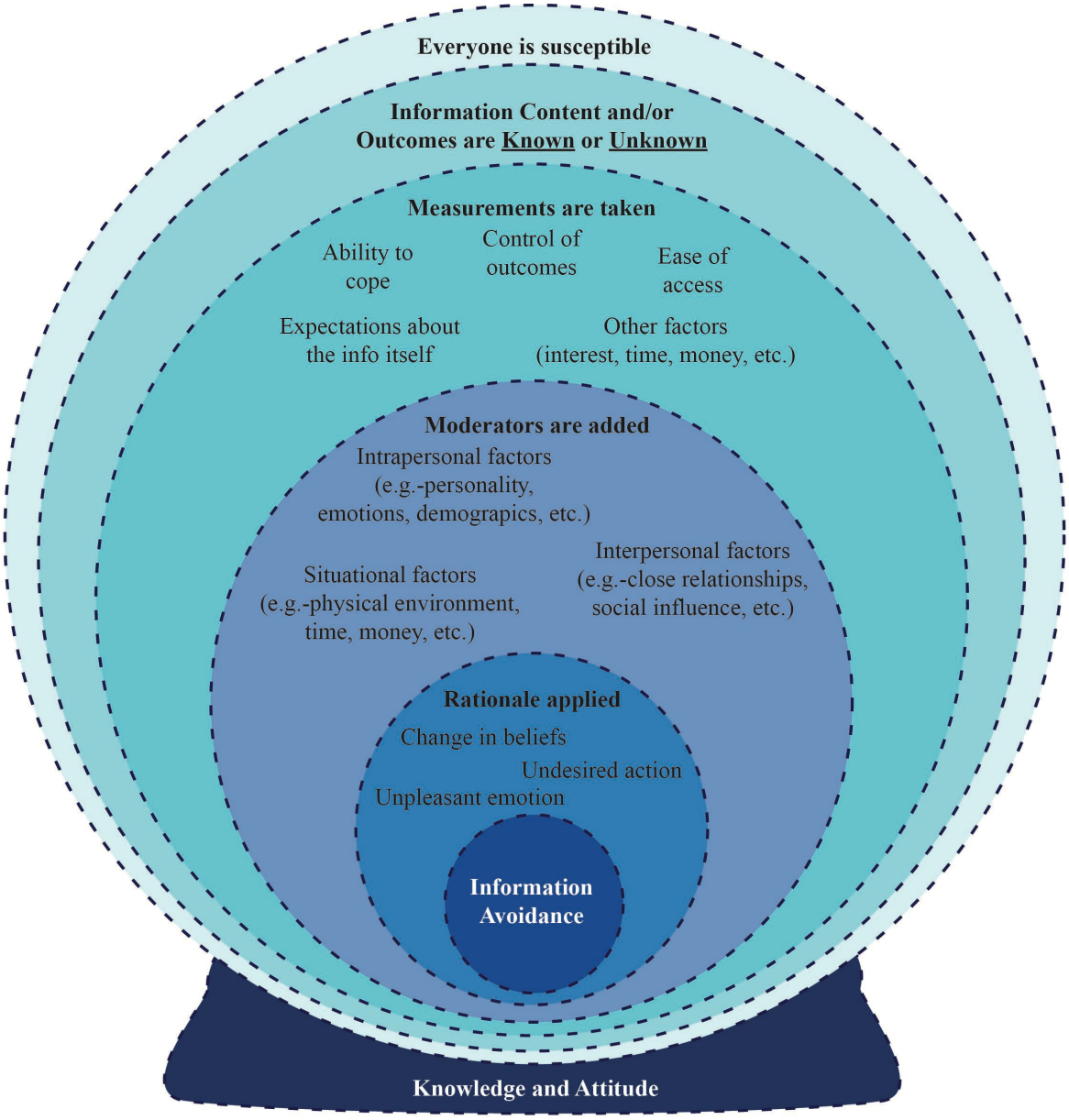
In short, Sweeny et al. (2010) assert that everyone is susceptible to IA and likely has engaged in IA behavior in any combination of the what, when and why above. For example, let's assume a postcard from a politically liberal source gets sent out to encourage people to vote early. One individual could actively avoid the information by immediately tossing the post card in the garbage, and could further influence others by illegally removing the postcards from another person's mailbox. They may have chosen to do this because engaging with the information may challenge their beliefs and make them angry. Another individual who does not participate in elections might passively avoid the same postcard by not checking their mail simply because it is voting season and they might encounter something that encourages them to perform the undesired action of voting. They may change their mind later on for any number of reasons, and can then choose to check their mail and learn more about early voting. The slew of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and situational factors that an individual must measure implicate

everyone in the information ecosystem, and anyone can employ any reason to avoid information, or cause others to avoid information, at any time in any combination. Some individuals may be more likely to engage in IA and these can depend on a variety of traits about the self, social implications, and situations. Sweeny et al. (2010) did not focus on this in their review, but others like Howell and Shepperd (2016) conclude that IA occurs in various populations but some personality types, like those who tend to be less agreeable, are more likely to avoid information. Backing this with a consumer study, Deng et al. (2023) also found that older people are also more likely to avoid information if they find it useless or that encountering the information would result in negative emotions.

Before diving into the extant literature from different fields, I propose a conceptual model (Figure 2.1) inspired by a model of the relationality of Indigenous systems of knowledge by Littletree et al. (2020) in which the parts are "layered in a cyclical and interlaced structure" (p. 416). My Relational Information Avoidance System (RIAS) Model, and the multiple components, or parts, of IA as presented below are represented as circles layered on top of one another. Each circle is outlined with a dashed line illustrating that the parts are not independent of one another, ultimately converging together in any combination to result in IA. Opposite from Littletree et al.'s (2020) model which resonates outward, this model starts with the premise that everyone is ultimately susceptible to IA as the outermost circle, and moves inward to show how an individual may encounter the various interior components to potentially result in IA. In this system of information avoidance, pre-existing elements about a person's knowledge and attitude in relation to the inner components support whether the information may be potentially avoided and may be systematically added to their future knowledge and attitude. These are represented by the cradle supporting the concentric circles and include level or lack of knowledge, whether

Figure 2.1

Relational Information Avoidance System Model



they see their current level or lack of knowledge as a positive or negative way of being, whether the level or lack of knowledge is permanent or temporary, whether they take an active or passive role in this system, and whether they influence others, or allow others to influence them, in this system.

The individual could be any person in the universe, and any individual plugged into this model will have their own relationality to all of the circles of this model moving inward based on their pre-existing knowledge and attitude. Once they encounter new information, their knowledge and attitudes come into play regarding how much, if any, of the content is known or unknown and their general attitude. This may be interrelated with measurements of: 1) Their perceived control over the outcomes of receiving that information; 2) their perceived ability to cope with receiving that information; 3) their perceived ease or difficulty of receiving that information; 4) their expectations about the information itself; and 5) internal and/or external perceptions about things like interest, relevance, time, money, energy or other resources. Any of the above may be moderated by factors like: 1) Intrapersonal factors including their own personality traits, emotions, demographics, or more; 2) interpersonal factors including closeness in a relationship, social influence from their community, or more; and 3) situational factors like environment, time limits, access, or more (only a few examples of these factors are included above and more will be discussed in the following sections). The individual may also employ one, all or any combination of three rationales to avoid the information: To avoid it because it requires 1) a change in beliefs; 2) an undesired action; or 3) the experience of unpleasant emotions or diminishing positive emotions. Any combination can manifest in outright denial of information, or omissions of information, which can then be reciprocated back to the individual's knowledge and attitude. It is important to note that the notion of IA not being restricted to one's

self means that this RIAS model can influence the next individual that may receive information, or may have been influenced by the previous individual.

2.2 Information Avoidance in Psychology

Several studies in the psychology field have focused on the intrapersonal traits that factor into IA behavior. In particular, factors regarding cognition, personality and demographic traits, emotions, and coping skills appear to be most salient.

The Sweeny et al. (2010) article was written in the context of psychology, and like many other studies and reviews from this field, it mentions that much of this corpus is deeply rooted in theories of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the theory which holds that people are motivated to combat oppositional attitudes, beliefs and behaviors because they may cause unpleasant mental conflict (Festinger, 1957). In particular, the psychology IA literature is rich with the dissonant phenomenon of selective exposure theory, a strategy in which an individual may intentionally or unintentionally choose to only acquire information that aligns with their worldview in order to minimize this mental conflict (Festinger, 1954) (Select studies centered on selective exposure theory–Alam, 2024; Hart et al., 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2008). On the flip side of that coin in which an individual may avoid information that does not align with their worldview, the stage is set for IA as a major topic in this field. This theory leans heavily on known IA; that an individual must know something, or be certain, about the content of the information or the outcome that would occur upon receiving that information in order to make a decision about acquiring or avoiding it (Sweeny et al., 2010). Although these theories have a tinge of interpersonal factors, the intrapersonal factors are the focus of these studies.

Cognitive explanations are also offered for unknown IA, or the avoidance of information in which an individual may be uncertain or ignorant of the content or outcome of receiving that information (Sorrentino & Short, 1986; Sweeny et al., 2010). An individual's "uncertainty orientation", or their proclivity towards seeking or avoiding this uncertain information (Sorrentino & Short, 1986) offers a cognitive explanation for this type of IA. Further, individuals can perceive this uncertainty as a positive or negative state of not knowing, and can then aim to reduce, increase or maintain that uncertainty with a variety of strategies (Link & Baumann, 2022).

Personality traits such as agreeableness, openness and curiosity (Deng et al., 2022; Howell & Shepperd, 2016), as well as demographic traits like age (Deng et al., 2022), gender and political orientation (Howell & Shepperd, 2016) are also found to be factors that impact IA. Deng et al. (2022) also found that perceived relevance or potential for negative emotions could impact one's decision to avoid information. Although these studies continue to focus on intrapersonal traits, these are thought to be multivariate and it is helpful to envision them as sliding scales that can also be influenced by interpersonal and situational factors (Deng et al., 2022; Howell & Shepperd, 2016; Sweeny et al., 2010). Interpersonal factors in psychology studies, like feedback preferences, are relevant as people tend to desire positive feedback, thus avoiding negative feedback (Trope et al., 2003). Individuals also tend to prefer avoiding knowing how their actions impact others (Vu et al., 2023). The social implications of feedback are important, but still, these preferences are strongly rooted in a person's perception of control over situations and outcomes in addition to perceptions of self-efficacy and beliefs.

Coping skills and how one perceives their ability to cope with information in a given situation are interdependent (Miller, 1987; Sweeny et al., 2010). Coping skills that include

avoidant behavior may be gauged individually as one would assess the situation by considering many factors. Miller (1987) would classify people into two groups: "Monitors" who tend to gauge the situation at hand by seeking information, and "blunters" who, conversely, may avoid the situation altogether, create distractions or invalidate the threat of certain information. It is important to note that critics of this dichotomy do not consider the proclivity to being a monitor or blunter to be stable personality traits, therefore making it difficult to permanently type people as one or the other (Baker & Pettigrew, 1999).

Several points from my study's conceptual model apply here, including intrapersonal factors, perceived measures of control and coping abilities, known and unknown IA, and positive and negative outcomes. I would infer that the mention of intentional and unintentional choosing of information in the selective exposure theory would also allude to active and passive avoidance. Interpersonal factors are also included, although the focus is on the intrapersonal, and strategic and hedonic rationales are provided.

2.3 Information Avoidance in Economics

The literature from the economics and finance fields focuses largely on control over outcomes, particularly through active instances of IA, but delve more into interpersonal factors of IA and instances that are not restricted to one's self (Golman et al., 2017). Some researchers assert that IA is always active, meaning a person takes action to avoid information through verbal or physical acts and should not be confused with failure to collect appropriate information through inaction, or passive IA (Golman et al., 2017; Sweeny et al., 2010). In this model, possible outcomes are ranked on their utility based on what outcomes will be pleasant or unpleasant (hedonic), or by anticipation of how information will influence future behavior (strategic) (Golman et al., 2017). This model is more indicative of interpersonal factors as these

hedonic or strategic instances of IA are not restricted to one's self and can be employed to influence or control what information reaches other people. Specific finance-related examples might include using IA to keep others uninformed, to strengthen a bargaining position, to enhance or counteract market power, or to prevent unfavorable negotiations. This aligns with my departure from Sweeny et al.'s (2010) assertion that omitting information is not characteristic of IA because they would have needed to encounter the information and chosen to omit it in order to maintain control and/or influence another individual's access or decision to engage with or avoid that information.

Similar to the psychology literature on IA, other studies focus on the intrapersonal factors that influence IA in the economics and finance context. One study finds that traits like disappointment aversion, curiosity, boredom and sense-making through strategies like confirmation bias are autonomous cognitive processes that impact decisions to avoid information (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016). Another study found that an individual's political partisanship can impact whether they reveal or ignore information with different possible economic outcomes (Momsen & Ohndorf, 2023). Republicans were more likely to ignore information that would result in donating money, presumably to a pro-social program like welfare, and were more likely to reveal information that would result in a payoff. The inverse was found of Democrats, indicating that political partisanship has an impact on IA tendencies where financial outcomes are known and can reflect on the individual's self-image. This is an example of active IA as the individual is actively choosing what self-image to ignore or reveal, but Momsen and Ohndorf (2023) also account for people who ignore information through inattention or complete ignorance, noting that some participants chose to reveal no information at all.

From my study's framework, the economics and finance literature on IA reflects more favorably on active IA than passive and implicates interpersonal factors more than that from the psychology literature. Importantly, this literature exemplifies how IA may not be restricted to one's self. IA imposed on others may have positive outcomes for those controlling the information while those receiving the diluted information, if they receive it at all, are more likely to see negative outcomes. These could also be controlled temporarily or permanently depending on desired outcome. Intrapersonal factors are also considered, such as personality traits and sociocultural factors like political orientation. There appears to be a more strategic, utilitarian edge here, and less of a focus on emotions and feelings, thus the rationale of regulating unpleasant emotions seems less salient in this literature.

2.4 Information Avoidance in Consumer Health Informatics

People's avoidant behaviors regarding unknown information is particularly salient in literature from the fields of health and medicine. Individuals often avoid information regarding medical diagnoses and genetic markers (Case et al., 2005; St. Jean et al., 2017), as receiving this information could result in negative emotions or could be impacted by one's ability to cope (Sweeny et al., 2010). Interpersonally, IA is not restricted to only health information about one's self, as one may take an active or passive role in relaying diluted information to someone else, or in leaving out information altogether (Rauscher & Dean, 2018). This relates strongly to my study's inclusion of obscurity in IA, as relying on others to gather information can obscure the information by leaving room for error or interpretation, which could be an active or passive strategy for managing information exposure.

Access to information is also implicated in health information avoidance literature. Nelissen et al., (2015) finds that exposure to too much information can cause IA by impacting an

individual's emotions, causing emotions like fear and anxiety, and can have positive and negative outcomes. Specifically, the researchers mention screening and avoidance which may put the individual at risk. Other studies examining risk aversion in the health context found that privacy concerns and attitudes may cause people to evade information from sources or from providing information in certain circumstances (Lipsey & Shepherd, 2019; Shahrour et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2022). There are also physical and digital barriers to health information that impact overall avoidant behavior. Digitally, low information literacy skills correlate to low health literacy (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2004; Norman & Skinner, 2006) and this is more commonly observed in individuals among marginalized groups, including people of color, immigrants, the elderly and the poor (National Network of Libraries of Medicine [NN/LM], 2014). St. Jean et al. (2017) assert that demographic and socioeconomic barriers like lower education levels, lower income, employment status, lack of healthcare coverage and lack of access to the Internet appear to be linked with greater likelihood of avoidant behavior (2017). Physically, those who face limited access to information also face physical barriers to accessing genetic and other medical testing (Rauscher & Dean, 2018). This is important because, while conducting an online search, an individual may only produce results that provide incomplete or incorrect information, which may have an impact on their decision-making and potentially on their final outcomes. They also may avoid searching altogether.

The literature on IA from the consumer health informatics field seems to examine demographic, socioeconomic and sociocultural variables and how they correlate with IA more than the previous two fields. This has intra- and interpersonal implications, and emotions and access concerns across social considerations bring in strategic and hedonic rationales for avoidance. These studies also exemplify how IA is not restricted to the self, may be active or

passive, may be outside of the control of the individual, and may be positive or negative. Temporality is not mentioned, but it can be assumed that an individual may temporarily or permanently employ IA to regulate emotions, protect others, or deal with information overload. Situational factors may also impact access and emotions and can change over time, thus impacting avoidance. The perceived inability to control outcomes or to cope may deter people from accessing information at all. Intentional or unintentional omission or poor interpretations can impact another individual's decision to avoid information, or an individual's perception of someone else's ability to cope may cause that person to purposefully omit information that they relay to another.

2.5 Information Avoidance in Communications

Unsurprisingly, there are several affective and social implications to IA outlined in literature from the field of communications. Emotional variables such as fear, anxiety, and hope are linked to IA, particularly when evaluating risks of retrieving information (Chang & Huang, 2020; Deline & Kahlor, 2019). In addition to the rationale of mitigating negative emotions, IA can be an intrapersonal strategic manipulation to maintain hope and beliefs. Interestingly, Lu et al. (2022) point out that culture-specific differences may generate different results, alluding that this is not generalizable. Emotions associated with social environments are also found to be relevant, and these interpersonal relationships can exist in physical, real-world environments and digital environments. In the real-world application, a person's community, or social sphere, can influence the way they handle certain information by impacting their attitudes, affective responses, and perceived beliefs and control (Lu et al., 2022; Yang & Kahlor, 2013). In a digital application, perceptions of irrelevance and overload, which can be amplified by time pressure,

are associated with social network fatigue resulting in negative emotional reactions like tiredness, boredom, and indifference (Guo et al., 2020).

Beyond these investigations of social spheres and group mentality, more intimate relationships and influences of significant others were found to contribute to information behaviors (Chang & Huang, 2020). Negative emotions, relational closeness and satisfaction are closely linked , therefore uncertainty about relationship status can drive individuals to avoid communicating about sensitive topics to protect their own image, their partner's image or the status of their relationship (Schrodt et al., 2024). This recalls feedback preferences, and in this context, these are found to impact known and unknown IA in that anticipation of the results and relationships with the individuals providing the feedback have an influence on whether or not the receiving individuals want to acquire the information (Afifi et al., 2004). Concerns about others' perceptions may also motivate an individual to choose to not ask someone for information because it may demonstrate ineptitude and poor self-efficacy (Afifi & Weiner, 2004).

This literature naturally implicates interpersonal factors, but does not neglect intrapersonal factors such as emotions and perceptions of self-efficacy and ability to cope when discussing IA. There are instances of known and unknown IA and IA may be active or passive, but these tend to highlight IA employed as a means to foster positive outcomes for the individual. These are also not restricted to one's self as an individual may avoid information to protect another individual's emotions or image. Finally, although these studies discuss emotions a lot, strategic applications are also offered to maintain positive emotions and outcomes.

2.6 Information Avoidance in the Information Sciences

Information professions are varied, but the scope of this section applies mainly to those in the libraries, archives and museums (LAM) sphere. Many IA studies from this field focus on

information behavior in people's everyday lives. Narayan et al. (2011) presented research at the Association for Information Science and Technology conference in 2011 and found that active and passive IA is common in everyday life, with implications for peoples' health, finances and relationships, all previously discussed. The massive amount of information that is available to people everyday can also create IA by increasing anxiety (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022; Soroya & Faiola, 2023) and with technological advances and dependence rapidly changing, online information avoidance is particularly salient (Sultana et al., 2022). Sultana et al. posit that the mass quantities of information available online, which is often unvetted and unfiltered, may trigger one's desire to regulate how much information they take in. In order to take in less information, an individual can call upon intra- and interpersonal motivations to filter out some information in favor of information that aligns with their beliefs or information that they believe will result in positive emotions only.

Cognitive barriers and biases (Singh & Brinster, 2021), emotions (Savolainen, 2013; Willson & Given, 2020) and feedback preferences can potentially link IA with other behaviors like library anxiety, information overload, filtering and more (Behimehr & Jamali, 2020). Library anxiety is a grounded theory in which a patron perceives that their skills regarding library use are inadequate compared to others, the lack of skills is shameful and this inadequacy would be evident if they ask a librarian a question (Mellon, 1986). This is impacted by many aspects of libraries, but most importantly in this context is an individual's familiarity with libraries as place, as well as familiarity with discrete components of the library like catalog searching and the people who work there (Larsen et al, 2019). This posits that people may exhibit avoidant behaviors simply because the space that the information may be accessed in can cause negative emotions or a perception of negative outcomes attributed to previous experiences

(Savolainen, 2013). Aligning with this, task difficulty and information literacy (Zhang et al., 2023) and trust (Bressel et al., 2023; Riley et al., 2022) are also influential factors. Particularly, aligning with the idea of social spheres, Riley et al. (2022) discusses how information within social spheres is sometimes only shared within that sphere and how trust proximity is key in people's decisions about what information to avoid. IA in this context is also believed to have positive and negative outcomes that can be strategic intra- and interpersonally (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022; Manheim, 2014; Riley et al., 2022; Willson & Given, 2020).

This literature incorporates several factors mentioned in other disciplines that impact IA and has implications for known and unknown IA, active and passive IA, intra- and interpersonal factors, strategic and hedonic IA, positive and negative outcomes, and control. Emotions, information literacy and situational factors (e.g., library anxiety and trust) seem to be particularly salient in this corpus. Lack of restriction of IA to one's self is also evident here as barriers are acknowledged and social spheres impact the flow of information and decisions to avoid it. Temporality in the perspective of temporary versus permanent IA is not mentioned, but researchers do find IA to be common in everyday life, which aligns with the idea that everyone is susceptible.

2.7 Summary and Identified Gaps

The literature above presents clear interest in IA across several disciplines and it is evident that the phenomenon should be studied in a variety of contexts to better understand its impacts on society. There are similarities and differences across each discipline and these provide a framework for an overview of IA for this study, but there are some gaps in the literature to address.

While IA is specifically investigated by some LAM professionals, there is a noticeable gap in literature that specifically centers on IA. This aligns with Sweeny et al. (2010) and Foust and Taber (2023) who point out that IA is underexposed as compared to information seeking. Foust & Taber (2023) further posit that IA and information seeking should have distinct models. The literature cited in the previous sections investigate and mention IA specifically, either as keywords or within the body of the articles, but there are also studies that may include instances in which individuals avoid information. These are often framed under information seeking behavior and make no mention of any variation of "information avoidance." These include: A study of middle schoolers' information seeking behavior regarding perceptions and use of federal government websites that indicates how some students do not trust government sources and therefore avoid them (Taylor, 2018); A survey of 165 African researchers on their perceptions of the impact of accessibility and infrastructure, environment, collection concerns, finances, and familiarity and level of trust in staff which divulges that these factors influence decisions to acquire or avoid information and sources (Makinde et al., 2019); and an essay situating fake news, mis-, and disinformation in relation to information behavior signifies that individuals with partisan political ideals may favor sources that align with their worldview regardless of the source's credibility (Cooke, 2017). Although studies like these are helpful and important in the grand scheme, situating IA under the umbrella of information seeking behavior may be problematic as there are calls for distinct theoretical models for each (Foust & Taber, 2023). This also impacts searchability as these studies may not appear in search results for "avoidance."

Despite being lumped in as information professionals with libraries and museums in the LAM group, none of the examples above were produced in the context of archives specifically. This is problematic because archivists, as keepers of records which serve as a reference of past

events as well as memory-making, should consider how the Information Age is impacting their profession (Yeo, 2018). Although there is an observed historical lack of published user studies from archivists (Conway, 1986; Rhee, 2015), there are some which incorporate information seeking that mention instances of avoidance, but, like the examples above, do not mention "information avoidance" at all. Examples include: Power et al.'s (2017) observation that the processing or expansive amounts of information and data in archival collections can prove to be unwieldy and may delay users in accessing this information; A survey of 200 romance novel writers who use archives when researching who report feeling stymied in their information seeking process thanks to feelings of lack of self-efficacy in identifying materials, perceived lack of guidance, lack of digitized materials, inability to get to the archives, and "the impact that archivists' perceptions of researchers and topics as 'serious' versus 'frivolous' may have on interactions with users" (Radick, 2016, p. 46); and a study using questionnaires and interviews which found that differences between libraries and archives in terms of indexing structure, content, and digitization impact a user's expectations when using archives, noting an attitudinal difference in searching (Borlund et al., 2024). These studies have clear themes of IA based on my framework for this study, and all provide examples of how important it is to consider IA as a phenomenon that may not always be personal; that something about the archive as place (e.g., as an organization, its location, etc.) can impact another person's potential to avoid information, and how individual archivists can also have an impact on other archivists and researchers. Also important is the fact that the phrase "information avoidance" is not used in any of the examples above as they are framed under information *seeking* behavior. This emphasizes a lack of exposure to IA as a relevant topic of interest in the field of archives and the importance of contributing to the literature in this specific context.

Extensive searching resulted in only one paper intentionally placing archives in conversation with IA as a phenomenon (Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022). It is important to know that this paper uses the term "deliberate ignorance" rather than "information avoidance" as the main topic and was actually found on a psychology database rather than a LAM or information sciences database. The study regards the opening of East Germany's Stasi archives in 1991. Participants, who were not archivists but potential researchers who could use these archives, were asked to provide reasons they may avoid these files and the reasons provided reflect many aspects of my study's framework. Relevance, social relationships, bureaucracy creating difficulty, utility and credibility, political convictions, bias, discontent with institutional memory policy, perceptions of others' experiences and behaviors, and unpleasant memories were all cited. Other archives-related literature using the term "deliberate ignorance" included an article detailing "a reluctance to critically engage with the colonial practices that continue to marginalize Indigenous peoples within the archival record" (McCracken, 2019, p. 183). Another article discusses information regarding Indigenous health history and criticizes the representation of Indigenous peoples and histories and how that impacts modern day issues (McCallum, 2017). McCallum says this has caused "recent historical scholarship on race and colonialism [to be] met with a response that ultimately reflects denial, disinterest and deliberate ignorance" (p. 112). These also play on the important idea that the archives as cultural heritage systems can stain a person's approach to archives with avoidant tendencies.

The three articles in the previous paragraph are signals that IA literature at large may still be "disjointed, unsystematic, and disorganized" (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 340) although Foust and Taber (2023) provided a table that both likens "deliberate ignorance," information avoidance," "ostrich effect" and "ostrich problem," while also providing various definitions for each. More

importantly, the existence of literature regarding IA specifically in the archival context is fundamentally nonexistent. The Hertwig and Ellerbrock (2022) article is about an archive and they interviewed participants who may avoid that particular collection, and McCallum (2017) and McCracken (2019) mention clear "deliberate ignorance" but this is merely consequential to the main points of their articles. Therefore this study seeks to intentionally center IA in the archival context by interviewing archivists to investigate the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?

RQ2: How do archivists experience IA in their daily work?

In the next section, I will talk about the methodology I used by grounding my study in a qualitative phenomenological framework, and details about the participants, data collection method, and data analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Due to the lack of solid, generalizable theory regarding IA, I conducted this study using qualitative methods to explore the phenomenon of IA in the archival context in an empirical fashion. I carefully rooted my planning in a phenomenological framework outlined by Creswell and Baez (2020), collected data with well-executed qualitative interviews, and carefully analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and detailed synthesis grids (Miles et al., 2020) to learn how archivists ideate and conceptualize IA in relation to archives, and how they may, or actually have, experienced IA in their daily work.

3.1 Phenomenology Framework

As this study explores the phenomenon of IA, a phenomenological philosophy serves as the basis for the study design. The aim is "to see a detailed description of how a number of individuals experience a specific phenomenon" (Creswell & Baez, 2020, p. 273). This can be accomplished by inquiring about their first-person experiences and what they mean to them. Creswell and Baez' (2020) six step approach was used and Table 3.1 outlines how they were used in this study. It is important to note that these "steps" may not necessarily need to be taken sequentially, but are guidelines for a methodologically sound study.

Table 3.1

Phenomenology Framework Outline

Steps	This study
1. "Focus on a single *phenomenon* to explore."	Information Avoidance
2. "Collect data from *individuals who have experienced the phenomenon*."	As everyone is likely to engage in IA at some point (Sweeny et al., 2010), archivists are likely to have engaged in IA themselves, or are likely to have engaged with others who have. Therefore, interviews seeking to explore IA (the phenomenon) with archivists is sufficient.
3. "Explore the *context* in which the individuals experience the phenomenon."	Interview protocol designed to inquire about IA and how it may relate to and manifest itself within their daily work, and how they may (have) experience(d) it.
4. "Frame the study within a broad *philosophy*."	Hermeneutics: "New understanding is achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have" (George, 2021, para. 9). How archivists interpret the concept of IA, and how they experience it *through* this concept to create meaning of the experience. Identify common themes to create an objective consciousness.
5. "*Bracket* out personal experiences."	Remove own experiences with IA in order to objectively learn how interviewees experience IA. Offer a positionality statement (see "Preface" section of this study).
6. "Report on the *essence* of the experience."	Systematically analyze the transcripts and identify significant themes, develop aggregate meanings for these statements, and develop a description of what the individuals have experienced so that they can understand it.

3.2 Participants

3.2.1 Recruitment

I used purposive and snowball sampling strategies using an University of Maryland, College Park (UMD) Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved advertisement (Appendix A). These advertisements were posted to online archives community boards and sent via email to personal networks to identify potential participants. I selected interviewees who matched the criteria pre-approved by the UMD IRB. Participants had to:

1. Be 18 years of age or older;
2. Actively work in an archives-related position of any kind in the United States; and
3. Have earned a graduate degree related to archival, library, museum or information studies.

Once a pool of willing interviewees was formed, I purposively selected archivists from different regions of the United States and from different types of archival institutions to maximize the diversity of perspectives and types of institutions. I was then able to target specific regions or types of institutions to recruit a final selection. Table 3.2 below lists the regions of the United States that the participants lived in at the time of the interview and the second column provides the number of participants from that region. Table 3.3 lists the types of archival institutions and the number of participants who worked in that type of institution.

Table 3.2

Number of Archivists Interviewed by Region

Regions of the U.S.	# of Archivists Interviewed
Mid-Atlantic	2
Midwest	3
Northeast	2
South	2
Southwest	2
West Coast	1

Table 3.3

Number of Archivists Interviewed by Type of Institution

Types of Institutions	# of Archivists Interviewed
Academic	6*
Museum	2
Historical Society	2
Public Library	1
State Archive	1

Note: *The number of academic institutions is greater than other types aligning with post-World War II trends in which many nationally renowned archives are associated or housed within academic institutions as this period brought about expansion to the United States education system (Tansey, 2023).

In the interest of diversity, equity, and inclusion, no candidates were excluded on the bases of race, gender, sexuality, disability or other socio-economic/cultural factors. Interviewees were notified of selection well in advance of the interviews, and I briefed them on the project and provided informed consent forms to each with the assurance of confidentiality. I collected the signed consent forms from each participant prior to their interview and assigned each person a pseudonym based on the order in which they were interviewed (e.g.-the first archivist interviewed is "A1", the seventh archivist interviewed is "A7", etc.).

3.2.2 Sample

Smaller samples of 10-12 participants are recommended for phenomenological, exploratory studies to achieve saturation (Creswell & Baez, 2020; Schamber, 2000). Saturation was achieved at 12 interviewees as the archivists represented various regions of the United States, types of institutions, and levels of experience, backgrounds, and ranks, and patterns in themes began to emerge across all of the interviews. Table 3.4 provides details about each participant including their pseudonym, regional geographic location, institution type, years of experience, job titles provided, whether they associate their role to be more behind the scenes or public-facing, and broad job responsibilities that apply to their daily work.

Table 3.4

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Region	Type of Institution	Years of Experience	Job Title Provided	Behind the Scenes/ Public-Facing	Responsibilities
A1	Mid-Atlantic	Large, public R1 university	9	Associate Director, Special Collections	Behind the scenes	Access, processing, arrangement, description, accessioning, digitization
A2	Northeast	Small, public liberal arts college	32	Head of Special Collections/ Associate Professor	Mix, more public-facing	Generalist*
A3	Midwest	Medium, public R2 university	15	University Archivist/ Associate Professor	Mix	Generalist
A4	Mid-Atlantic	Federally funded museum	12	Museum Specialist in Archives	Mix, more public-facing	Reference, collection management, processing, preservation
A5	Southwest	Historical society	5	Archivist and Librarian	Public-facing	Generalist

Note. *"Generalist" applies to archivists who said that their job responsibilities require all aspects of archival job functions.

Pseudonym	Region	Type of Institution	Years of Experience	Job Title Provided	Behind the Scenes/ Public-Facing	Responsibilities
A6	Northeast	Large, multi-branch, municipal public library	12	Archivist, Special Collections	Mix	Reference, collection management, processing
A7	Midwest	Public, non-profit museum complex	16	Senior Manager/ De facto Chief Archivist	Mix	Admin tasks, collection management
A8	Southwest	Large, public R1 university	3	Curatorial Assistant I	Behind the scenes	Collection management, processing
A9	South	Large, public R1 university	12	Archivist/ Associate Professor	Mix, more behind the scenes	Processing, collection management, donor relations, some reference
A10	South	State archive	10	Digital Assets Coordinator	Behind the scenes	Digitization, metadata, description, processing
A11	West Coast	Historical society	8	Managing Reference Archivist	Public-facing	Reference, instruction and training, digitization, some processing

Pseudonym	Region	Type of Institution	Years of Experience	Job Title Provided	Behind the Scenes/ Public-Facing	Responsibilities
A12	Midwest	Large, public R1 university	3	Processing Archivist	Mix, more behind the scenes	Processing, some reference

3.3. Interviews

I chose semi-structured interviews as the appropriate data collection method for this study because using open-ended questions allowed me to learn about the interviewees' perspectives in their own words (Creswell & Baez, 2020; Tracy, 2020). I created and piloted the interview protocol (Appendix B) well in advance of the planned study and secured approval by my thesis committee members as well as the University of Maryland IRB. I conducted pilot interviews with three colleagues which allowed me to evaluate the amount of time needed to conduct the interviews. I also acquired feedback after each pilot interview to determine if adjustments to the interview protocol were needed. I found that the interviews would take about an hour each and determined that the questions were well-suited to the RQs, so minimal changes were needed prior to recruitment and scheduling of official interviews for data collection.

3.3.1 Interview Procedures

I conducted the interviews between March 25, 2024 and May 23, 2024. The interviews were one-on-one and took place either in person or online via Zoom based on location and availability. Interviews averaged about 62 minutes, with one outlier of about 86 minutes in which there was a delay to the start and a short break during the interview. I audio recorded and transcribed each interview in real time using Otter.ai with the interviewees' verbal and written permission, both collected prior to the interview start. On the day of their interview, I briefed each participant on the details of the project and reminded them that they may withdraw from the interview at any time. They were also reminded that the interviews would be audio recorded for the purposes of transcription and coding, only to be seen by the interviewer. Accurate transcribing is a crucial step in the qualitative process (Kowal & O'Connell, 2014), therefore the AI transcriptions were edited by hand while listening to the audio recording to correct errors and

to create a list of any questions to check with interviewees as quickly as possible after each interview. I summarized each interview after this and sent each interviewee a copy of their transcript and summary to serve as member checks (75% of the interviewees responded, either approving or offering minimal corrections to transcripts or initial interpretations and summaries; the remaining 25% did not respond, even after follow-ups).

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Thematic Coding

I utilized these member-checked, edited transcripts and summaries to start coding by hand with a physical copy of each transcript in a bound book. The initial summaries and notes served as initial in vivo codes and I began an inductive thematic coding approach to identify themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) by repetitively referring to audio recordings, summaries and transcriptions to create a sense of familiarity with the content.

After completing initial rounds of hand-coding, I used qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) to refine codes and to create easy reference points to identify exemplar quotes and annotations. The individual summaries and transcriptions were uploaded to NVivo and I reviewed each individually, utilizing the analog code book as a reference to mark specific instances of each code. This allowed me to see which codes appear in each summary and how many times, and to quickly see a list of each line in the transcription that was tagged to that code. This provided me with better insight into frequent occurrences and themes by allowing me to see instances of specific codes across all documents in the data set.

3.4.2 Synthesis Grids

I created two synthesis grids as a means of visually representing the data in a more digestible, organized manner (Miles et al., 2020). These grids consolidated variables that helped

identify themes in terms of each research question, and also quantified the frequency of mentions for certain instances (e.g., the amount of times government regulations or archival access were mentioned as factors that can cause IA). These were helpful in relaying information regarding findings and in identifying trends for discussion and interpretations.

The findings I discovered in the next section align with many tenets that I covered in the literature review, but there are several that seem particularly relevant and perhaps more specific to the archival context. Each subsection will address the theme and the finding of IA specifically in the archival context with statistical evidence, exemplar quotes and some light analysis throughout.

Chapter 4: Findings

Nine out of the twelve archivists interviewed for this study were not familiar with existing literature or frameworks for IA in a more clinical sense, but once provided a broad definition of information avoidance ("any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information" [Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341]), the 12 archivists interviewed were able to reflect and discuss the phenomenon in relation to their field. Three of the participants had at least heard of IA in some context, although only one had specifically heard of it in the context of archives, but only through their own research. Aligning with my earlier identification of a lack of literature concerning IA in the archival context, A12 shared:

> I'm much more familiar with it as a concept, rather than as those words paired together… probably mostly through my own research, which has been on how archives are described… when an archivist thinks that there's a high likelihood that it will cause offense or discomfort. And so, for me, I think that comes up a lot more in library literature. I think it's more common as far as content warnings, book bans, and that sort of context… it doesn't come up a ton in archives, and that may or may not be fair. But yeah, when I've encountered it, it is mostly in the context of how a content warning might fulfill that purpose or facilitate that avoidance.

But how do archivists break down ideas about IA in the archival context into digestible pieces and how might they, or how have they, experienced it in their daily work? Several codes relating to these questions emerged during the coding process which I aggregated into five major themes and categorized to the RQs of this study. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 organize each theme under its respective RQ, and the aggregated codes for each theme, total number of references and

number of transcripts tagged with that code are listed to the right of each theme (see Appendix C for definitions of codes).

Table 4.1

Themes, Codes, Number of References and Number of Transcripts Tagged with Code for RQ1

	RQ1: What ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?		
	Codes Included	**Total # of References**	**Number of Transcripts Tagged with Code**
Theme 1.1: IA Susceptibility	Archivists exhibiting IA Researchers exhibiting IA	42 32 **Sum: 74**	12 (100%) 12 (100%)
Theme 1.2: Contributing Variables	Scoping factors Self-preservation Access Experience level Bias/Worldview Type of archive Obscurity Outside influence Resource availability	113 103 89 69 61 56 44 42 28 **Sum: 605**	12 (100%) 12 (100%) 11 (92%) 12 (100%) 12 (100%) 12 (100%) 12 (100%) 11 (92%) 11 (92%)
Theme 1.3: Denial vs. Omission	Omission of information Purposeful denial/misdirection	58 35 **Sum: 93**	11 (92%) 12 (100%)

Table 4.2

Themes, Codes, Number of References and Number of Transcripts Tagged with Code for RQ2

	RQ2: How do archivists experience IA as it relates to their daily work?		
	Codes Included	**Total # of References**	**Number of Transcripts Tagged with Code**
Theme 2.1: Applications	Anecdotal evidence Hypothetical evidence	55 40 **Sum: 95**	12 (100%) 12 (100%)
Theme 2.2: Archival Practices and Workflows	Experience with archival research Collection management Overall visibility of archives Digital access Description Reference skills Archivists' training/experience Archivists' bias Physical access Processing Trigger/Content warnings Exhibits/Public Displays Arrangement Metadata	45 39 35 32 29 27 25 23 19 16 8 6 4 4 **Sum: 312**	12 (100%) 10 (83%) 11 (92%) 9 (75%) 10 (83%) 9 (75%) 8 (67%) 8 (67%) 9 (75%) 8 (67%) 4 (33%) 2 (17%) 4 (33%) 3 (25%)

Themes categorized to RQ1 (what abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?) reflect how the interviewees ideate about IA. These reflect the organization of Sweeny et al.'s (2010) systematic review, but in a different order starting with 1) who is susceptible to IA, 2) why does IA occur, and 3) what the manifestation of IA can look like in the archival context. RQ2's (how do archivists experience IA in their daily work?) themes relate to real-world applications of IA, or how archivists experience IA in their daily work. Archivists

provided hypothetical and anecdotal instances, and were able to list several archival concepts that may impact decisions to avoid information or could influence its manifestation.

4.1 RQ1: What Abstract Ideas Do Archivists Have About Information Avoidance as it Relates to Archives?

4.1.1 Information avoidance susceptibility when working with archives

Finding 1: Archivists and researchers are both susceptible.

All twelve of the archivists I interviewed agreed that the concept of "neutrality" in archives is a myth. From personal judgments and human nature (A1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 10), to politics and missions (A5, 6, 7 and 9), and social positions (A11 and 12), archives are seen as not neutral because subjective decisions are made everyday to create archives and collections based on a slew of factors. This has clear implications for archivists and their potential to employ IA, but the interviewees also find researchers to be subject to the above. This also demonstrates that participants of this study are not solely blaming the researchers as the only perpetrators of IA in the archival context, and most of the statements seem to be fairly non-accusatory. I will note that whenever an interviewee provided evidence in which archivists were implicated in avoidant behavior that the interviewee making that statement was often not talking about themself.

Archivists. All twelve interviewees relayed ideas about archivists exhibiting IA as well, with 42 references across all transcripts. Some exemplary quotes included:

A2: "For archivists, it's just, I guess, for collecting… if the information avoidance is that you're only collecting certain things to [create] a certain narrative, then I think that's problematic."

A7: "To the point of actively withdrawing material from certain… archival collections, so you know, we are imposing our own information avoidance on the researcher."

A9: “I think that there are archives that are more closed than others that serve the needs of a subgroup for whatever reason and they have less interest in providing all the information.”

Several principles from my study’s framework resonate through these quotes, including omission of information, active avoidance, controlling the outcome of what information reaches the researcher, and the idea that IA is not restricted to the self. The imposition of IA on others also implies that the archivist knows something about the content of the information, and that impacts their decision to share or not share that information, thereby delaying or preventing the acquisition of information that the *archivist* may not see as relevant, interesting or wanted.

The above examples are all very direct, purposive occurrences of IA on the archivists’ part, but some of the interviewees also shared ideas about factors that may not be entirely in the archivist’s hands. A7 pointed out, “Not that the staff has to purposely [steer] research, but that they don’t have the depth of knowledge of the collections that might support further research, because the materials aren’t processed, because there’s not enough… staff.” This appears to be a fairly unique factor contributing to IA in the archival context, although lack of resources was mentioned, and rejected as a characteristic of IA, by Sweeny et al. (2010). These further make the point that, especially in archives, IA is not entirely personal and can be imposed on another person, or organizational impositions can be applied to the archivist in their daily work.

Researchers. All twelve interviewees relayed ideas involving researchers in archives exhibiting IA, with 32 individual references across all transcripts. I note that there are less references about researchers engaging in IA than references to archivists doing so, and find that the conundrum of neutrality may impede on the archivist’s instinct to make value judgments against researchers. It may also be crucial to note that archival user studies were described by Rhee (2015) to not only be lacking, but to be focused broadly on “information *needs*,

information *seeking*, and information *use*" (p. 32–emphasis mine), meaning that this lens of IA is not, to borrow from Fugmann (2022), an embedded concept. Some exemplary quotes included:

A1: "A researcher could be, you know, influenced to go and seek some collection or not based on the description that's provided."

A5: "It's easy to go to a place and say, 'oh, I found *the* thing that already confirms what I'm already looking for' and then just not go looking for the other things that could disprove what you're looking for."

A10: "If a researcher wants to leave out information to create something, obviously there might be intention where somebody's leaving information out to create a narrative."

These statements implied that researchers may make avoidant decisions, actively or passively, sometimes without making it explicitly obvious to the archivist. That is to say, that IA on the researcher's end might occur before the archivist is even aware of who the researcher is. examples are in the context of face-to-face interactions and that some instances may occur "before [researchers] encounter us," as A12 pointed out. A9 astutely pointed out that "the barrier to entry for using archives is already so high," and this prevents several people from accessing archival materials, aligning with the IA principles of task difficulty, obscurity and the imposition of IA through barriers like time and cost constraints, privacy concerns, trust (Sloan et al., 2019), archives-specific jargon and policies (Douglas & Mills, 2018), attitudes and the need for "multiple literacy skills" (heretofore to include search, information, digital and primary source literacy—Duff & Johnson, 2003) to name a few. Again, several of these align with tenets of Yakel and Torres' (2003) archival intelligence, which discusses how archival jargon, internalized rules about access and use, and an archivist's own awareness of archival knowledge relating to the self and/or another individual make archives hard to understand. This can make the avoidant

behavior difficult to identify in real-time or based on the archivist's perception, if at all, as pointed out by A11:

> The difficulty is, of course, recognizing it when it happens… sometimes people really want to proceed all the way with the topic and really see how far they can take it but they're stymied by the limitations of the archive itself… it's interesting to see and think about the ways that people might accept that denial, because they don't want to know more.

A11 continued:

I can't get in their head, I don't know them that well, I see the things that I think I'm seeing, but I also could be wrong. There's a lot that I know that I sort of miss even when somebody really wants to talk to me and wants to talk to their colleagues in the room. But yeah, I think that most of the time, people don't do it on purpose.

The researcher may also be aiming to confirm something they already believe, thus denying or omitting information that does not fit within that worldview because it would force a change in beliefs or an undesired action. The notion of IA not being restricted to the self is also present here, as A1 mentioned how an archivist's description of archival material could influence a researcher to not seek information from that particular collection.

The interviewees do not find IA among researchers to be common, which may additionally explain why more references of IA among archivists were mentioned as opposed to IA among researchers. Although the interviewees do not find IA common among researchers, several points below were echoed by many or all of the interviewees, showing that researcher IA may be more common than they originally thought. The interviewees seemed to share the notion that archival researchers have high levels of experience, motivation and interest. Perhaps this

stems from empirical data showing that most archival researchers have strong academic backgrounds (Borlund et al., 2024). A12 said:

> I've come to… suspect that at least experienced or regular archival users sort of know what to expect and that they might encounter something uncomfortable… and so my perception is that most of them are coming in already aware of that possibility and prepared for it or willing to confront it.

A11 echoes that "researchers really seem to have a lot invested in showing reverence and respect for the materials and that includes not saying 'I am not interested in this,' pretty much ever." A4 also said, "researchers who come to archives are typically fairly motivated and… their inquiry is very directed… they know what they want, and they know what they're looking for, so that kind of limits what they might be open to looking [at]."

To summarize, in the archival context, all individuals who work with archival materials, including archivists and researchers, are susceptible to IA, and several principles in this study's framework are implicated by the interviewees. Of importance is the key tenet that IA is not necessarily an entirely personal decision and that some inherent concepts from archival training might come into play in how archivists perceive IA. Also of importance is the idea that IA in some of the instances above may have been employed for intentionally or unconsciously, or for good or bad reasons. For example, an archivist may have unconsciously left out information during a reference interview because they are new, or a researcher may have avoided graphic photographs in fear of trauma responses. Other components of the Relational Information Avoidance System (RIAS) Model have also already made some appearances in these quotes, but will be explored specifically in the next subsections.

4.1.2 Contributing variables to IA when working with archives

Finding 2: Several factors contribute to IA in archives surrounding the ideas about scoping, self-preservation, access, experience level, bias and worldview, characteristics about the archive itself, obscurity, outside influences and resource availability.

Congruous with this study's framework for IA, the twelve archivists interviewed pointed to several intrapersonal, interpersonal and situational factors that moderate an individual's participation in IA behavior, and these factors are often intertwined. Factors were discussed through general and archives-specific ideas about scoping, self-preservation, access, experience level, bias and worldview, characteristics about the archive itself, outside influences and resources. Many of these are applicable to IA in a general sense (e.g., self-preservation, access, and bias have been brought up in much of the extant literature), but some seem to be more specific to archives (e.g., scoping, research experience, characteristics about the archive itself, and the obscurity of archival information and structures). Also, several of these variables tend to overlap (e.g., outside influences may occur due to a donor's bias or a limited collecting scope; resource availability may be linked with access limitations, like hours of operation).

Scoping. All 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of scoping and how it relates to IA in archival research and daily work, with 113 total references across all transcripts. Relating back to the notion that most archival researchers have academic backgrounds (Borlund et al., 2024), scoping is considered to be a moderator that the interviewees believed researchers employ that can result in IA. A1 said, "[it's] always a challenge of historians and researchers that your scope is supposed to be one that is manageable… and so you really might be, even though you see information that kind of contradicts your point of view, you're specifically avoiding that," and reflected that archival researchers tend to be "particularly directed" in their research. All of

the other interviewees echoed this sentiment of researchers using confirmation bias in scoping for their research. This aligns with several principles from this study's framework including controlling outcomes by managing scope, having expectations about the content of the information itself, measures of relevance and interest, and strategic IA. This scoping could be conducted actively or passively, could have positive or negative outcomes, and could also result in inaccurate interpretations.

Going back to A1's statement about historians and researchers above, in some cases, archivists may also be historians and researchers in their own vane as well. More specifically on the archivist's end, limited scopes could impinge on collecting scopes (A2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 12), or could result from external influence from donor or legal statutes (A3, 5, 6, 7 and 9), unprocessed collections (A5 and 7), or the archivist's own biases (A10). These scoping limitations could be known or unknown to the archivist. In instances where the limited scope is known and understood, the decision to avoid information outside of that scope is strategic, indicating that the archivist knows something about the content of that information. Relevance and interest rankings are implicated here. In instances where the limited scope is unknown, or not acknowledged or understood as such, the avoidance may be more passive, or the result of an imposition of IA from an outside source, perhaps a superior.

Some instances that limit scope may be less strategic and more based on emotions and ability to cope. When discussing a particular collection relating to Holocaust and genocide studies, A2 mentioned that the graphic nature of some of the materials may be triggering for some individuals and that "maybe… they're less likely to look at pictures of the death camps and so forth." A12 also mentioned the Holocaust, and other topics mentioned include explicitly antisemitic and racist material (A7, 8 and 10), lynching photos (A8 and 12), and LQBTQ+

history (A11). While some archives users may be accustomed to confronting this type of material through experience or academic motivation, or perhaps through coping and compartmentalization skills, traumatic collections and ethics of care are still a point of focus for archives professionals as they can perpetuate historical trauma and deter users (Cvetkovich, 2008; Nathan et al., 2015; Sloan et al., 2019; Steering Committee on Canada's Archives, 2022; Turner, 2020; Wright & Laurent, 2021). The interviewees see these responses to likely, or even expectedly, traumatic material as a means for those working with archival materials to limit their scope to exclude these potential sources.

Self-Preservation. All 12 interviewees discussed the idea of self-preservation and how it related to IA in archival research and daily work, with 103 total references across all transcripts. Individuals may wish to preserve positive emotions, their privacy and safety, their trust in others, their own reputations, and personal morals, ideals, attitudes, habits and opinions. As noted before, self-preservation can sometimes be a useful application of IA, and both researchers and archivists are implicated in using self-preservation to employ IA in archives.

Both archivists and researchers are thought to avoid information relating to topics to which they may be sensitive or those that may result in negative emotions. Earlier I mentioned sensitive topics centering on racism or depicting violent acts and how individuals may exclude these from their research by limiting their scope to less traumatic material in an attempt to make the research less graphic or controversial. In a similar fashion, a researcher could seek to preserve positive emotions by avoiding imagery that could re-traumatize them or stir up negative emotions of fear, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, anger, discomfort, and more (A1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12). A1 said, "Perhaps topically there's sensitivity there… something that we might be afraid would upset us, something that we might be afraid would shift or upset our worldview in a way

that we are not wanting," aligning strongly with the principles of avoiding information because it may cause unpleasant emotions, or it may even cause a change in beliefs or trigger an undesired action. A12 also talked about how "when [archivists] fear the materials themselves or the words and they're changing their actions based on that," that this can "facilitate avoidance for other people." This interestingly touches on how this personal self-preservation of emotions on the part of archivists can still impose IA on others, resonating with the principle that IA is not restricted to one's self, even if the imposition is unintentional or passive. Similarly, A8 and A10 indicated how describing things with words but not providing digital access, or not digitizing the content at all, can deter users from trying to access the information because it becomes too difficult, or too obscure, to access.

Archivists and researchers may also have privacy and safety concerns when working with archival materials. For researchers, A2 talks about how an archives user may want to maintain anonymity depending on what they are looking at, but having to register and make an appointment to visit the reading room, thus associating the user with that information, can be dangerous in some contexts. A2 also mentions donors not wanting to "share things because there may be political and maybe racial" language that may incite safety concerns, something that A7 echoed. A8 mentioned something similar in the Indigenous context in which the Indigenous communities may want to place conditional access to information pertaining to their community that exists within an archival or museum repository.

Using the example of Indigenous archival material, on the archivist's end, the archivist preserving that material may also impose restrictions on behalf of that community's privacy and safety as well. A4, who works with medical archival material in a federal repository, outlines clear privacy concerns not only for the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act

(HIPAA) and other medical information rights of privacy, but also federal guidelines and mandates such as the Freedom of Information Act, the Privacy Act and the Presidential Records Act which can impose limits on the archives. A12 exemplified this by saying:

> I see practices like restricting certain materials and leaving those kind of undescribed because… this is, like, bleeding into sort of privacy and… restriction terms, but if you can't provide access to… something you don't want to describe, [then that's] something that you can't provide access to.

In other words, an archivist may avoid information or material because they cannot provide access to it anyway.

Trust and reputation are avenues of self-preservation that almost all of the archivists (A1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) explored in interviews. A lack of trust or perceptions of a poor reputation may cause individuals to avoid information from those people or institutions. These are applicable to archivists and researchers. Ideas about a researcher's level of trust included trust in the archivist's knowledge and expertise (A1, 5, 6, 9 and 11), trust in similar mindsets (A1, 5, 7 and 11), trust that the archivist will respect privacy (A2, 7 and 11), trust in level or amount of information sharing (A4, 6, 7, 10 and 11), trust in the information source (A8 and 9) and trust that the archivist will be respectful in general (A11). Ideas about an archivist's level of trust were all centered on trust in the researcher's intentions (A4, 9, 10 and 11). Ideas about reputation were more cemented in relationships, and are likely rooted in level of trust, and were mentioned less frequently. A4 mentioned that the institution's or individual archivist's reputation of being available and accessible can impact a researcher's avoidance, and A11 mentioned the archivist's or researcher's reputation of being ethical and/or accurate and how that can impact the likelihood of avoiding information exchange with that individual.

Lastly, individuals may want to preserve their morals, ideals, attitudes, habits and/or opinions. This relates strongly to worldview and bias which will be discussed at length later in this section. People may avoid information that reflects opposing, dissonant ideals or beliefs from their own, or may want to avoid information from those who have differing (negative or positive) attitudes from their own. All archivists discussed dissonant topics that may be observed in relation to IA including human rights (A1, 2, 5, 9 and 11), facts or opinions about close relations and communities (A1, 2, 5, 7 and 9), politics (A2, 3, 5 and 6), and promotion of controversial sentiments towards eugenics (A4), antisemitism and racism (A7, 8 and 9), sexism and sexuality (A9 and A11), and blackface and lynching (A12).

Access. Eleven of the 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of access in both physical and digital contexts and how they relate to IA in archival research and daily work, with 89 total references across all transcripts. Access to archives and archival materials can be limited thanks to a variety of barriers, and the interviewees find many components of my study's conceptual model of IA to be relevant to archival access concerns.

Archives cannot collect everything, so some researchers may avoid an archive in which they feel they have exhausted all resources (A7). Limited access to physical or digital items, or limited access to staff were also mentioned as factors that can cause IA to occur. Items may be restricted or concealed due to a variety of reasons that an archivist may or may not have control over, and they must make decisions about what physical or digital access a researcher may have. A10 pointed out that archives sometimes collect materials that they are not legally allowed to provide access to:

> We had some execution files from a court that contain all the evidence of these guys who were sent to death and the videos included [were] from the murder scene as it

happened… and those things don't, obviously they're not going to be put out for the public. There's certain statutes that don't allow that out.

Ultimately, someone, either the archivist or another entity imposing the law, knows something about the information and is then choosing to prevent access to this information for a slew of reasons on behalf of someone else. I previously mentioned how an archival item may be described with words, but access to that item is only granted in-person in the reading room (A8 and 10). Barriers to physical or digital access, in addition to the imposed difficulty of accessing the material, were also mentioned by A1, 4, 5, 7, 9 and 11.

A12 discussed an instance in which the archivist's warning about the content of an image of an actual lynching as potentially traumatizing could have prevented or delayed user access. The archivist did not outright refuse to show the image to the requester, but certainly added time and the space for second thoughts for the requester to decide to then avoid the information and not go through with their request. This dips into the previous idea of self-preservation and the way that this could facilitate IA from another individual, but also hints at the principle of the request demanding an undesired action from the archivist to provide the information. Another example came from A7 who discussed access limitations in the context of an imposition being applied by their Board of Directors to withhold potentially "inflammatory" information about a historical figure to which some of the board are related. This could impact the archivist's decisions about accessing that information themselves, or whether they pass it on to researchers and also related to the aforementioned idea of privacy.

In addition to difficulty accessing material and content, it can also be difficult to secure access to staff members. A4 said, "When you're simply not available to the public in any sort of way, and you're non-responsive, that just takes you out of the running as a source of

information," pointing out that this can happen in institutions of any size and type. Smaller organizations may suffer from limited staff, funding or staff with expertise (A4, 7 and 11), but larger ones with better funding and qualified experts on staff may also be unresponsive, perhaps due to workload distribution (A4). This ties back to reputation and how that can impact an individual's avoidant behavior, and has implications for individuals avoiding information in these institutions either just in that moment or perhaps permanently. This also hints at limited resources which will be discussed later in this section.

On the flip side of not having enough access to information, sometimes too much information or overexposure can cause IA. Information overload is characterized by the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of information, potentially causing a person to avoid information to "reduce noise" (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022, p. 1015). This is not always a bad thing and may be dependent on time and emotions like fear and trust, and can lead to biases and the application of strategic avoidance, all of which align with the framework for this study. A9 summarized this by saying:

> One thing that I sort of think about information avoidance is my human brain can only take so much information, and along with processing information there's also a lot of doubt about where the information comes from, and should I trust it, and that's only gotten more that way.

Avoidance due to information overload may also be less intentional. A4 said:

> I have a rather robust collection of materials, and thankfully it's pretty well-documented in some capacity, but when you're talking about the idea of having to rely heavily on keyword searches, and on sort of scanning of bulk materials that don't necessarily all

have finding aids, you can sometimes end up doing accidental… information avoidance just because you can't know every single thing that's in the collection.

The interviewees also noted that at any level of access to the archives, the user of that material may still have difficulty in evaluating or interpreting it's contents, and this can occur among researchers (as discussed by interviewees A4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11) and archivists (as discussed by interviewees A6, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12).

Experience Level. All 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of experience level, both in general research skills and specifically in archives, and how it relates to IA in archival research and daily work, with 69 total references across all transcripts. The interviewees equated varying levels of experience working with archives, general evaluative skills and information literacy skills with potentially varying levels of IA.

In terms of researchers, A2 reflected that less experienced archival researchers may be more passive and reactionary in avoiding information, while more experienced researchers are more active and intentional in their avoidance. A4 backed this up by saying that:

> [Experienced] individuals will have only, like, one collection they're interested in. You can tell them that there are potentially other collections and they are not interested in seeing them, they really just want to see this one collection. That's fine, I'm happy to facilitate. And then there are the other ones, which you can tell are very inexperienced, which will come up with the broadest topic, in terms of a research thing, and then they'll give themselves like a day to be in the archives.

The experienced researcher in this case is intentionally choosing specific collections because they have an understanding of how the archives work, what collections exist, and most likely have an idea of what they are looking for, therefore actively eliminating other recommendations

or options due to a limited scope, lack of interest and/or perceived irrelevance. The inexperienced researcher is basically reflecting the opposite and is passively avoiding information merely by not realizing the depth of the information they requested or how much time it will take to sift through it all. In addition to the likelihood of running out of time, they may also be overwhelmed by the amount of information placed in front of them.

An archivist's experience level with the archival materials they are handling can also lead to IA on their own part, although the examples provided are similar to the inexperienced researcher type above. A4 provided:

> It just happens to be that you don't necessarily have 100% institutional knowledge and knowledge of every single thing that's in the collection, and because your ability to search and whatnot may not have uncovered the thing that the researcher was looking for.

A8 also discussed how, in a museum display context, "[an archivist] working in a museum is typing up a little description to go with an artifact, and they don't happen to know any better just because they've never done the research themselves." In both instances, the archivist may be overestimating their skill level and therefore not thinking to ask for help, but this can certainly lead to IA if they choose to ignore advice or cut their research short after finding one piece of information.

Experience (or lack thereof) with other research skills that are not exclusive to archives are also viewed as contributing factors to IA. All of the interviewees discussed evaluative skills as congruous to avoidant behaviors. A3, who is an Associate Professor and University Archivist, pinned this as a flaw in the K-12 education system, providing, "so much of what we do in education is absorbing facts, but not, you know, seeking information, evaluating information." All of the interviewees discussed the importance of teaching evaluative skills in K-12 settings,

particularly as the world becomes increasingly digital. The interviewees all also discussed the importance of information literacy and many referred to multiple literacies (Duff & Johnson, 2003) that should make up a holistic approach to information literacy, or "meta literacy," which resonates in archival literature (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2016; Cooke, 2017; Yevelson-Shorsher & Bronstein, 2018). Some specifically mentioned the importance of primary source literacy, such as A2:

> If information literacy programs could focus more on, not forcing, but just making students or people engage with materials, in our case, primary sources, and see how it functions… any instance where you can make people engage with original documents… I think what they experience is tactile and you are engaging and you're having to really do a close read of things then, that I think is helpful and people being not necessarily more open but just certainly feeling more comfortable interrogating different sources and so forth.

Interestingly, some of the interviewees recounted that they did not dive deep into primary source research themselves until their own graduate studies:

A1: "It really wasn't until grad school, I feel like, that I was really diving into the primary sources."

A4: "I think I was in grad school before I actually ever did primary document research in an archive."

Bias and Worldview. All 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of bias and worldview and how it relates to IA in archival research and daily work, with 61 total references across all transcripts. Archivists and researchers are found to avoid information that does not align with their biases.

Researchers may engage more with archives and collections that have information that aligns with their worldview and all of the interviewees discussed this. Some examples include:

A1: "I definitely think there are people that are kind of more apt to avoid information… because they do have a very set worldview. I think there's a rigidity in thinking and less openness to… content that might shake up their worldview."

A4: "Sometimes our researchers will come in with, let's say, confirmation bias…"

A12: "It is a form of biasing, like if you're looking in a subject area for evidence and you are eliminating some of the evidence from your review, that's a biased look at that subject. Good or bad, it's not the whole picture."

These examples can apply to several principles of IA from the framework of this study, including denial and omission of information, passive avoidance, lack of interest, and positive and negative outcomes. Emotions can also come into play, reflecting back on A1's earlier quote, "There's something that we might be afraid would upset us, something that we might be afraid would shift or upset our worldview in a way that we are not wanting." Connections that the interviewees made about things researchers may be biased about included bigotry (A2, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 11), political and religious affiliations (A2, 3 and 5), personal and familial connections (A2 and 7), and demographic and socioeconomic traits like education level (A3 and 4), age, ethnicity, and gender (A5 and 8).

All of the interviewees also discussed how the archivist's own biases could cause them to avoid information, touching on several aspects of archival work. These will be discussed later in the chapter as they relate more to how IA is experienced in the archival context.

Characteristics About the Archive Itself. All 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of how characteristics about the archive itself can relate to IA in archival research and daily

work, with 56 total references across all transcripts. I asked the interviewees if they could envision IA occurring in certain types of archives more than others and they were able to provide various answers. On a general level, A5 reminded that "a big problem that archives have is that not all archives are created equal," and this seems to have a profound effect on missions and collection policies as they can limit the scope of what and who gains entry to the archive. To this point, A5 also mentioned the specific example of a private archive and how they might "cherry pick what information gets kept or accepted into a place," while A6 and A11 talked about Presidential libraries where "they're wanting to tell a story from a particular political perspective and so they're going to be seeking specific sources produced by members of that particular Presidential cabinet [or] political party" (A6). This may not resonate well with a researcher and can allow the researcher to "cherry pick" which archives they might go to because "they know that they're going to find the information that fits more with their worldview of what they want to find" (A1).

Privacy concerns and freedom of information also seem to be concerns, particularly for federal and medical repositories that may need to redact or restrict information. A4, who works in a federally funded museum with medical collections, voiced ideas about federal regulations and how they control the flow, or stoppage, of information due to HIPAA protections to peoples' rights to privacy. In this example, being located on a federal property, there are additional restrictions on photography and physical access to spaces, which can turn researchers away because of perceived difficulty or obscurity in accessing the information. In an earlier example regarding privacy and trust, A7 discussed restricting access to inflammatory information at the behest of the Board of Directors because of antisemitic content. State mandates on another earlier example regarding restricted access to disturbing photographs of crime scenes (A10) are

also rooted in concerns regarding privacy and the potential to induce trauma. In all of these examples, there is a clear desire to control outcomes and minimize emotional and mental stress.

Ultimately, all archives are likely subject to this scoping and "cherry picking" as there are limitations to space and other resources, but other popular types of archives mentioned by the interviewees included historical societies and community or grassroots archives.

Obscurity. All 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of obscurity and how it relates to IA in archival research and daily work, with 44 total references across all transcripts. Perhaps closely linking to ideas about experience level above, the interviewees for this study would likely agree that archival research is not easy or well understood by the layman, including novice and experienced researchers. The previously mentioned underexposure to primary source literacy and archival research in K-12 education is thought to impact an individual's decision to not engage with archival materials because it is perceived to be too difficult or obscure.

The uncertainty about how to use archives, what is in an archive, and whether one has access to an archive may cause researchers to avoid information in archives or avoid the archive altogether. This is also measured with myriad other factors. A2 explained that a novice researcher may avoid using archives because "it's easy to be intimidated by going into an archive." A9 similarly remarked, "sometimes… you encounter a researcher who seems overwhelmed with the process of using archives, and of course, I mean, [if] they've never used archives before, then how are they going to know what that's like?" In addition to experience level, these thoughts also strongly connect with the idea of self-preservation as the researcher may soothe their negative emotions about archives by avoiding archives altogether.

Also relevant to researchers avoiding information is the idea of multiple literacies (Duff & Johnson, 2003) and primary source literacy (Yakel & Torres, 2003). On the primary source

front, A7 mentioned that "a lot of our folks have never used primary sources before, don't know what that is, so there's definitely this education component, you know, on a very selected [*sic*] group of people that have found their way to us." This exposure to primary sources can occur in person, but there are digital implications at play as well, as archives have adapted to technological advances, with most of their finding aids and collections discoverable online rather than in analog formats. A7 also touched on this earlier by talking about older patrons who may have an aversion to using new technology to access collections online or even being contacted via email. This example is more reflective of a choice, but digital divides and lower digital, search and information literacy skills which may not be by choice are also relevant here. A3 alluded to a lack of search literacy in an example of the archivist suggesting collections "if the researcher hasn't found them through our database or access systems." All of these examples show how archives and archival research can appear to be too difficult or obscure, which can cause avoidance in favor of easier tasks. A5 passionately summed it up, saying:

> I feel very strongly that archives are to the average Joe… people have no idea what we're talking about in archives… the only people who could have come up with the idea of a finding aid is an archivist, because [other people are] like 'what are those?' [We] use words like 'provenance,' and like, nobody in the real world walking around has any idea what you… mean.

The quote above also brings up ideas about how archivists intentionally or unintentionally obscure the process of archival research, thus impacting an individual's IA, and aligns heavily with Yakel and Torres' (2003) research on "archival intelligence," language use in particular. Other examples include:

A8: “There’s a lot of ways for archivists… to sort of hint around what they don’t want to say, the information they don’t want to give in a way that sort of pays lip service to it, but doesn’t really lay it all out for people to understand.”

A10: “We’ve had photos that… aren’t restricted by law, but they aren’t things that we’d want people to grab on the internet and start just spreading it everywhere. And so we have some collections where we put up… ‘this is available in the reading room or by request,’ but we don’t put it up on the public side.”

A11: “It’s the foldering structure, you know, it’s folders and series. I can really argue all sides of a lot of questions about archival processing [but] I feel like the longer my career goes on, the less committed I am to highly formal and clear processing.”

These examples of jargon and specific archival practices are clearly observed by the interviewees as acknowledged barriers between the archives and potential researchers and are clearly thought to impact whether one might avoid archival materials. It is interesting to note that this is the only idea in which the interviewees did not discuss obscurity as something that impacts the archivist’s own IA. I would assume that the archivist is trained in archival research and multiple literacies (Duff & Johnson, 2003) prior to working in the profession, thus mitigating the task difficulty that this particular idea about IA in archives seems to hinge on.

Outside Influences. 11 of the 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of outside influences and how they relate to IA in archival research and daily work, with 42 total references across all transcripts. Sometimes it may not be in an individual’s control whether they include a piece of information or not in a narrative or information exchange.

Some instances of outside influence have been discussed in tandem with other ideas mentioned by the interviewees, such as self-preservation of morals or ideals, or bias. A6

contextualized this in political groups: “Moreso within maybe a government institutional context that’s kind of guided by, you know, collections related to public officials and city bureaus where politics with a capital ‘P’ is at play and things are coming from a certain political perspective.” In this case, individuals aligning with certain groups or ideals may discredit information sources that do not echo their own morals or biases. Individuals may also be drawn to avoid information in order to align with another individual’s wants or needs from the information. A3 opined that archivists should follow their institutional mandates, and A5 provided an example of researchers avoiding information about a United States Border Patrol agent that reflected racist ideals because the objective of the research is meant to be a positive celebration of the Border Patrol’s 100th anniversary.

Other ideas about outside influence that were mentioned can be imposed by legal statutes from federal, state and local governments (A2, 4, 5, 6 and 10), the institution at-large’s missions and/or policies (A 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11), stakeholders (A5, 6, 7, 9 and 10), or general bureaucratic delays (A8).

Resource availability. 11 of the 12 archivists interviewed discussed the idea of limited resources or capacity and how they relate to IA in archival research and daily work, with 28 total references across all transcripts. The interviewees discussed how an individual’s perception of how available resources are can impact one’s avoidant behavior. Resources discussed included mental capacity (A1, 3, 9, 11 and 12), time (A1, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11 and 12), money (A2, 5 and 7), space for storage (A5), educational resources (A5 and 8), digital divides (A7), the desire to not be responsible for fixing problems (A9), and checks and balances (A10). These limitations can have strategic or emotional implications and in instances where the individual has some control over the situation or outcome, they may engage in IA in order to assert even more control. For

example, they may decide to strategically avoid some information to save time or mental capacity because they have a deadline.

Conversely, another idea the interviewees discussed is when things are not in the individual's control, as mentioned earlier in this section. Some of these limitations listed above may not be something that a person can control, and people may avoid information because of the lack of perceived control as well. Certainly, a person can control several of these variables, such as giving themselves enough time to do the research or learning more digital literacy skills so they can access and use the materials better, but sometimes this is not the case. After 89% of archives closed to the public and several archivists faced lay-offs, pay cuts, and fears surrounding contract renewal, and struggled to reopen after the COVID-19 pandemic (Tang et al., 2021), A7 is still feeling the struggle. At the time of their interview, their organization was still having limited in-person reference appointments due to a lack of staff, which has also impacted the day to day workload. They said, "if we can't do in person work, so we have to potentially do the digging that the researchers would do themselves if they were here… do we have time to do that?" This limitation to in-person services also has impacts on older researchers who have a "limitation on their end to contact us electronically." They may not have access to a device at home, and access to public services can present a limit as well. This digital exclusion is linked with poverty, low education attainment, and isolation and these individuals are at higher risk of this digital divide than the wealthier, educated and more socialized population (Anrijs et al., 2023; Vogels et al., 2020).

The previous subsection looked at the outermost sphere of the RIAS model in which everyone is susceptible to IA, in this case, archivists and researchers. Other stakeholders in the process are also implicated as lawmakers, administrators, board members, etc., may also be

involved in this process. Many of the above examples were not purely categorizable into one of the variables as several may have been included as contributors to one particular instance of IA. A researcher could have a limited scope in order to manage their workload and outcomes, but this limited scope may also be inspired by their own worldview or bias about a particular topic. On the other hand, the way in which archivists structure information could be too confusing for an individual, thus causing them to avoid archives altogether for no other reason. A manifestation of IA in the archives could combine any of these variables thus far.

4.1.3 Denial vs. omission when working with archives?

Finding 3: IA can manifest itself in two ways when working with archives: Omission, and/or denial or misdirection.

All of the archivists interviewed shared ideas about the ways in which IA can manifest itself in the archival context. Researchers and archivists manifest IA in two ways, which can occur independently or in any combination: 1) Omission of information and/or 2) Denial or misdirection of information. Denial and omission are explicitly congruous with the framework of this study, although Sweeny et al. (2010) would exclude omission, or "knowledge dismissal," from IA. The evidence in support of omission as a manifestation of IA is clearly salient in the archival context. I believe it is also important to note that outright denial or misdirection, and omission, is not necessarily bad or intentional.

Omission. Eleven of the 12 archivists interviewed provided ideas in which archivists and researchers may access information and then omit or reject it later, with 58 references across all transcripts. Although mentioned but excluded as a principle of IA in Sweeny et al.'s (2010) systematic review, omission of information is characterized well by the idea of knowledge dismissal in which information is retrieved and then omitted or rejected. This is a less direct

method of IA and can clearly be temporary or permanent, as the decision to omit the information can happen at any time.

In terms of researchers omitting information, A11 provided a solid example of this in which an archivist provides a researcher with "a super rich box [that is] relevant to their topic, and they just look through it and put it back," and how an archivist would perhaps discern a difference between them simply being done with the box and actively rejecting the information. In this example, the archivist expands that the researcher takes the time to at least acknowledge and access the information, but may then be discarding it because, to the researcher, it "isn't relevant to [their] immediate topic." A11 also provides an example where a researcher may encounter information about a historical figure and engage with it at first, but then may choose to discard that information later because the terms used to describe that person may not match with the way the researcher would describe them, or the way they would describe themselves. This resonates back to the previous subsections' ideas about biases, self-preservation of morals, limited scope and more. Also applying to self-preservation and limited scope is A5's story about a group who was researching the U.S. Border Patrol and a particular figure who was targeting Chinese people. In this story, A5 would attempt to provide all of the relevant information about the Border Patrol, but said, "I can tell you right now that the way that they're going to craft the narrative is not going to include [that part]" because the research is meant to be a positive 100th anniversary narrative. All of the other interviewees mentioned notions of skewed and crafted narratives as well.

On the archivist front, only 7 of the 12 interviewees shared ideas about the omission of information on the part of archivists. All of the interviewees would say they believe in providing the most information possible and that they do not intentionally omit information, but there are

factors often out of the archivist's control that can result in omission. A5 pointed out "that one person's collection or one entity's collection does not always end up in the one same place" and provided an example where a family's records ended up in multiple repositories. Aligning with ideas from the previous subsection, some parts of the records may end up at one repository because of the family's relationship or trust with that particular institution, or an archivist may only collect certain records that contain aspects that are relevant to their collections policies. In this situation, the archivist is accessing the information and may then assert some control over what does or does not get added to the collections based on relevance or perhaps their own biases, but other uncontrollable factors and outside influences can come into play as well (A4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

Denial or Misdirection. All of the interviewees provided ideas in which archivists and researchers exhibit outright refusal to engage with information or purposefully misdirect other people from information, with 34 references across all transcripts. Interviewees are divided on whether denial or misdirection is always characterized by conscious or active decisions to avoid information. A6 sees denial as more active because "that interpretive choice that people are making when they're requesting material… I could see that being at play on a more active level." A11 also experienced a moment when a patron flatly refused to see a particular piece in their archival holdings, but said that this is uncommon: "There have definitely been moments when it's quite overt but most of the time it is subtle."

A3 conceptualized denial and misdirection more in the archivist's own IA, in which they might refuse to collect material outside of their collection policies, by providing the example of a religious archive. A8, who works in a federal government repository, acknowledged that "even looking at, like, we only collect governmental records, that's a slant right there." This is common

in archives and libraries as there are limitations of space, budgets and other resources (Gregory, 2019; Johnson, 2018), and is not necessarily a bad thing for the institution. Unclear, poorly described or vastly limited policies and missions may cause researchers to make decisions to avoid repositories that do not possess collections that they see as relevant to their topics. When discussing content warnings on graphic, potentially problematic imagery in collections, A6 envisioned these as a tool "that kind of enables somebody to kind of consent to whether or not they want to see that… that could lead to information avoidance, and maybe for good reason, because somebody doesn't want to be re-traumatized."

The interviewees agree that an archivist could more actively misdirect an individual by explicitly pushing them to a new collection or refusing to provide the information they ask for, but this is seen as uncommon. In direct contradiction to their shared view that neutrality in archives is a myth, the interviewees mostly said that they should remain neutral in their reference services to patrons by providing what they ask for and trying to avoid value judgments. A3 said, "I do point out other collections that are related… but I don't twist their arm to use them," and this sentiment was shared by all participants. Some decisions to misdirect individuals may not come from value judgments and may also be outside of the reference archivist's control. A4 provides:

> I would more relate to.. the active aspects of either not providing, over-restricting or, in some way, kind of stymying or otherwise, just kind of restricting the flow of all information… sometimes it can just be like, full on, 'no, you can't access this because of such and such reasons,' or, 'oh, we can provide it to you, but we can really only provide like three things, and I don't think they're gonna be particularly helpful for you'.

A7 also offered:

> We will not provide information about [certain items], because we are concerned that that item and that paperwork is potentially so inflammatory that it just… seems ethically wrong to [provide it]. I mean, yes, you know, information should be free, but on the other hand, you know, [it] seems very difficult for us to provide that.

Again, the conundrum of neutrality is creeping in on some of these examples as personal morality and judgments impact decisions that might impact IA. However, other variables also come in, as there are sometimes intentional silences in an attempt to protect an image, reputation or another individual's emotions. Some of the examples above may also suggest that, although this section provides two manifestations of IA, that these manifestations may also lie on a spectrum from deliberate to more unconscious, like many of the key tenets of IA.

4.2 RQ2: What Experiences Do Archivists Have with Information Avoidance in Their Daily Work?

Although 9 of the 12 archivists interviewed for this study were not familiar with IA in a clinical sense, all of the archivists were able to talk about ways that they could experience, or have experienced, IA in archives. The discussions that occurred relating to possible or actual real life experiences with IA fall into two overarching themes that explore how archivists have, or how they might, experience IA, and what archival practices and concepts influence the occurrence of IA. The interviewees' perceptions of whether their role as an archivist is more public-facing or behind the scenes also seem to have some bearing on how they discussed potential or actual experiences.

4.2.1 Applications of information avoidance in an archivist's daily work

Finding 4: Archivists discussed real life applications of IA hypothetically and anecdotally, and those who perceive their role as more public-facing tended to provide more anecdotal examples.

All of the archivists interviewed each spoke hypothetically about how they could imagine IA playing out in archives, and anecdotally about IA with real stories from their lives. The latter occurred more frequently. As they were forming ideas about the concepts of IA previously outlined in this chapter, each interviewee was able to apply their ideas to hypothetical situations, or to actual past experiences. Interestingly, the interviewees' perceptions about whether their job is more public-facing seem to correlate with the provision of more anecdotes than hypotheticals. Perhaps this is because public-facing archival roles are working more collaboratively with more researchers and are more conscious of these interactions than those who work behind the scenes, who may be more solitary. Those who considered their positions to be more of a mix are less predictable in whether they spoke anecdotally or hypothetically, and those who considered their positions more or totally behind the scenes are even less predictable. Factors including years of experience, job responsibilities and institution type do not seem to impact these assertions in any predictable way. Table 4.3 provides a breakdown organized by totally public-facing, more public-facing, mix, more behind the scenes, and totally behind the scenes with the interviewee's pseudonym, number of anecdotes, number of hypotheticals, years of experience, job responsibilities, and institution type. The rows below in green indicate more anecdotes than hypotheticals, yellow are even splits or split with a margin of 1, and red indicates more hypotheticals than anecdotes.

Table 4.3

Perceptions of Role Type and Total Numbers of Anecdotes and Hypotheticals Provided

	Public-facing vs. Behind the Scenes	**Archivist**	**# of Anec-dotes**	**# of Hypo-theticals**	**Years of Experience**	**Job Responsibilities**	**Institution Type**
Group 1	Totally public-facing	A11	10	4	8	Reference, instruction and training, digitization, some processing	Historical society
	More public-facing	A2	5	2	32	Generalist	Small, public liberal arts college
	More public-facing	A4	5	3	12	Reference, collection management, processing, preservation	Federally funded museum
	More public-facing	A5	4	1	5	Generalist	Historical society
Group 2	Mix	A1	3	3	9	Access, processing, arrangement, description, accessioning, digitization	Large, public R1 university
	Mix	A3	1	2	15	Generalist	Medium, public R2 university
	Mix	A6	3	4	12	Reference, collection management, processing	Large, multi-branch, municipal public library

	Public-facing vs Behind the Scenes	Archivist	# of Anec-dotes	# of Hypo-theticals	Years of Experience	Job Responsibilities	Institution Type
Group 2 (cont'd)	Mix	A7	5	2	16	Admin tasks, collection management	Public, non-profit museum complex
	Mix	A9	3	1	12	Processing, collection management, donor relations, some reference	Large, public R1 university
Group 3	More behind the scenes	A12	4	3	3	Processing, some reference	Large, public R1 university
	Totally behind the scenes	A8	4	7	3	Collection management, processing	Large, public R1 university
	Totally behind the scenes	A10	8	6	10	Digitization, metadata, description, processing	Large state archive

In Group 1, the four interviewees who considered their role to be totally public-facing or more public-facing (A2, 4, 5 and 11) all relayed more anecdotes than hypotheticals. In Group 2, some interviewees who considered the role to be more of a 50/50 mix between both (A1, 3 and 6) provided equal or close to equal examples of anecdotes vs. hypotheticals, while others (A7 and 9) told more anecdotes but these two archivists may work in small internal teams as part of larger organizations. In Group 3, the interviewees who considered their roles to be totally behind the scenes or more behind the scenes (A8, 10 and 12) were more varied. A8, who works in a large academic institution, provided more hypotheticals than anecdotes and considered themselves to be totally behind the scenes, with tasks focused on processing and collections management. Their examples seemed to focus more on the researcher. A10, who works in a large state archive, provided more anecdotes than hypotheticals but focused more on anecdotes about IA on the part of archivists. They considered themself to be totally behind the scenes, with tasks focused on digitization, metadata and processing. A12, who works in a large academic institution, provided a near even split with 4 anecdotes and 3 hypotheticals, and talked mostly about how the archivist may impose IA on a researcher through description or trigger warnings. They considered themself to be more behind the scenes with processing and collections management tasks, but also taking on required reference desk shifts at times. It is interesting to note that A8, who provided more hypotheticals but an arguably close split, and A12, who provided a near even split as well, both have less years of experience than A10, who provided more anecdotes.

Anecdotes. All of the archivists provided anecdotal experiences with IA, with 55 references across all interviews. As was shared in the previous part of this chapter, several of the interviewees developed ideas about IA by articulating past experiences working with researchers

and behind the scenes in their everyday work. On the researcher front, A8 provided a very specific example of a man who frequents their collections and expresses IA through denial of what he deems irrelevant, and/or uninteresting information, limited scope and bias:

> He shows up every couple of years and asks for records from… one of the big battles that we [have is] Geronimo or the Apaches or somebody like that… that's mostly what he's interested in. And he, you know, shows up repeatedly and asks for more information about that and I kind of get the impression from my boss that he's not really interested in, you know, the whys and the wherefores and the other side's opinion or anything like that…so I would characterize that as a sort of information avoidance to focus in so narrowly, especially after so many years to focus in so narrowly on just one aspect of an event or of an era or the people that you're looking at.

On the archivist's end, A3 provided an anecdote about a former Society of American Archivists (SAA) President who adamantly believed that archives should stick to their institutional missions when developing and managing collections, to the point where a discussion was canceled because he had written an article that critiqued postmodern social justice-driven collecting movements:

> There was supposed to be some kind of… brown bag lunch discussion about this article that people complained about and SAA canceled. It was a big to-do… [the President of SAA] was arguing that [what] we ought to be doing with collection development is sticking to our institutional missions, and he was sort of critiquing sort of the social justice collecting movements, that a lot of the profession was going down that path and I bet upset some people and they complained and then I believe that brown bag talk… was canceled.

On one hand, these collections, which center on reparative archiving practices that seek to elevate and be representative of marginalized communities and their struggles and successes (Caswell, 2021; Freeman, 2023; Hughes-Watkins, 2018), are felt by some to be exclusionary of materials from the other side, or the "mythical norm." This could reflect self-preservation of emotions or morals, bias, or outside influences who dictate missions for the collecting institution. On the other hand, IA occurred in the form of self-preservation, and perhaps bias, which resulted in the denial of receiving the information by complaining enough to get the discussion canceled.

The above examples showcase IA manifesting in the form of denial, but it can also manifest as omission and obscurity. A5's experience relating to the group researching the U.S. Border Patrol provided a real example of how researchers may have a limited scope of research influenced by outside factors and internal biases, feelings and morals. Archivist 5 would provide the information, and felt that the anti-Chinese racism-related documents would be omitted from the final outcome of the research. In some ways, this could simultaneously be manifested as denial since the box "says 'Chinese Border Patrol Agent'" which could cause a researcher to avoid it altogether, or omission if the researcher looked in this box to learn more and then chose to exclude that from the final narrative.

Other examples include stories about genealogical researchers who would not look at information that skews "the narrative they have for their family tree or themselves" (A2), political implications that might make individuals avoidant of critical information (A9), and a self-acknowledged bias of perhaps providing more rich and favorable metadata for materials that are more interesting to the archivist (A10). These cover a variety of principles outlined in this study's framework and could be seen in any combination.

Hypotheticals. All of the archivists provided hypothetical experiences with IA that they imagine are likely, with 40 references across all interviews. While discussing ideas about IA, the interviewees were able to think about hypothetical instances where IA could unfold based on their previous experiences. These are characterized by examples of how IA could occur without providing specific stories from their daily work, and in the form of questions. A6 talked about interpretation on both the archivist's and researcher's side where an individual may have to:

> ... kind of fill in the blanks based on what is and isn't there in the collection… what is and isn't said, what else you know contextually about the person or the organization. And because I don't believe anybody's neutral, including people who are doing the research and interpretation side… you can kind of interpret things in whatever way you want, especially if there's gaps in the record where you don't have a lot of evidence about something to… support whatever your argument is in your research.

This leaves room for omission or denial on the part of both archivists and researchers and also brings up the idea of inference avoidance as a type of IA, in which the interpretation may be inaccurate or inappropriate in order to falsely support a claim or narrative. This was excluded by Sweeny et al. (2010) in their definition of IA, but I included it in the framework for this study as limited scope, time constraints, biases and more are mentioned by the interviewees as factors that might lead to IA. These are also not restricted to one's self, as an archivist's approach to processing or description may influence a downstream researcher's avoidance and interpretations. As A7 discussed on the researcher side:

> It could work both ways so you could actively avoid [by saying] 'I don't want to see the boxes that are labeled African American' and on the other hand, you could not know that

> they're there because they're… 20 pages away in this very long container list and… particularly if you're… only looking at the paper finding aid.

The avoidance may not always have a negative utility or outcome either, as A4 pointed out:

> Hypothetically, if, you know, a researcher were to be looking for images related to vascular surgery or something like that, of which they've got 3 images that they're particularly interested in, it might be that they're just interested in seeing the vascular surgery as a visual aid for a paper, at which point they just [don't need more information]... it really comes down to how they're utilizing it and what they're open to.

Some hypotheticals about IA came in the form of questions. A8 asked, "In recommending certain collections as interesting and relevant, [am I] paradoxically like, discouraging them, of course, from others? But I'm also saying… '[X] aspect of this collection is interesting, this is what draws me into it and why it made me think of you'." A12 asked, "If I am adding quotation marks around an offensive term, because I want to keep that original language in there, [am I] still doing something to that language and how it's going to be interpreted?" These resonate strongly with the idea of how archivists can impose IA on researchers through the way they approach their daily tasks, with the first example stemming from a hypothetical reference interview and the second from a hypothetical description. The researcher could then measure any combination of factors and choose a reason to avoid information actively or passively.

4.2.2 Archival practices and workflows influence or are influenced by the occurrence of IA

Finding 5: Archivists discuss IA in relation to several archival practices and concepts, including experience with archival research, collection management, visibility or

archives, digital access, description, reference skills, the archivist's training and experience, the archivist's bias, physical access, processing, trigger and content warnings, archival exhibits and public displays, and archival arrangement and metadata.

All of the archivists interviewed could name archival practices and concepts that related to IA. The archival practices and concepts listed above were all woven into anecdotes and hypotheticals in varying combinations of the who, why, when and what of IA discussed in the previous section. These archival concepts came up in the interviews organically as the interviewees provided their anecdotal and hypothetical evidence in the previous subsection, which demonstrates that upon learning about IA, archivists can ground concepts in their daily work. Similar to the contributing variables from RQ1, these may also be combined in an overlapping fashion, or may occur individually. These also may reflect more heavily on the archivist and their ability to impose IA on another individual since many of these are workflows and practices that the archivist would have more control over than someone else would.

Experience with Archival Research. All of the archivists related a researcher's degree of experience with archival research with IA, with 45 references across all interviews. These particular instances were only mentioned in relation to a researcher's potential to engage in IA behavior. Aligning with the idea of sliding scales, many of the interviewees envision a researcher's experience with archival research as something that has variable levels, and the level of experience can cause more or less proclivity towards avoiding information and influence how it manifests. Obviously, these overlapped with the idea the interviewees had about experience level linking with why and when IA occurs in archives, but other ideas overlapped as well, such as limited scope (A1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11), availability of resources (A2, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12), bias and

worldview (A3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10), obscurity and task difficulty (A5, 6, 7, 8, 9), self-preservation (A6, 9), access (A7, 8, 9), and outside influence (A9).

Using an example of "young academics" who would be less experienced with archival research, A4 asserted, "They're individuals who very much are a little bit more trying to either confirm what they already believe, or that are attempting to kind of make the pieces fit into the framework that they've already created." This combines the idea of experience level with the ideas of limited scope and biases. A4 had also mentioned ideas of resource availability and access as well. A5 strongly connected experience with obscurity, mentioning that they "can't think of a single good example… like an archival standard or an archival tool that is well translated to just the regular people," alluding to the fact that those unfamiliar with archival research and jargon may get lost and avoid information because it becomes too difficult to access and understand.

A11 does not necessarily see inexperience as a negative thing:

> With, like very amateur researchers who tend to come in with preconceived ideas, and to be pursuing an obsession rather than an idea. I think that there's a lot of room in the archives for people who research this way. And I certainly, you know, in my private life, I'm an amateur researcher on many topics. It's just again, it's a thing that we need to look out for, be honest with ourselves about as we approach the archive.

This archivist saw encountering individuals with a lack of experience as an inevitable part of the job, one where the archivist has an opportunity to teach the researcher and guide them towards strong research skills in an open environment where they feel safe and comfortable. This relationship building, and trust in particular, are also mentioned by A6 who finds that researchers may not trust an archivist when they say they do not have information on a particular topic. In

this situation, the researcher is not avoiding the information in the collections, but rather the information that the archivist is providing.

Collection Management. Ten of the 12 archivists related collection management practices to IA, with 39 references across all interviews. These particular instances were specifically mentioned in relation to an archivist's engagement in IA behavior, but outside influence from donors, administrators, legislation, etc., also came into play (A1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10). Collection management also overlapped with limited scopes (A1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 12), bias and worldviews (A1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12), characteristics about the archive itself (A1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12), access (A2, 10, 11), availability of resources (A5, 7, 8), task difficulty (A7), and experience (A7, 8).

A1 succinctly provided that in collection management there are "subjective decisions and personal judgment that comes into decisions around acquisition, deselection, the curation of collections and more." A2 added a layer of outside influence by mentioning "we're a state chartered institution and what we store, in a sense, being supported by tax dollars should be open." Others, like A7, pitched outside influence as a limiting factor to their collection management. Recalling A7's anecdote about their institution's board of directors intervening in what information is available to the public: "I mean, we have it in our collection, we do not make that public and we will not provide information about it, because we are concerned that that item and that paperwork is potentially so inflammatory that it just seems ethically wrong to… provide that."

In A7's case, the way the collection is managed and the materials that make their way into the collection may also attract or deter researchers for positive or negative reasons:

> Certainly we have… been contacted by people who are specifically looking for the antisemitic materials related to [redacted for researcher confidentiality], and we can

> develop a sense, even in just a brief email exchange, what perhaps they intend to use that material for. And so they're supporting, you know, their own antisemitic views and potentially using that to, you know, try to influence others and that seems to be potentially misusing the material.
>
> A7 continued:
>
> Our collecting has diversified away from that, but we've also then tried to, particularly in the last five or six years or so, tried to diversify the people that are represented in the collection… it will take years and years to kind of really change the balance of that by like volume of material, but we can change and we're, I think, as an institution and kind of changing our face or the way that the people, the stories that we're presenting, the people that we're presenting, the groups that we're talking about and that is impacting our collecting and the types of material that we're collecting and who we're collecting on.

The known antisemitic content in this case is attracting researchers of a particular worldview, but the archivist and their board of directors are engaging in IA, and imposing it upon others, by not providing those materials to researchers. This content may also deter other, less like-minded individuals away from using these particular collections as they may not want to encounter this type of information.

Overall Visibility of Archives. Eleven of the 12 archivists related the lack of visibility of archives (what they are and how they are used) with IA, with 35 references across all interviews. As archivists obviously know what archives are and how to use them, these particular mentions were discussed in relation to a researcher's potential to engage in IA. The interviewees made general statements about the lack of visibility of archives, such as A6 who said, "it could be the lack of familiarity with archives and the nature of archival collections, kind of getting back at the

researcher being very convinced that something exists that doesn't, because of lack of familiarity with how archival collections manifest." A1 also noted that "There are a lot of studies, right, about the visibility of archives and this question of, 'do people know the value? Do they know what archives do? Do they understand the value of archives to their lives personally to broader society?'." Some of these instances also overlapped with ideas about experience (A1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8), access (A1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10), availability of resources (A1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12), limited scope (A1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 12), self-preservation (A2, 6), outside influence (A5), and obscurity or task difficulty (A4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12).

As in the section above about collection management, there were several allusions to the lack of representation of diverse communities in archival collections that were linked with statements about the lack of visibility of archives. A1 said:

> I think this is partly today out of contemporary dialogue around who's represented in archives, who isn't and gaps in the archives. And so there's, I think, what is more attention to collecting around underrepresented communities and not just collecting but having those communities be part of our collaborative work in enhancing the archives. But if that is sort of one side of this… then is there that awareness for broader society about these records being available. Are people avoiding the information in archives? Are they not aware of it, you know… so that's something, that's what comes to mind.

Agreeing with this, A12 said "I think a lot fewer people know what archives are and what they do and how they support a community than it can feel like sometimes," and A5 talked about a queer archive they had visited in Mexico City and how it was not very well-known:

> They just start collecting all their friends' stuff, and all their posters and all their banners and all their documentation of their personal papers like everything they have, right? And

> they start shoving it into a room and it becomes like a bit of a hoarder situation but over the years they, like, come together and they get it into an actual working archive. But they have no funding. I mean, it's just them. It's just this one guy, a very passionate guy, collecting all of these things that are an incredible resource and that are very thorough, you know, untold, like, history smack in the middle of Mexico City. But the problem is, is that they don't have the funding that like, the National Archives in Mexico has [redacted for researcher confidentiality]. And so there are a lot of issues that I think come up when it comes to that like how I started by saying not all archives are created equal.

K-12 and undergraduate education is also strongly linked as the value of archives and archival, primary source research is not commonly taught in schools (A1, 4, 5, 7 and 10). A5 provided an anecdote about how a lot of the classes they would teach were mostly for college students, but they saw it as important to connect with younger children:

> We were like, 'we want to get kids, like, we want to get the younger students in here, get them in early' because I didn't even know what an archivist was… until college… it's not like when you're little it's like… 'are you going to be a teacher, a veterinarian or an archivist?' Like nobody even knows what those are… none of the kids I had ever had a clue what an archive was. So they've never heard of it in seventh grade, high school… all throughout college students… so I think it's vital.

While all of the examples above are in relation to a potential researcher's visibility of archives, that visibility is clearly hinged on several aspects of archives that are within the control of an archivist. Decisions and efforts made by archivists can change the visibility of archives overall, and the way in which people perceive the archive's value. Educators are also seen as a point of entry for younger students.

Digital Access. Nine of the 12 archivists related digital access to archives to IA, with 32 references across all interviews. Ideas about access overall discussed earlier in this study are obviously relevant here, but the interviewees had some specific thoughts about digital access to archives and how that may impact IA among researchers and archivists. For the researcher, there may be barriers relating to digital literacy skills or access (A3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9). For the archivist, their digital interfaces may not be easy to use, may not be searchable, (A3, 4, 6, 7) or potentially could not exist, and materials may not be digitized fully or at all (A7, 8, 10, 12), thus imposing IA on others. Examples below also overlapped with ideas about experience level (A3, 4, 9, 10, 11), availability of resources (A4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9), limited scope (A5, 7), outside influence (A5, 7, 9, 10), self-preservation (A8, 9, 12), and bias and worldview (A9, 12).

A5 talked about "the average Joe" and "non-academics" in an earlier example and provided the following hypothetical about the digital divide: "People who exist in a world where, like, you maybe haven't… gotten sat down and learned how to use computers or like, you know, do deep research." They also linked this to representational belonging by adding, "I think that is the number one, like, thing that's keeping people from even knowing what an archive is, like… not seeing themselves in an archive or know[ing] that they could have their stuff in an archive." Not providing digital access to "hidden collections" was also noted by A7 as something that relates to IA:

> So the last 10 to 15 years of trying to improve the searchability of our materials… we were a completely paper-based finding aid and inventory shop. We've now transitioned to at least keyword searchable PDFs… so that you can search across collections as well as down into collections and we can do that electronically. So that [has] also helped us

> greatly in revealing materials about, you know, underrepresented groups and people in our material.

Too much information and too much access to information are also seen as potential problems. A4 pointed out:

> I have a rather robust collection of materials, and thankfully, it's pretty well documented in some capacity, but when you're talking about the idea of having to rely heavily on keyword searches, and on, sort of, scanning of bulk materials, that don't necessarily all have finding aids, you can sometimes end up doing accidental sort of, like, I guess, information avoidance just because you can't know every single thing that's in the collection.

A9 also provided that "We do want the people who come in and use our collections or encounter us online… to engage with all things within the context of learning, but I feel like we almost sometimes do too much of it." A6 was also previously quoted wondering, "Is the more that we make things discoverable on the web, has that led to more of an increase [in avoidance] because people can see more of what's there in a particular collection so they can make a conscious choice?"

Archival Description. Ten of the 12 archivists related archival descriptions and practices with IA, with 29 references across all interviews. The interviewees envisioned archival description and its relation to IA as something that archivists and researchers may both engage in. Examples provided overlapped with ideas about self-preservation (A1, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12), outside influence (A1, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12), limited scope (A4, 7, 12), bias and worldview (A4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12), availability of resources (A7, 8, 10, 12), experience level (A8, 10), and obscurity and task difficulty (A8, 10). There are access concerns as well, as a lack of description

or choices in descriptive terms may limit searchability (A1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12), and content warnings in descriptions could cause a researcher to avoid information (A3, 6, 10 and 12).

For the archivist, personal subjectivities could come into play when writing descriptions where they may avoid information altogether or omit information:

A1: "There's still so much [of] the personal in that there's a huge variety [of descriptions] and how those are written in terms of length, in terms of colorful language and more."

A10: "When people are describing things and writing out metadata or whatnot, that's where I think that's definitely where something could be left out… if the information could be left out that was unsavory towards this person, maybe that… you don't want to talk about this person's past history that may be unpleasant."

There are also impositions placed on the archivists from outside influences that can cause IA in description writing and these could have negative or positive outcomes. A10 went on to talk about "certain rules about [description and metadata]... and I may not necessarily get real deep into some of the content or information that would be that type of information where people would want to… [avoid] in a sense." A7 also mentioned that they "start[ed] looking at the terminologies that we're using to describe materials, a lot of that was initially driven by needs of [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act]... so in the museum collections going through those and understanding all of that and then what the terms and languages should be… describing that material."

A few of the interviewees built on A1's thoughts of including the personal in how they describe archival materials and historical figures, and how this can impose IA on researchers. A9 discussed how "materials that are challenging, reflecting a lot of racism and sexism and other biases, prejudices from that time and carrying into our own time, and if you don't know how to

handle that, how to present that, then that ignorance does sort of carry over into how the researchers might engage with the collection." A6 and 11 discussed how these descriptions and terms utilized may cause avoidance from individuals who do not agree or align with ascribed terms that may not match with their beliefs or self-image. A11 provided the following:

> I'm going to just sort of, like, jump in with a trans-related example… I'm always very interested by the alternate modes of claiming that different folks will sometimes have over the same historical figure… trans-masculine people tend to read, you know, like a butch person who lived in the past, who used he/him pronouns, at least in public, and who lived publicly as a man and sometimes who passed… this person would not have used the same language that we do to describe themselves, they saw their gender, no doubt in a different way. But this is somebody who is a forerunner to me, I see my own history here. But I think that also you know, there will also always be people who are of the opinion 'this is a lesbian figure,' you know, 'this is a butch woman' and to say that this person isn't a woman is to erase the history of butch-ness and to say that, you know, it's sort of to make a feminist argument for not claiming a masculine person as a man to some extent.

A6 also provided a similar example using "a woman activist in the 1700s who, from our current standpoint, we might [label as a feminist], but maybe that wasn't a term that was used, and if it was, maybe they wouldn't have ascribed it to themselves?" These examples were summed up well by A4 who said, "contextual information… is sometimes ignored in favor of a confirmation bias, or hav[ing] a certain desire to have a hypothesis proven correct" (A4).

Content and trigger warnings were also discussed by some of the interviewees (A3, 6, 10 and 12) as mechanisms employed by archivists that relate to IA, but these instances will be discussed later in this section.

Reference Skills. Nine of the 12 archivists related archival reference skills to IA, with 27 references across all interviews. In archival user studies, reference skills are a common topic (Conway, 1986; Duff et al., 2024; Rhee, 2015), but these are not in conversation with IA frameworks. Like description, interviewees envisioned reference skills and their relation to IA as something that archivists and researchers may both engage in. Examples provided overlapped with ideas about outside influence (A1), self-preservation (A1, 4, 6, 8), experience (A1, 3, 4, 6, 11), bias and worldview (A1, 2, 5, 8), limited scope (A1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11) availability of resources (A2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8), access (A2, 4, 6, 7), and obscurity or task difficulty (A3, 7, 11).

The reference skills an archivist may provide are heavily reliant on their experience as their training and institutional knowledge would allow them to better recall information that may be relevant to the researcher's needs. A1 reflected on their own training and how coursework in reference services may not be a requirement in MLIS programs:

> I'm trying to think back to my own MLIS studies and… there was definitely a reference course. I can't remember now if it was required. I don't know if that's true of other MLIS programs if there is a requirement for reference… I don't really see us as being taught to sort of be so active within that person's experience when up at the reference desk, at least the way I was taught was very much about… helping the person with their information seeking, but not necessarily having a judgment when it comes to avoiding information or a judgment around what it is that they're asking to you to see.

A2 reflected, "I was watching an argument between a… curator of a museum and a researcher who had different opinions about politics or something… and the archivist took me aside and taught me to never do that." Other stories like this were also relayed and these allude to information avoidance in that the archivist may sometimes have to omit information in reference requests because of several variables. The archivist may have to confront their own avoidant tendencies in order to fulfill this request and appear to remain "neutral."

At the same time, they may need to point out other collections, perhaps due to a researcher's lack of experience or limitations to access, without being too forceful. At this point, the researcher may refuse the suggestions or later omit the information they received due to any of the ideas listed above. For example, the researcher's own biases and limited scope, or a desire to not encounter materials that may make them sad or angry, have an impact on whether they avoid information from a reference request. A8 presented a hypothetical about a researcher requesting information about the Ku Klux Klan and also offering materials related to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: "But if they say 'no'... then I don't think it's possible for the archivist to be like 'too bad, you're getting NAACP minutes as well.'"

Archivist's Training and Experience. Eight of the 12 archivists related an archivist's training and experience to IA, with 25 references across all interviews. Training and experience were implicated in the subsection above in regard to reference, but the interviewees found that these have their own relation to IA. Similar to the way the researcher's archival experience level can create the occurrence of IA, the statements the interviewees provided about the archivist's experience level overlapped but were mentioned less frequently. This may be because the interviewees all had acquired MLIS degrees and were working in archives themselves. Other

contributing variables overlapped as well, such as outside influence (A1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10), availability of resources (A1, 4, 6, 8), self-preservation (A4), access (A4, 5), obscurity or task difficulty (A5), and characteristics about the archive itself (A10).

As mentioned above, archivist's may avoid or omit information in reference services in an attempt to stay neutral and not make value judgments. This attraction to neutrality can be conditioned into archivists through MLIS programs, as pointed out by A1 above, or through on the job training, as pointed out by A2 above. According to A5, these educational and training programs may also condition archivists to be "hyper-professionalized" which can lead to the use of specific jargon and policies that may make archival research difficult and inaccessible to those without domain specific knowledge (Douglas & Mills, 2018): "We get so deep into our jargon and… when you get an MLIS degree, like, you get in that zone and it's really hard to reevaluate it." A5 also sees these programs as an access barrier based on "the way we gatekeep who gets to be an archivist by whoever has the ability to get a master's degree is a big problem and like, the fact that we've… basically blocked off access to working in archives." On the flip side, A10 also thought of a hypothetical example where someone who works in an archival capacity may not be an information professional: "I think in that situation, you could certainly see [information avoidance] more so when you have volunteers and people that are non-professionals working in information capacities that could definitely be a catalyst for [information avoidance] to occur."

Of course, these behaviors can change over time as experience levels will change, so the avoidance may not be permanent, but the interviewees do see how they can have an effect on a researcher's behavior as well. In an example provided by A7, the way in which materials are processed may be different depending on the processing archivist's level of experience and

institutional knowledge: "Not that the [archivist] is purposely steering research, but that they don't have the depth of knowledge of the collections that might support further research."

Archivist's Bias. Eight of the 12 archivists related an archivist's potential bias with IA, with 23 references across all interviews. Beyond the archivist's training and experience level, the interviewees also observed that archivists may bring their own biases to work with them as well. The biases mentioned did not all have political or bigoted roots, as some examples were more based on perceived research value or personal interest. Several of the examples combined with ideas about self-preservation (A3, 5, 8, 9), limited scope (A5, 7, 8, 11), outside influence (A5, 6, 7, 8), access (A5, 6, 7, 9), availability of resources (A7, 9), and characteristics of the archive itself (A7, 8, 10).

A3 provided an example of archivists "giv[ing] lip service to [diverse collecting practices] like 'oh, yeah, well, of course we wouldn't ignore a movement that we may not personally agree with,' but I never saw much evidence that they actually follow through with documenting that kind of thing." This was in reference to politically charged historical moments in recent history, but less "heavy" types of bias were also mentioned. A6 talked about "bias within archival institutions and collecting efforts in what's deemed of historical value, who's deemed notable, who's been talked about and researched in the past that then prompts people to have additional questions and research." A9 also acknowledged that "archives are information that has not been created for their research use, and they're going to have to bring their own tools to it," which can ultimately color expectations about the information.

Some types of archives may also promote an environment that fosters more common or flagrant occurrences of IA than others. For example, as A10 mentioned, historical societies may not require archivists to have MLIS degrees: "I think in that situation, you could certainly see it

more so when you have volunteers and people that are just non-professionals working in information capacities, that can definitely be a catalyst for [information avoidance] to occur." Historical societies may also have stakeholders that promote certain narratives and a sense of membership (A5). This sentiment was echoed by A7 who acknowledged that stakeholder requests to "withdraw… certain material from archival collections… even indicating that we had withdrawn the material to researchers, so we are imposing our own information avoidance on the researcher, they don't even know it's there, right, so they can't avoid it… we've done that part for them."

Physical Access. Nine of the 12 archivists related physical access to archives with IA, with 19 references across all interviews. Ideas about access overall discussed earlier in this study are obviously relevant here, but the interviewees had some specific thoughts about physical access to archives. As employees of a particular archive, archivists have more access to all of the information in their collections. None of the interviewees discussed ways in which an archivist may have restricted physical access themselves, but they may impose restrictions on researchers which may result in avoidance. Physical access can be limited by a variety of factors and lead to IA, many of which overlap with ideas about characteristics of the archive itself (A1, 4, 8, 11), experience (A2, 5, 8), obscurity and task difficulty (A2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11), outside influence (A4, 7, 9, 10), availability of resources (A7, 8, 10), access (A7, 8, 9, 10, 11), bias and worldview (A7, 9, 10), self-preservation (A7, 8, 10), and limited scope (A10, 11).

The interviewees provided examples of physical access barriers and variables that may contribute to them. Things outside of the archivists control that can vary depending on what type of institution it is and its policies can create difficult situations for researchers who want to access information. A4 advocates for information to be unrestricted, "but there are some slightly

more conservative voices… that definitely have differing opinions in terms of like, what is releasable, and what is not releasable… [which] in aggregate, can potentially be problematic… to individuals involved." A7's institution has been struggling to reopen to the public since the COVID-19 pandemic, as residual effects have impacted staffing. On top of that, restrictions to access of certain materials are imposed by the board, making it difficult for people to access the information online, and also difficult to access in person because of the limited staff and hours. A10 has materials that are also restricted by laws and policies as the information may be confidential, sensitive or graphic.

A11 acknowledged that each archive also has its own limitations which can ultimately "deny knowledge and so it's interesting to see and think about the ways that people might accept that denial, because they don't want to know more." A8 mentioned specific examples of these limitations, such as culturally sensitive information regarding Indigenous ceremonies, or military archives which can be "conservative and rigid, [so] it makes sense that you know, what they're documenting would be as well." As A9 previously stated, "the barrier to entry for using archives is already so high," and any combination of other ideas mentioned like limited experience, bias, or emotional responses could easily make researchers avoid information in archives.

Archival Processing. Eight of the 12 archivists related archival processing to IA, with 16 references across all interviews. Processing concerns are thought to potentially cause the archivist to engage in IA themself, but also has implications for researchers. Other ideas that overlapped with these examples included outside influence (A1, 5, 7, 9, 10), access (A1, 7, 10, 11, 12), obscurity and task difficulty (A1, 5, 7, 11), availability of resources (A5, 7, 12), bias and worldview (A6, 7, 9, 10, 11), limited scope (A7), and self-preservation (A12).

Practices surrounding processing in archives have widely employed a model of "more product, less process" (MPLP) which aimed to solve unsustainable, outdated processing practices that resulted in backlogs in archives across the globe (Greene & Meissner, 2005; Hauck et al., 2019). Aligning with the literature cited, the interviewees referred to MPLP in interviews as a process where archival materials are processed with minimal information attached to create "an access point" (A10) that makes the materials accessible as quickly as possible, allowing the archive to "get out of [their] backlog" (A5). In this case, the archivist is avoiding or omitting information in order to accomplish these goals, which may reflect their own goals, or the "interest of the institution" as A7 said. While this may be perceived as efficient and beneficial to the archivist and the institution, the interviewees pointed out negative outcomes that impact researchers:

A1: "Kind of related to… just standards around more product less process, MPLP… something could be very minimal and that, I mean, it's unknown like, whether that's actually… beneficial for the researcher or not."

A6: "Sometimes we do process things to a more extreme degree, because of what we believe to be its research value, its historical value, at the expense of other collections that are then getting a lot less review and description."

The archivist may also avoid information during processing phases because of a lack of resources. In a previously quoted example referring to the archivist's level of experience, A7 mentioned unprocessed material that also remains that way because of a lack of staff. This can result in hidden information in the archives that can then cause negative emotions (A5) and perpetuated biases (A7, 9, 12).

Trigger and Content Warnings. Four of the 12 archivists related trigger and content warnings with IA, with 8 references across all interviews. As mentioned above, these are a subset of archival description that some of the interviewees mentioned within that context. These are seen as mechanisms that do not cause an archivist to engage with IA as they would have to encounter the information to apply a content warning, but the archivist's employment of a trigger warning can certainly impose IA on a researcher. A12, who was the only interviewee who had heard of IA specifically because of their own research regarding archival description, and in particular trigger warnings, summed this up: "When I've encountered it, it is mostly in the context of how a content warning might fulfill that purpose or facilitate that avoidance." A3 echoed this thought with a general statement, asserting that "content warnings in collection descriptions can foster or create an environment where people would be avoiding information for sure." Others provided thoughts about trigger warnings that overlapped with ideas about self-preservation (A7, 10, 12), outside influence (A10), access (A10, 12), bias and worldview (A12), and obscurity (A12).

Content and trigger warnings may be placed in descriptions of specific items in a collection, in finding aid descriptions as a more general caution, or as a general blanket statement for all of an archive's collections. A12 is unsure if any of these are better or worse than others in terms of how they impact a researcher: "I favor, in some ways over sort of a specific content warning that's like on a collection or an object is when repositories issue these sort of general ones that sort of set that expectation… the problem with those statements is that a lot of people aren't going to run into them at all." These materials may contain harmful words or images (A6, 10) and the archivist's own biases and emotional sensitivities, or policies from the institution and laws may cause them to employ a content warning, thus potentially causing a researcher to avoid

the information. This may have positive outcomes, as A6 pointed out that we do not "want to re-traumatize" someone, but may also have negative outcomes as the archivist's judgment about the content may not apply to all individuals.

Exhibits and Public Displays. Two of the 12 archivists related archival exhibits and public displays with IA, with 6 references across all interviews. Archival materials are sometimes displayed publicly in exhibits or online as an attempt to engage with society, but interviewees found that this can relate to IA on the part of the archivist. Examples provided overlap with ideas about limited scope (A7, 8), bias and worldview (A7), outside influence (A7), experience (A8), availability of resources (A8), characteristics about the archive itself (A8), and obscurity and task difficulty (A8).

Exhibit labels and the narratives they promote certainly limit the amount of information that can be projected to a viewer, but other factors contribute to the archivist's avoidance in curating these exhibits and writing these labels as well. Archival description has already been discussed in this section, and all of those ideas related to IA there are applicable here with even less words available to describe each item. A7 related this notion in the context of their own institution saying, "Our use of the material say in [an] exhibit label, I think, certainly we can do our own kind of internal avoidance… avoiding the more difficult parts of… history then winds up certainly skewing the story that your narrative that you're putting in front of the public." This reflects back on A7's mention that the collections have many antisemitic materials and how the board of directors impose restrictions on some information. A8 indicated that an archivist's inexperience with the topic may also result in incomplete or incorrect information. In both instances, the archivists are limited by the scope of their collections as well, which may be

impacted by other factors such as availability of resources and how obscure the topic or collections are.

Archival Arrangement. Four of the 12 archivists related archival arrangement practices with IA, with 4 references across all interviews. Arrangement is seen by the interviewees as something that only an archivist could engage in IA behavior through, but those decisions could potentially impose IA behavior on researchers. Examples provided overlap with ideas about obscurity and task difficulty (A6, 11), bias and worldview (A6, 8, 11), outside influence (A7), self-preservation (A7), and access (A7).

Although A5 did not mention arrangement specifically, the notion of archives-specific policies and practices making things difficult or obscure resonates well in this instance and tie in with other ideas related to why and when IA occurs in archives. A6 and A11 both pointed out ways that an archivist's decisions surrounding arrangement of a collection can result in obscure outcomes that are hard to interpret:

A6: "Sometimes, you know, in a collection, we're just going to describe this at the folder level, at the series level, but oh, here's this one document we're really going to call it out because this important person wrote this letter to the creator of the collection that's very historically famous, whereas there might be all these other letters from other people that, you know, we don't give that same kind of treatment, and I think bias can really show up there."

A11: "It's the foldering structure, you know, it's folders and series… but yeah, there by sort of sorting things into semi-arbitrary categories, just to keep it organized and make it easier to navigate, we end up making all kinds of statements about the collection and which parts of it may be of interest, and also, you know, which parts of it may be fun or disturbing or moving…

all of it makes it easier for people to avoid information, just as it makes it easier for people to find information."

A10 confronted some arrangement issues in their collections in relation to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and other post-colonial pressures that have been widely adopted in recent archival practice:

> We have a good deal of material that is talking about women but is talking about them in terms of being 'Miss [or] Mrs. Bob Smith.' So what is *her* name? So we've got a lot of work to do there in terms of just not only textual description, but in some cases physical arrangement… this is sort of a physical manifestation of information avoidance where we've got a large assembled artificial collection of photographs that's all arranged by [Library of Congress] subject terms.

In approaching arrangement, archivists may avoid information that is hard for them to confront because of their own biases or emotions, and standards for archival arrangement may impose avoidant behavior on them in order to align with "best practices." These best practices are subject to change over time, as ideals and descriptive terminology become outmoded and often face criticism (Brewer, 2021), and Library of Congress Subject Headings, currently on its' 44th edition published May 2022 [LCSH 44], are reviewed, revised and added constantly (Library of Congress, 1990; see https://classweb.org/approved-subjects/ for lists). In particular, the Library of Congress Subject Headings mentioned above have been criticized for perpetuating trauma for Indigenous peoples (Pettitt & Elzi, 2023). Researchers may then avoid information in archives, or avoid archives completely, because of the perceived task difficulty, perpetuated biases, and access barriers.

Metadata. Three of the 12 archivists related metadata with IA, with 4 references across all interviews. The interviewees who mentioned metadata and its relation to IA see it as something that only archivists may engage in, but it could potentially impose IA behavior on researchers. Examples provided overlapped with ideas about self-preservation (A6, 9, 10), availability of resources (A6), bias and worldview (A9), limited scope (A10), and outside influence (A10).

In a previously quoted example, A10 hinted at the various metadata schema and "rules" that have been determined by groups of archivists and continue to change as time moves forward. In that quote, A10 mentioned that they "may not necessarily get real deep into some of the content or information that would be that type of information where people would want to… [avoid] in a sense," which alludes to the archivist providing the metadata avoiding some information themself. A10 also previously acknowledged their own biases in potentially providing more rich metadata for materials that they find more interesting. A6 and A9 got more specific about the types of information that individuals may want to avoid, such as "harmful, problematic imagery" where content warnings may be embedded in the metadata or descriptions (A6), and "cataloguing terms that are out of date" referring to materials that reflect prejudiced and bigoted ideals (A9). These metadata examples can then impose IA on the researcher by "enabl[ing] somebody to kind of consent to whether or not they want to see that imagery before they're confronted with it" (A6), or "carry[ing] over into how the researcher might engage with the collection" (A9).

4.3 Summary

I developed the findings above through iterative examinations of the transcripts collected from the interviews in conversation with the principles I learned from my systematic literature

review. This allowed me to explore the abstract ideas that make up IA (who, why, when, and what) and contextualize them in archival work to answer RQ1. It also allowed me to learn from other archivists how they may have, or could imagine, experiencing IA in archives (applications, and archival practices and workflows) to further cement IA in relation to archives to answer RQ2. While the statistical enumeration of references to each theme and individual code speak to the relationship and importance of IA in the archival context, further interpretation was needed to create meaning and implications that would resonate with archivists.

I have already added some light analysis and archives-specific citations, but in the next chapter I provide a more robust, discursive analysis of IA in the archival context through the use of interpretive models and narratives.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this study should make it clear that there is no universal definition for information avoidance (IA) and that it is not dichotomous. That is to say that IA is not "this" or "that", but that the variables which contribute to its occurrence lie on a spectrum resulting in a highly dynamic and complex phenomenon. Systematic reviews across disciplines may be a good starting point (Foust & Taber, 2023; Sweeny et al., 2010), but these may try too hard to fit IA into a neat and tidy box aiming to create one ultimate definition of IA. Taking principles and theories from various disciplines to create a roadmap and understanding that instances where IA occurs have multiple, sliding variables that become intertwined (Bressel et al., 2023; Howell & Shepperd, 2016; Nelissen et al., 2015) can assist in identifying IA when it happens.

Even without in-depth details, the interviewees from this study touch on many principles from the extant literature across disciplines. Most of the quotes provided also allude to the complex nature of IA and make it clear that the principles and ideas can be interwoven in any combination (Foust & Taber, 2023; Howell & Shepperd, 2016; Makinde et al., 2019; Sweeny et al., 2010). Intra- and interpersonal, and situational factors, as well as expectations about the content of information and the outcomes that can arise from encountering it all, potentially lead to avoidant behavior (Foust & Taber, 2023; Sweeny et al., 2010).

Solutions for IA may also be just as complex in that some occurrences of IA may require nuanced approaches to things in relation to ethics. For example, in the Indigenous context, some occurrences of IA may preclude the notion of decolonizing archives with truth-telling and transparency. Archives may be caught in the grips of "inefficient internal processes that do not allow quick and easy access to holdings, requiring manual handling and delays (Thieberger et al., 2023, p. 12). On the other hand, truth-telling and the archives' potential role in that has proven

valuable. This was evidenced in a case where archival materials in Canada were discovered and utilized to expose sexual and physical abuse of Indigenous students over decades at the hands of Birtle Indian Residential School Principal Henry B. Currie (Betke, 2023). Networks of concealment ranged across several agents including the Presbyterian Church and the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. Archives are also historically guilty of concealment (Douglas & Mills, 2018; Nathan et al., 2015; Pineo, under review), and this may be done intentionally or unintentionally; and sometimes for good reason. For example, and adding to the complexity of IA and its relationship with ethics and solutions, again specifically in the Indigenous context, Indigenous communities may rightfully impose cultural restrictions on some sensitive material (Reijerkerk & Reed, 2023; Thieberger et al., 2023). Adding the IA lens to decolonization work like Punzalan and Marsh's (2022) ideas about reciprocity with Indigenous communities could help fortify relationships between the communities and the archives and build sturdier workflows and practices.

I hinge this discussion of IA in the archival context on the premise that everyone is susceptible to IA (Sweeny et al., 2010), as suggested by the data in this study. Although some people may be more likely to engage in IA behavior than others based on demographic (Deng et al., 2023) and socioeconomic factors (St. Jean et al., 2017), and personality traits (Howell & Shepperd, 2016), the data collected suggest that IA can hypothetically and anecdotally happen to everyone in the archival information exchange. This is not to say that IA is always an individualized phenomenon, as many evidentiary statements implicate group avoidance (e.g., for cultural or social reasons) or organizational issues (e.g., institutional missions, stakeholder input).

Applying the philosophy of hermeneutics ("new understanding is achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have" [George, 2021, para. 9]), I will relay how archivists interpreted the concept of IA and how they experienced it through this concept to create meaning in ways that they can understand. I will do this below by 1) applying my Relational Information Avoidance System (RIAS) model to the archival context by annotating the model with key points from the data collected, and; 2) using a hypothetical narrative to annotate a proposed model for the Archival Information Avoidance Exchange (AIAE) to further cement the data as a relevant concern in the archival field with key implications for consideration.

5.1 Applying the Relational Information Avoidance System Model to the Archival Context

The cyclical, interlaced illustration of my RIAS Model (Figure 2.1) lends well into the dynamic and complex nature of IA. My extensive literature review and the findings from my interview informed the creation of the original RIAS model. The lack of theoretical models led me to think of ways to visually represent IA in a way that did not have independent parts or sequential logic. Not only was this interdependent, overlapping nature evident in the literature, but also in the interviews with my participants. Several of the exemplar quotes provided in the previous chapter reinforce the overlapping nature of IA as evidenced by the way in which multiple variables could be listed in one thought. For example, see A2's statement:

> We're a **state chartered institution** and what we store, in a sense, being **supported by tax dollars** should be open... I have to keep in mind that we do have sensitive information in the records, but I don't, in terms of **collecting**, **I try to avoid** those sorts of materials because we have a different **mandate** in terms of **access**.

This solitary anecdotal statement provides evidence for the archivist themself avoiding information, due to outside influences that have an impact on collection management practices and accessibility. It could also be argued that the archivist has a bias towards certain types of information because of those mandates. I also believe it is important to point out that this avoidance may be viewed as positive or negative depending on the individual, but it certainly has an impact on other people who will potentially interact with that information.

In the spirit of hermeneutics, I adapted Littletree et al.'s (2020) idea of annotating their model of the relationality of Indigenous systems of knowledge to apply an interpretive structure of the ideas (Figure 5.1) and the experiences (Figure 5.2) that the archivists interviewed relayed during our conversations. As a reminder, the convergent nature of the individual circles is meant to demonstrate how the parts are not independent of one another and can converge in any combination.

Figure 5.1

Annotated Relational Information Avoidance System Model Part 1

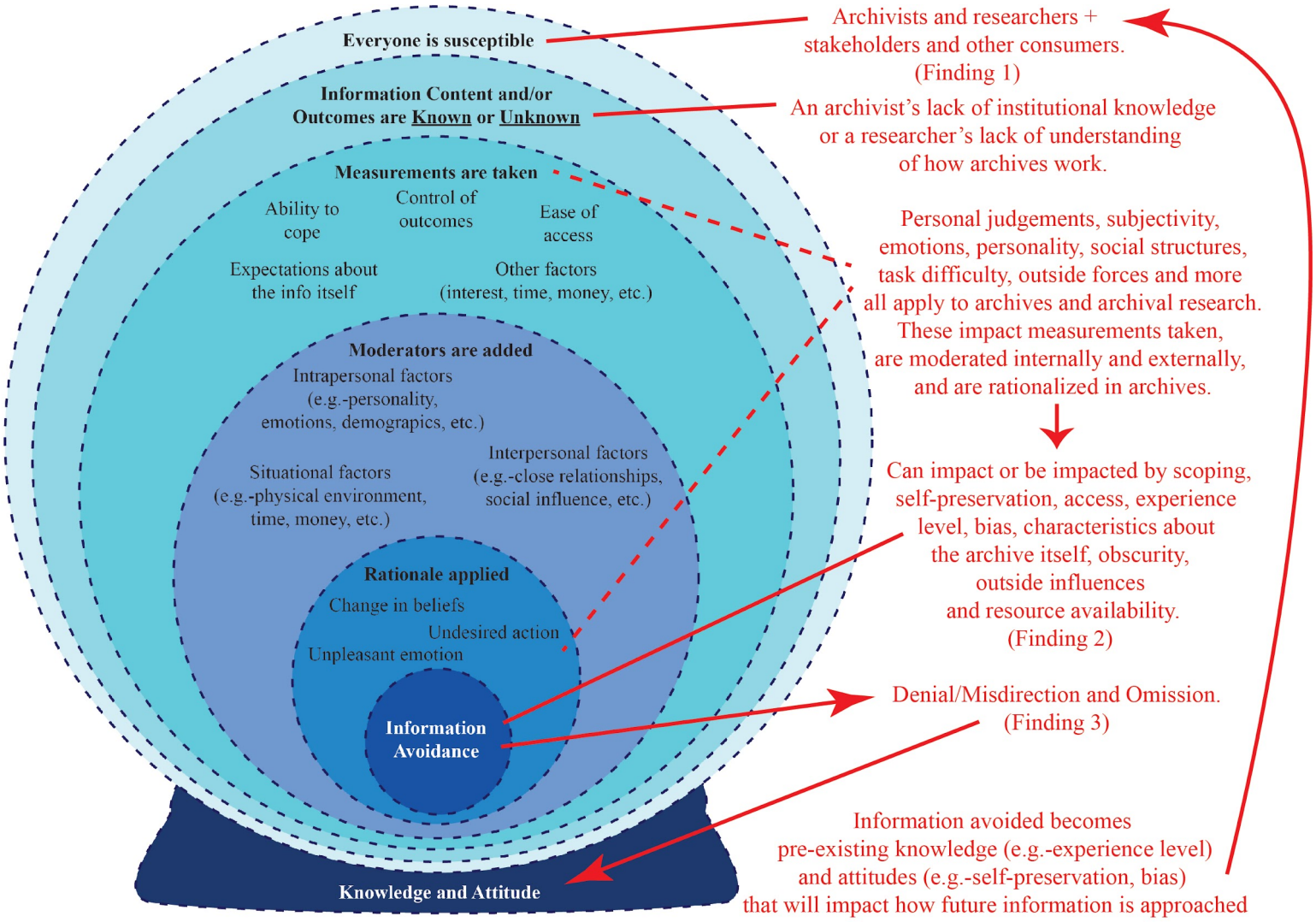
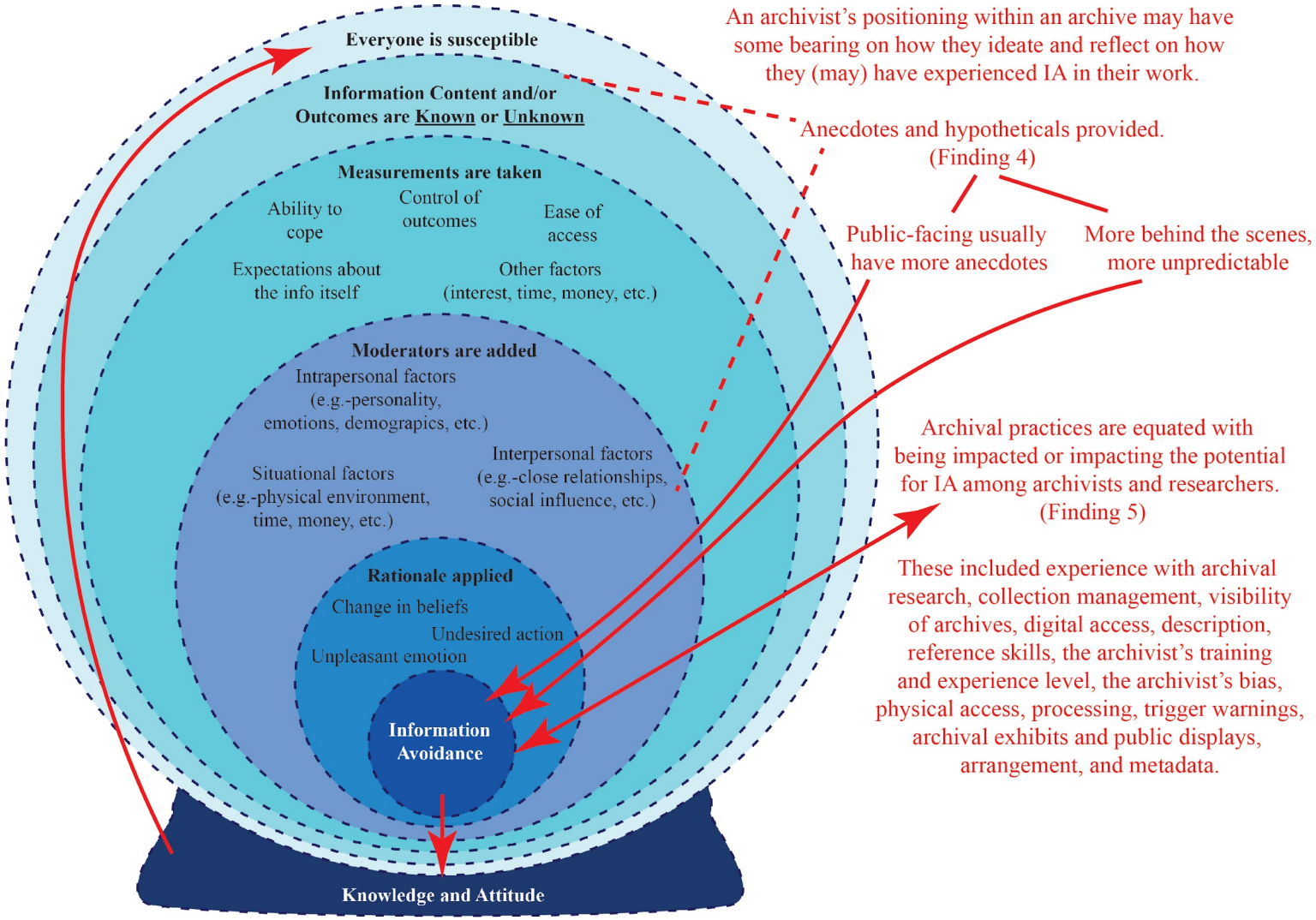


Figure 5.2

Annotated Relational Information Avoidance System Model Part 2



Starting with Figure 5.1, this illustration hinges on the premise that all people are ultimately susceptible to IA (Sweeny et al., 2010), and that all people bring their pre-existing knowledge and attitudes into the equation when they approach information: "What is considered worth knowing varies a good deal according to place, time and social group" (Burke, 2015, p. 7). This was well-supported by the interviewees who pointed out that, in archives, archivists and researchers all participate in IA behavior (Finding 1). They also implied that stakeholders and other consumers of archival research and information are also susceptible as they may impose IA on others, or have IA imposed upon them (Golman et al., 2017; Rauscher & Dean, 2018; Sweeny et al., 2010). Archivists may apply their pre-existing knowledge (e.g., institutional knowledge) and attitudes (e.g., bias) and researchers may do the same (e.g., knowing how to use archival collections and sensitivities to certain subject matter, respectively). At any time and in any combination, an individual will apply this:

1. To the measurements they take of their ability to control the outcome of confronting that information, their ability to cope with the information, how easy the information is to access, expectations about the information itself, and other factors like interest, time, money, and more;
2. To intrapersonal, interpersonal, and/or situational factors that will moderate the decision to potentially avoid information, and;
3. To the rationale they apply as the information relates to potentially causing a change in beliefs, an undesired action, and/or unpleasant emotions.

To name a few, these measurements, moderators and rationales may be impacted by personal judgments, subjectivity, emotions, personality, social structures, task difficulty, outside forces and more. In the archival context, the interviewees in my study related the above to ideas about

scoping, self-preservation, access, experience levels, bias, characteristics about the archive itself, obscurity, outside influences and resources availability (Finding 2). Once all of these variables have been combined, an individual may avoid information through purposeful denial or omission (Finding 3). Information avoided impacts the individual's future knowledge and attitudes, which will be called upon again when encountering future information, thus creating a cycle.

Figure 5.2 is exclusively annotated in relation to how an archivist may experience IA in their daily work, and this can be when working alone, when working with colleagues, and when working with researchers. An archivist's positioning within an archive may have some bearing on how they may engage with IA (Finding 4). The interviewees who perceive their roles as more public-facing and working more directly with researchers all were able to talk about actual anecdotal experiences with IA that they have encountered in their careers. As roles become more behind the scenes, the likelihood of recalling anecdotal experiences with IA seems to become more unpredictable and some start to discuss *possible* experiences with IA as hypothetical situations. Going back to the notion that pre-existing knowledge and attitudes support the IA system in how they approach information, perhaps the archivist's role and exposure to researchers provides them with different circumstantial knowledge and attitudes, thus they experience IA more frequently or on a more personal level. Finally, there are several archival practices and concepts equated with IA as either a facilitator of IA or something that is impacted by IA, and these have the potential to cause IA among archivists and researchers (Finding 5). These include experience and exposure to archival research skills, collection management, visibility of archives, digital access, description, reference skills, the archivist's training and experience level, the archivist's bias, physical access, processing, trigger warnings, archival exhibits and public displays, archival arrangement, and metadata.

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 should adequately link IA within the archival context as each of the main findings of my study can be interpreted into the model built off of existing literature across disciplines. This should amplify the importance of learning more about IA and how it can impact the archival field, particularly how the colonial, exclusionary systems ingrained in archives may be perpetuating generational trauma (Caswell et al., 2016; Caswell, 2021; Cvetkovich, 2008; Duff et al., 2019; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; McCallum, 2017; McCracken, 2019; Nathan et al., 2015; Reijerkirk & Reed, 2023; Roeschley & Kim, 2019; Sloan et al., 2019; Steering Committee on Canada's Archives, 2022; Tai et al., 2019; Turner, 2020; Wright & Laurent, 2021).

5.2 The Archival Information Avoidance Exchange Model and Key Implications

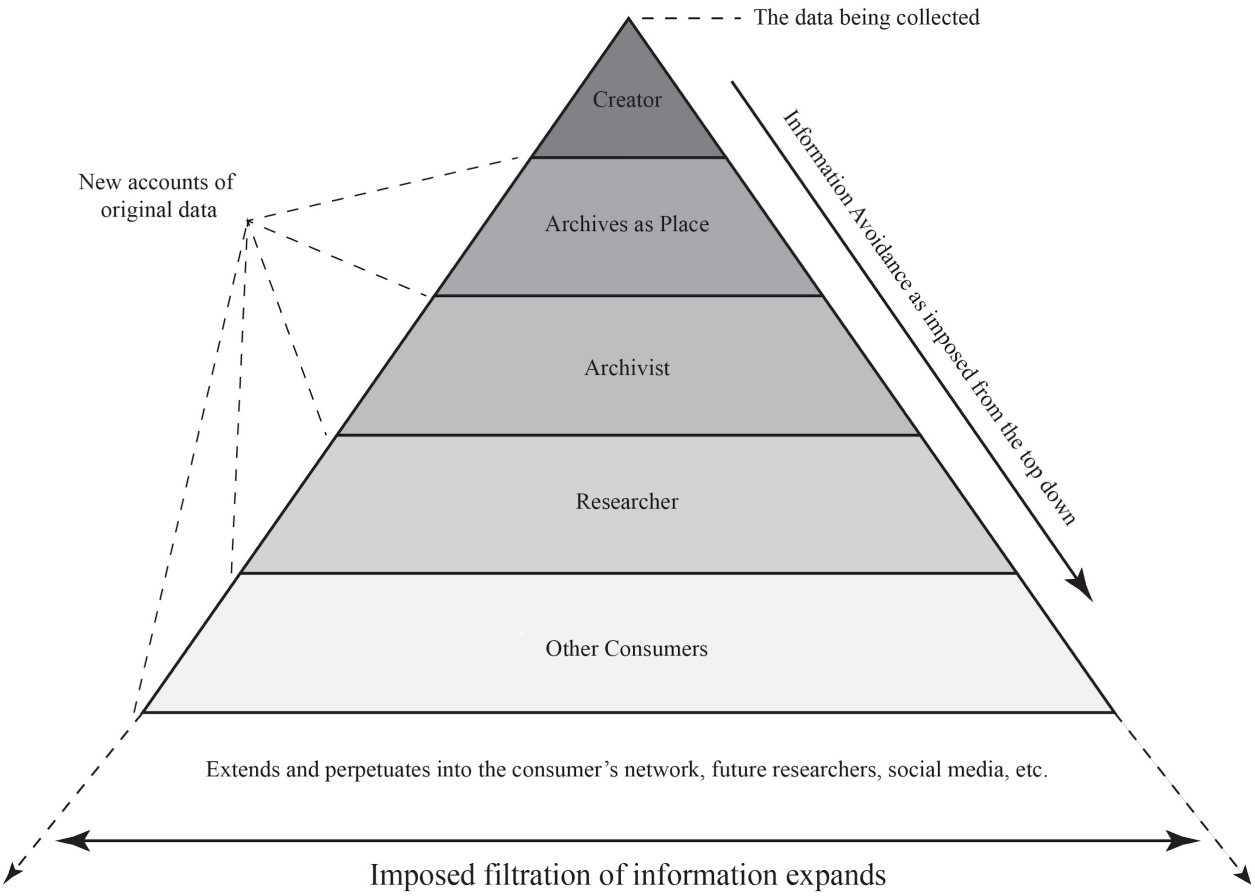
In archives, it is important to note that the records held in a repository were not created for that purpose. In a post-Positivist call "for archivists to be more cognizant of the role that they themselves play in shaping the historical records" (Trace, 2002, p. 159), Trace asserted that archival collections are not authentic or impartial and should be understood as materials that are "socially constructed and maintained" (Trace, 2002, p. 140). Each document was created by an individual whose own subjective whims are ingrained, and then these documents are collected, arranged, described and preserved in archives. The archives and those working within it then have a part in the visibility, maintenance, interpretation and more of those documents. This hypothetically sets the stage for a top-down exchange of information and the potential for IA to occur.

The Annotated RIAS Model (Figures 5.1 & 5.2) illustrates how archival concepts may apply to the various interrelated components of the system, as relayed by the archivists interviewed for my study. This fulfills the hermeneutic interpretation for "ourselves" as archivists, however, an additional model is needed to fulfill the hermeneutic interpretation for

"others." As outlined previously, IA can be imposed upon us as archivists, and we can impose IA on others as well. The model below presents a top-down exchange of information starting with the creator of an archival document and the potential for IA to occur as imposed from above by archivists and working down to researchers and other consumers of archival research, as archivists impose IA on others (Figure 5.3). This is followed by a hypothetical narrative breaking the model down into parts from one individual to the next with literature from IA and archival research to fortify my argument. I reiterate that the narrative below is hypothetical and the variables I have chosen to include to tell this story can be interchangeable with any variables of your own liking, or applied to situations that you have actually experienced.

Figure 5.3

The Archival Information Avoidance Exchange Model



5.2.1 The Stakeholders to The Archive as Place

The exchange starts with the Creator of the original document, and trickles down in a way that may cause IA to occur among any individuals that may have the opportunity to engage with that information. The Creator is subject to their own biases, feelings, and a multitude of other factors when creating the document and may not record an event objectively. That is to say, they may intentionally or unintentionally leave out details or present that information in a way that is not objective, neutral, or comprehensive. This pulls heavily on archival theories about representational belonging and symbolic annihilation, and colonial collecting practices (Caswell et al., 2016; Caswell, 2021; Duff et al., 2019; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Nathan et al., 2015; Reijerkirk & Reed, 2023; Roeschley & Kim, 2019; Tai et al., 2019; Wright & Laurent, 2021). Essentially, these theories all imply that colonial archives are rooted in systems that are created by and favor members of the dominant culture or "mythical norm" (e.g.-white, wealthy, educated, cisgendered, straight, and presumably Christian men [Lorde, 1990]). Importantly, Caswell (2021) asserts that "symbolic and actual annihilation are intimately related" (p. 84). The studies listed above are solid examples of how archives as cultural institutions have systemic, organizational issues that influence narratives. These skewed, limited narratives can thus create a potential for archival researchers (including the archivists themselves and researchers) to avoid archival information in order to, for example, confirm a bias or to self-preserve. Many principles from my RIAS Model apply here, as the Creator of a document will have their own pre-existing knowledge and attitudes that they recall when deciding to create a document. What they do or do not know will weave together with their internal measurements, interpersonal and situational factors, and final rationalization of why they ultimately decide to avoid some information in creating this particular document.

For this model, let's say that the Creator of a document is an older, white male who happens to be racist and sexist. Perhaps the Creator is also a prolific author and a Republican politician. This has led to a limited worldview and a social sphere of like-minded individuals as influences in his life (Bressel et al., 2023; Chang & Huang, 2020; Chatman, 1996; Guo et al., 2020; Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022; Lu et al., 2022; Momsen & Ohndorf, 2023; Riley et al., 2022; Schrodt et al., 2024; Singh & Brinster, 2021). In opposition to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the creator would attend rallies and protests and would then write about them in a journal. The Creator chooses to omit some information when he is writing, as his personal biases against conflicting ideals cause him to only provide details that confirm his beliefs (Behimehr & Jamali, 2020; Chater & Loewenstein, 2016; Cooke, 2019; Golman et al., 2017; Singh & Brinster, 2021; Sweeny et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2023). Information and viewpoints opposing his own are irrelevant to him and his bias (Deng et al., 2022; Foust & Taber, 2023; Guo et al., 2020; Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022). The journal is riddled with racial slurs and photos of fights and excessive force from police. Beyond, he talks about feeling personally victimized by Black rioters during BLM protests. Tying into the RIAS Model, the Creator's pre-existing knowledge and attitudes towards the subject impact what he does or does not know about the topic. He has taken measurements of his desire to control the narrative and his expectations about the information itself (e.g., that his views are the right views), which are clearly moderated by intrapersonal factors (e.g., his bias and emotions). Interpersonal moderators are factored in as the Creator's social sphere impacts his decisions, and he ultimately rationalizes his decision to omit some information because it may cause himself or others to have a change in their beliefs or to act differently in relation to similar events in the future.

For one reason or another, this man or his family then has an opportunity to donate this record, and others that may be less outwardly racist, to an archive. This journal was never created for the purpose of being an archival record of history, but it is now a historical representation of the events nonetheless. Now the Donor and Administrators at an archive are beginning to negotiate about the accessioning of these records. The Donor may then attempt to dictate certain conditions about how the records are kept, who can access them, and how they are described. On the Administrator's end, they must consider the Archive as Place, including their collection policies, space, institutional and other legal mandates, and other factors when potentially adding these records to the collection. Despite criticism that this particular archive's collections are exclusionary of marginalized perspectives (Caswell et al., 2016; Caswell, 2021; Duff et al., 2019; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Nathan et al., 2015; Reijerkirk & Reed, 2023; Roeschley & Kim, 2019; Tai et al., 2019; Wright & Laurent, 2021), the Donor is offering a cash donation in addition to the physical records so a decision to accession the collection moves forward. The administrators only have space for half, so they must turn away several boxes of records which then get donated elsewhere or even destroyed, resulting in unintentional IA (Power et al., 2017). Budget cuts and staffing issues cause the archive and its employees to not have a chance to perform a robust review of all of the documents (Sloan et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2021), therefore ingesting materials that potentially have bigoted language, violent imagery, or flat out inaccurate accounts of historical events. These materials may have been seen as irrelevant in relation to collection policies (Deng et al., 2022; Foust & Taber, 2023; Guo et al., 20220; Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022), or simply as untrustworthy and incorrect (Chang & Huang, 2020), but ultimately the Creator's BLM journal makes it into the archive.

In addition to intra- and interpersonal factors, situational factors outside of the Administrator's control have combined (Bressel et al., 2023; Foust & Taber, 2023; Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022; Howell & Shepperd, 2016; Lloyd & Hicks, 2022; Makinde et al., 2019; Nelissen et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2022; Sweeny et al., 2010; Willson and Given, 2020) and resulted in an imposition of IA from above their position in the AIAE Model. The Administrators were able to enforce some rules denying some of the information from entering the Archive as Place, but this has a greater impact on the Archivist as the next, lower level in the information exchange than it does on the Donor who ultimately got the under-evaluated material into the collections. The Creator, the Donor, and the Administrators collectively make up the Stakeholders in the AIAE Model. Relevant to my study, the Archive as Place also imposes IA on others as characteristics of the archive itself impact how people approach information held by that particular institution and this actor is positioned below the Stakeholders and above the Archivist.

All of those actors are now creating an organizational group that is informing IA practices, which makes the Archive as Place an actor in itself. The decisions made up to this point may characterize and personify the archive itself and those characteristics may impact the archivists who work there and potential researchers who may avoid the archive altogether, or may just avoid certain collections. This is indicated by finding 2's contributing variables that seem to be more specifically archives related (e.g., scoping, type of archive, obscurity) rather than general IA (e.g., self-preservation, access, bias). There are likely limits to what an individual's, whether they are an archivist, a researcher, or other actor in this equation, total archival intelligence can be overall, or even from one day to the next (Yakel & Torres, 2003). Recognizing those limits is particularly important for reference archivists who work closely with

researchers, but it can be difficult to identify. Although archives should be open to anyone for research, there are inherent barriers to language, access, usage and overall understanding of archives, and this impacts several actors in the narrative below.

5.2.2 The Archive as Place to The Archivist

It is now an archivist's job to process, arrange, describe, and make accessible these records for use. Despite education requirements for most archivists, low evaluative skills (Cooke, 2017; Sweeny et al., 2010; Taylor, 2018) and low skills in multiple literacies (Anrijs et al., 2023; Cooke, 2017; Duff & Johnson 2003; IOM, 2004; NN/LM, 2014; Norman & Skinner, 2006; St. Jean et al., 2017; Yevelson-Shorsher & Bronstein, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023) may persist throughout those archival activities. The Archivist then has to consider the Stakeholders' wishes, which are subject to policies and other external forces and may cause them to approach the records in a particular way. The Archivist may also apply their own biases (Behimehr & Jamali, 2020; Chater & Loewenstein, 2016; Cooke, 2019; Golman et al., 2017; Savolainen, 2013; Singh & Brinster, 2021; Sweeny et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2023) and emotions (Case et al., 2005; Chang & Huang, 2020; Chater & Loewenstein, 2016; Deline & Kahlor, 2019; Deng et al., 2022; Golman et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2020; Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022; Nelissen et al., 2015; Rauscher & Dean, 2018; Savolainen, 2013; Savolainen, 2014; Schrodt et al., 2024; St. Jean et al., 2017; Willson & Given, 2023; Yang & Kahlor, 2013) relative to the records, thus refusing to look at some records or omitting records in the processing and arrangement phases. The Archivist may also have other collections to work on and may prioritize any of those collections higher or lower than others based on outside influence or their own internal reasoning, thus temporarily avoiding some information (Foust & Taber, 2023; Sweeny et al., 2010). At this point, the Archivist has taken measurements, such as their ability to cope with emotions and

outside factors from Stakeholders, and their decisions have been moderated by intra- and interpersonal factors, as well as situational ones imposed by other job duties that the Archivist has to attend to. Their own pre-existing knowledge and attitudes are impacting this process and allow them to rationalize avoidance because the information challenges their beliefs, causes unpleasant emotions, and may require an undesired action (e.g., spending more time on this collection than others that are more interesting).

Existing standards place some best practices on arrangement and description (Bountouri, 2017; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007; Society of American Archivists [SAA], 2013) some of which favor "more product, less process" (MPLP) models. MPLP is when materials are described minimally in order to make them more quickly discoverable by researchers, and allows archivists to get out of their backlogs (Greene & Meissner, 2005), thus, information is omitted. The Archivist may also make subjective statements about the records based on their biases and emotions mentioned above. The archivist may also engage in IA or impose it on another archivist by not asking for help for fear of being perceived as having low self-efficacy skills (Chang & Huang, 2020; Link & Baumann, 2022) and receiving negative feedback (Afifi et al., 2004; Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Behimehr & Jamali, 2020; Trope et al., 2003). When describing the Creator's BLM journal, the Archivist does decide to include that the journal contains racist language and potentially harmful imagery. Recent scholarship posits that content and trigger warnings may be controversial (e.g., as a censoring device) in that they can impede on free speech and academic freedom (Antelman, 2023; James, 2017; Jones, 2015), and can sometimes do little to reduce avoidance (Sanson et al., 2019). This can cause IA in that "any librarian or archivist creating and applying a content warning on behalf of their institution ('governing authority') is doing so from a position of power vis a vis their readers" (Antelman, 2023, p. 463). A12 brought up interesting

ideas about who content warnings are actually for, positing that they are not usually for people within the community that the warning is about: A sentiment also felt by Antelman (2023) who said, “The urgency and intensity of these content warnings raise the question of whether the offense may be more keenly felt by the librarians than by the readers who experience the metadata or documents in the course of their study or research” (p. 474). The rest of the descriptions are relatively positive, attributing a lifetime of achievements to the Creator and showing that he was a dedicated father and husband. These descriptions are then added to the archive’s finding aid so that researchers can begin to request the material for research. The Archivist has engaged in IA themself through denial and omission throughout processing activities, and they have also misdirected the next entity on this exchange, the Researcher, by ultimately actively and passively making statements about the content of the information in descriptions, metadata, arrangement, etc. If this particular Archivist also works in a reference capacity, the possibility of even further imposition of IA could also occur, as we know that an archivist’s role in the archive, if it is more public-facing, seems to increase the possibility of real-life experience with IA. These impositions may impact how the Researcher approaches the information, and may also impact how other archivists and administrators at this particular archive approach the material in the future.

5.2.3 The Archivist to The Researcher

The Researcher in this narrative is an undergraduate studying African American studies, and she is a young, Black female who grew up in Flint, Michigan. As a participant in several BLM movement rallies, she is researching a capstone centering on how perspectives on civil and human rights movements across demographics may vary. She comes across this archive’s finding aid for the Creator because “Black Lives Matter” is in the description and decides to dig

through the various series in the collection. She learns that the Creator was an educated, white Republican and author and starts to formulate some judgments about the Creator based on her own worldview and life experience, despite the positive description of the Creator's prolific career and life. She begins to weed out materials in the collection because of this bias (Behimehr & Jamali, 2021; Chater & Loewenstien, 2016; Singh & Brinster, 2021) and in order to save time (Guo et al., 2020; Sloan et al., 2019; Willson & Given, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). The researcher is already applying their pre-existing knowledge and attitudes about the BLM movement to what they may or may not know about the content of some of the material in this collection. This results in omission and denial of parts of the collection as she takes measurements of her expectations about the information knowing that the Creator was a white Republican. She also takes measurements of her ability to cope with her memories (Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022) and emotions relating to BLM movements she attended, moderated by interpersonal factors impressed upon her from friends, family and her education. Time is also coming into play as a situational factor. As a motivated researcher with academic goals (Borlund et al., 2024), she decides to push forward with looking at the materials that she has not already omitted or denied.

It is important to note that, as the custodians of the records in this exchange, the Archivist has more control over the flow of information than the Researcher. This implies the Archivist has more control of outcomes or flows of information (Golman et al., 2017; Sweeny et al., 2010; Trope et al., 2003; Yang & Kahlor, 2013), which may be strategic (Golman et al., 2017; Riley et al., 2022; Sweeny et al., 2010), but may also be unintentional. The Creator's journals are all relegated to one series of the collection and, as mentioned above, the description mentions several topics that the Creator wrote about in these journals, including the BLM movement. The Researcher finds this information in the finding aid and continues to read on. At the end, there is

a note saying that the journals may contain racist language and harmful imagery depicting violent acts. The content warning does have an impact on the Researcher, having attended BLM events, but she decides to try to locate the correct journal despite feeling uneasy about the possibility of encountering negative emotions from past experiences (Case et al., 2005; Chang & Huang, 2020; Chater & Loewenstein, 2016; Deline & Kahlor, 2019; Deng et al., 2022; Golman et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2020; Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022; Nelissen et al., 2015; Rauscher & Dean, 2018; Savolainen, 2013; Savolainen, 2014; Schrodt et al., 2024; St. Jean et al., 2017; Sweeny et al., 2010; Willson & Given, 2023; Yang & Kahlor, 2013; Zhang et al., 2023). The trouble is, the journals in the inventory are all titled with the format "[date of first entry] - [date of last entry]," and the Creator happened to keep multiple journals at a time, creating overlap. The series is only described down to the series level, meaning there is no description for each journal. The journals are not digitized. The Researcher is now beginning to get frustrated with the process and decides to just move on to a different resource because the task is becoming too difficult (Savolainen, 2013; Sweeny et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2023). An instance of the archival equivalent to library anxiety can also come into play if the Researcher does not want to ask for help in fear of looking incompetent. The Archivist never even gets to interact with the Researcher face-to-face, but their decisions in describing the collection have caused the Researcher to avoid information. Despite the Researcher's motivation, this content warning has compounded with previous measurements and moderators, adding situational factors like task difficulty and obscurity. The Researcher ultimately rationalizes IA because moving forward would require an undesired action (e.g., continuing to sleuth through the journals even though it is difficult).

5.2.4 The Researcher to The Consumer

The Researcher has completed her research and is using mostly secondary sources from the internet. The final product, a 30-minute long podcast featuring four stories about the BLM movement from men and women of different ages and races, tells an uplifting story about change and equal rights where the protests were peaceful but moving. The podcast gets shared on Reddit, YouTube and other media sharing platforms where Consumers can levy their opinions on facts at will. Consumer 1, who politically agrees with the Creator, comments that not everyone had the same type of experience and that this research was skewing the narrative by omitting other perspectives. Consumer 1 does not mean that the research should have included less positive BLM experiences. The rest of their comment points out that narratives about Black people looting, rioting and inciting violence during these protests were not so peaceful and they include other sources from the internet to fortify their claims.

Consumer 1, a middle-aged white woman, then decides to do her own research. She also finds the Creator's BLM journal and decides to request to see all of the journals that fit within the dates of the movement as she believes they will align with her worldview (Behimehr & Jamali, 2021; Chater & Loewenstien, 2016; Singh & Brinster, 2021). She chooses to interact with the Archivist via email and in person and talks about her project and the Archivist suggests other materials that are more positive and from a Black person's perspective, but Consumer 1 refuses to see these collections. The Archivist, believing they should try to be neutral in providing information and feeling that they cannot intervene, facilitates the request. Consumer 1 is able to spin a tale about white people victimized by Black rioters during BLM protests, thus creating her own skewed narrative. Although the Archivist is the same, the outcomes for the Researcher and Consumer 1 are different because of each individual's pre-existing knowledge

and attitudes towards the BLM movement. Consumer 1 measures her expectations about the BLM journals, believing that they will align with her biases. The Archivist tries to moderate the process by proposing other collections from various perspectives (e.g., interpersonal factors), and Consumer 1 moderates this by considering her own feelings, thoughts and goals (e.g., interpersonal factors) to rationalize avoiding that information from the Archivist because they challenge her beliefs.

5.2.5 The Exchange Perpetuates

Fifty years later, both of the research outcomes made by the Researcher and Consumer 1 later get accessioned into archival collections. The Researcher and Consumer 1 have become Creators. Consumer 2, a future researcher and victim of excessive police force during a BLM protest, may avoid either of these resources for many reasons. The Researcher's podcast is excluded as reflecting a narrative that is too narrow (e.g., limited scope), and the descriptive terms used to describe the people that this podcast is about are outdated (e.g., description, metadata). Consumer 1's tale is excluded because statements in the narrative are inflammatory (e.g., bias), which makes Consumer 2 feel angry (e.g., self-preservation). Because of the limited scopes, outdated descriptions and metadata, bias and self-preservation, IA was imposed on Consumer 2, as they took measurements of their ability to cope with encountering the information. This results in Consumer 2 not feeling represented in the collections and like they do not belong in the Archive as Place doing this research (Caswell et al., 2016; Caswell, 2021; Duff et al., 2019; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Nathan et al., 2015; Reijerkirk & Reed, 2023; Roeschley & Kim, 2019; Tai et al., 2019; Wright & Laurent, 2021).

Nonetheless, they persevere and Consumer 2 somehow finds the Creator's BLM journal after months of research. The Archivist's description has never been changed, reflecting a

positive biography of the Creator and minimal information about the BLM movement, not to mention limited arrangement titles. However, the journal has been digitized basically as is, but the harmful images have been redacted from the online version. A note says that Consumer 2 can see the images in the journal in person in the archive's reading room. The Archivist from our narrative has long-since retired, and the Future Archivist, a new professional with only a year of experience, is tasked with providing reference and access. They do not know all of the content of the Creator's BLM journal and based on the description provided, does not dig deeper into the collection, nor do they ask for help. The Future Archivist is not interested in this particular topic and does not engage with the journal prior to Consumer 2's visit, therefore they do not communicate with them about the sensitive content. Consumer 2 sits down with the journal on the day of their appointment and finds a photo of themself being pinned down by a group of white police officers. Consumer 2 is overcome with anxiety and unpleasant memories and immediately closes the journal. They leave the archive and never return. They pass their experience on to friends and family and the cycle continues.

The hermeneutic interpretive structures offered through the annotated RIAS Model and the AIAE Model and narrative above demonstrate the linkages between the phenomenon of IA and why it is important to consider it in the archival context. IA is indeed highly complex with multiple overlapping pieces that can create a confusing profile which may be misunderstood or overlooked, making IA hard to identify, but exposure to key concepts can allow an archivist to make meaning of the phenomenon and their past experiences. The interviewees in my study were able to learn about IA in this context in real time as we went through the interview process, but these models and narrative should help in providing a roadmap for other archivists who want to understand IA as well.

Finally, in the next chapter I will summarize my key findings, outline my major contributions, and list limitations of my study in conversation with future research opportunities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

My study aimed to explore the ways archivists ideate and experience the phenomenon of IA in the context of their daily work without taking an ethical stance in order to explore the phenomenon openly. Despite a lack of familiarity with the extant literature, the 12 interviewees of this exploratory study were able to discuss their ideas and experiences in ways that reflect the complex findings from previous interdisciplinary research. More importantly, this study should help in cementing IA as an important topic for consideration in archival work and research, as there are clearly unique implications for this particular field. None of this is to say that every instance of IA is bad, or good, or fits in one box. The multivariate nature of IA just alludes to the fact that each occurrence of IA will be different, but perhaps some of the practices and workflows we engage in as archivists and how we approach our work can perpetuate some of the things that we acknowledge as problematic, such as the colonial nature of archival collections and outmoded ideals and descriptions surrounding race, gender, and sexuality.

6.1 Summary

The first three emergent findings explored RQ1 (what ideas do archivists have about information avoidance as it relates to archives?) and included:

Finding 1: Archivists and researchers are both susceptible to IA.

Finding 2: Several factors contribute to IA in archives surrounding the ideas about scoping, self-preservation, access, experience level, bias and worldview, characteristics of the archive itself, obscurity, outside influences, and resource availability.

Finding 3: IA can manifest itself in two ways when working with archives: Denial/misdirection, and/or omission.

The findings align with various existing publications but are now contextualized in the archival field specifically and raise some interesting implications. For Finding 1, the scope of my study explored the relationship between archivists and researchers in IA situations, but it was implied that stakeholders and other consumers may play into that structure as well. Most of these dynamics also seem to be rooted in power exchange. For Finding 2, some factors discussed were well-documented in IA research, like self-preservation and bias, but others combine some of those factors to result in archives-specific avoidance factors like limited scoping, archival access concerns, experience level in archives, characteristics of the archive itself, the obscurity of archival processes and information, and resource availability. For Finding 3, outright denial is common in what seems like all IA literature, but denial through purposefully misdirecting another person, and omission of information are less commonly acknowledged.

The fourth and fifth findings explored RQ2 (how do archivists experience IA as it relates to their daily work?) and included:

Finding 4: Archivists discuss real life applications of IA hypothetically and anecdotally, and those who perceive their role as more public-facing tended to provide more anecdotal examples.

Finding 5: Archivists discuss IA in relation to several archival practices and concepts including experience with archival research, collection management, visibility of archives, digital access, description, reference skills, the archivist's training and experience, the archivist's bias, physical access, processing, trigger and content warnings, archival exhibits and public displays, archival arrangement, and metadata.

Because these findings are specifically explored in the archival context, and because IA in archives literature is nearly non-existent, these findings are particularly important for

archivists. Finding 4 implies that an archivist's positionality within an institution, and how they perceive their engagement with the public may have some bearing on how they think they have experienced, or could experience, IA in their work. Perhaps this is because those who work with the public are more exposed to a variety of people who are conducting research for different reasons, whereas the behind-the-scenes folks are encountering this less, or just amongst other colleagues? Finding 5 calls out archival practices and concepts that the interviewees see as potential facilitators of IA.

6.2 Major Contributions

Aside from the emergent findings listed above, my study resulted in several additional contributions that could augment future research.

A systematic review of the existing literature suggests several ideas about IA that are sometimes succinct, and at other times divergent. One such idea is a call for distinct theoretical models differentiating information seeking behavior from information avoidance (Foust & Taber, 2023), and my study demonstrates the importance of looking at IA in the context specifically relating to archival research and practice. Indeed, the general lack of familiarity with IA among the archivists interviewed aligns with previous assertions that IA studies are underrepresented as compared to information seeking behavior studies (Foust & Taber, 2023; Sweeny et al., 2010). By combining literature and ideas from multiple disciplines leading the charge in IA research, I was able to create the Relational Information Avoidance System (RIAS) Model as a means of converging various ideas from multiple contexts. This not only provides a model that is more inclusive of various ideas, but also allows one to explore those principles in relation to a specific context of interest: Archives. I was able to do this by annotating the model with my findings above.

This annotated version has the potential to be a helpful tool in explaining IA to archivists in a way that they can easily understand and apply to their work. It can be used to systematically understand the convergent, multifaceted characteristics that lead to IA, and can be used to explicate IA in hypothetical or anecdotal situations. This could impact future practice in the field as a lens from which to approach certain standards or skills, and leaves plenty of room for future research. Some suggestions might include exploring IA further by breaking some of the framework into more digestible pieces (e.g., how archival reference impacts or is impacted by IA specifically), or expanding it to include stakeholder and consumer perspectives in addition to archivist and researcher perspectives.

Another helpful model emerged from my study in the form of the Archival Information Avoidance Exchange (AIAE). Using story-telling techniques to illustrate a top-down model of how IA can work its way through an archive, ultimately potentially resulting in generational avoidance, further cements IA as a relevant topic in archival conversations. This was also a way to bring in key theoretical perspectives that contemporary archival professionals are discussing. The variables in this particular narrative are interchangeable: The Creator could be a liberal, queer, Black artist who would have created a completely different record of the same BLM rally that the conservative, cisgendered, white politician and author attended. The next levels trickling down would undoubtedly have different outcomes, but may still ultimately result in the same generational trauma. This may be a powerful tool to explain the value in reflectively exploring mindfulness in archival practices, including collection management, description, metadata production and more.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The roadmap provided here is still exceptionally complex and nuanced, but the data shows that the phenomenon of IA has many important implications for archives and archivists. As pointed out above, my study had a limited scope focusing on archivists and researchers as potential avoiders of information, and there are no doubt more avenues of exploration for the various archival applications mentioned in this study. These probably barely scratch the surface and more focused studies could prove beneficial, especially if they are explored by experts in that particular archival job function. This limitation of only interviewing archivists also revealed an underexplored sub-phenomenon in which IA is not just an individualized phenomenon; that IA can be imposed on an organizational level, and from in-groups and out-groups. This notion does come up in some of the archival literature. For example, on an organizational level, Hertwig and Ellerbrock's (2022) finding that factors like discontent with institutional memory policy are reasons for people to avoid archival information that is available to them. Regarding in-groups and out-groups, McCracken's (2019) and McCallum's (2017) acknowledgement that Indigenous groups have particularly fraught relationships with archives due to the colonial practices and systemic issues that they perpetuate come to mind. Future research could include examining some policies that aim to repair some of these issues, like the Steering Committee on Canada's Archives (SCCA) (2022) *Reconciliation Framework*, through the lens of IA to inform better practices.

Continuing on the theme of sampling limitations, this study explored this phenomenon with a small sample. Although this is viewed by scholars as sufficient for exploratory phenomenological studies (Creswell & Baez, 2020; Schamber, 2000), a larger sample of archivists could reveal more implications for IA in the archival context. It would also allow for a

more nationally and institutionally representative study in which more regions of the United States, such as Puerto Rico and Alaska, and more institution types, like religious archives and digital-only archives, are included. Another limitation of my study is that only archivists were interviewed. As other entities are implicated in the AIAE Model, focus groups or dyads with archivists and researchers, stakeholders or other consumers could provide valuable insight into this body of literature. For example, on the researcher end of user studies, Yakel and Torres' (2003) archival intelligence study interviewed only users of primary sources (researchers). This study divulged some important implications for archives and the barriers that they put forth to researchers, and arguably society at large, and it would be interesting to compare some of those ideas with the framework and models of my study. Further, focus groups with researchers and archivists discussing archival intelligence and information avoidance in archives could be enlightening.

Regarding researchers in particular, more research about IA in archives should be conducted as archival user studies have been found to be lacking (Conway, 1986; Rhee, 2015). User studies have emerged in the last decade and several discuss avoidant behavior, but the focus remains on information seeking behavior (Borlund et al., 2024; Power et al., 2017; Radick, 2016). Beyond this limitation, the archivists interviewed were also all MLIS (or equivalent)-bearing professionals, which excluded participants who worked as archivists but did not have the degree. A report from a survey of 5,699 professional archivists in the United States shows that only 60% of archivists have an MLIS degree and that many professional archivists work in institutions (full-time and part-time) with other degree types (higher and lower) (Skinner & Hulbert, 2022). Indeed, participants who were interested in this study were turned away for not meeting the recruitment criteria approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review

Board. These volunteers may have provided valuable insights and potentially different perspectives on IA that may be worth investigating.

A limitation beyond the scope of my study includes the lack of controlled vocabularies circulating in the extant literature on the topic of IA. Relevant to archives, theoretical studies specifically examining IA in libraries and other information institutions (Narayan et al., 2011), and information seeking behavior studies with IA themes exist (Cooke, 2017; Makinde et al., 2019; Taylor, 2018), but it has not quite infiltrated the archives community yet. Library anxiety literature is also popular (Jiao et al., 2004; Larsen et al., 2019; Malvasi et al., 2009; Mellon, 1986) and its impacts on IA behavior could benefit from more research in itself, but some of these theoretical models could also apply directly to archives and should be explored more. In archives specifically, some studies have looked at "deliberate ignorance," a sister term for IA, in archives (Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022; McCallum, 2017; McCracken, 2019; SCCA, 2022), making the search process for IA-related studies cumbersome. Future user studies centering IA could be highly impactful to the archives community in considering future policies and standards.

Practical research positioning IA in archives could be more robust as well. Although I attempted to not take ethical stances on IA, testing policies and protocols could prove beneficial. For example, research investigating the possibility of a National Finding Aid Network (NAFAN) brings up several barriers and considerations that have been addressed in this study (Weber et al., 2023). The findings regarding the NAFAN project found that end users of already existing archival collection aggregators measure resource limitations "against the potential importance of particular archival material to their research" (p. 11) and that barriers like this lead to inconsistency and inequity of access. Perhaps approaching that concern with an understanding of

IA and this study's findings and frameworks could help in navigating solutions. Additionally, literacies like general information literacy and primary source literacy were mentioned in all interviews and putting existing frameworks like Daines III et al.'s (2022) *Competencies for Teaching with Primary Sources*, SAA's (2018) *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, and ACRL's (2016) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* in conversation with my RIAS Model could be an interesting way to test fortitude and practicality of those frameworks.

Another literacy, digital literacy, could also be placed in conversation with IA as they have parallels. It is important for archivists to consider the digital interface of their finding aids as a mediary between themselves, the user, and the information itself. It is also important to recall that not all archives publish their finding aids, and that different metadata schemas and the extent to which things are processed can impact discoverability (Weber et al., 2023). Digital literacy is not universal and, like IA, factors are complex and multivariate (Bruno et al., 2003; Fuchs, 2009; Mota & Cilento, 2020). Factors contributing to digital divides also overlap with IA, such as demographic, socioeconomic and sociocultural factors (Pew, 2024), digital attitudes (OECD, 2019) and mobile usage/penetration and fixed, permanent access such as home, work, school or public internet access (ITU, 2024). Also, examining IA in relation to new paradigms in archival thinking (Cook, 1997; Douglas & Mills, 2018; Foscarini, 2017; Trace, 2002), analog to digital interfaces (Hamill, 2017), sensitive topics and imagery in records (Roeschley et al., 2024), and daily archival job tasks like reference (Duff et al., 2024) may be an interesting way to test outcomes and develop competencies and educational responses to IA.

In short, the favored lens of exploring archival frameworks and practices from the information *seeking* perspective is not the only option and it is important for practitioners in the

field to consider how tendencies towards information *avoidance* are impacting the quality of information they receive and what that means in the long run. This will allow archivists to approach their work with a more mindful, and hopefully empathetic, ethic of care in handling information, understanding the costs and benefits of their decisions and actions, and better serving their patrons.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Advertisement

Subject Line: Recruiting Archivist for Interviews

Good morning/afternoon/evening [insert potential participant's name],

My name is Scotty Beland and I am an MLIS student at the University of Maryland.

I'm collecting data for my Master's thesis which focuses on a phenomenon known as information avoidance in the archival context, and I am curious about the connection between this phenomenon and if and how archivists' encounter it in their daily work. The interview is expected to last 1 hour or less. See below for more details about the project.

If anyone you know who fits the criteria below might be interested in participating in an interview on this topic, please feel free to connect them with me or send them my contact information to reach out. They can feel free to contact me at sbeland@umd.edu or call 302.258.3561.

I appreciate your help and consideration and I hope to hear back from you soon. Thank you!

Sincerely,

—Scotty Beland

Title: Information Avoidance in Archival Contexts

PI: Scott Beland

Research goal: Investigate how archivists perceive information avoidance and what that looks like in their daily work.

Who can participate? Professional archivists aged 18 years or older who possess a graduate degree (Master's or higher) in Library Science, Archival Studies or related field.

Confidentiality: Participation in this study is voluntary and participant identities as well as any identifying factors will be kept confidential. The interviews may be AV recorded and transcribed (there will be a preference for participants who consent to being recorded) with the use of pseudonyms. These files will be stored in secured folders that only the researcher will have access to in order to avoid breaches in confidentiality.

Research process: You will be involved in a one-hour long interview in person or via Zoom at your request/convenience. With your consent, the interview will be audio and video recorded. If you do not want to be recorded, the researcher will take detailed notes. The interview questions will focus on your archivist background and experiences in general, and on the topic of information avoidance and your experiences with it throughout your career.

When: At the interviewees convenience.

Where: At the interviewees preference, either in person or virtually.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introduction

"Thank you for your participation in this interview. [INTRODUCTION OF MYSELF]. You have been asked to participate in this interview today because you are an archivist who has an advanced degree in library science or archival studies. I am collecting data for my Master's thesis which focuses on a phenomenon known as information avoidance in the archival context. Information avoidance is described by psychologists as any behavior designed to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information. As stewards of information and cultural memories, I am curious about the connection between this cognitive phenomenon and if and how archivists' encounter it in their daily work with researchers.

"To recap what we are doing here today, this meeting should take approximately an hour and I will be asking you questions that are meant to explore concepts and spark a conversation. I have planned out some questions ahead of time, but we may not get to all of the questions and new questions may arise as conversation continues. As a reminder, the interview will be AV recorded and transcribed with your permission so that I can refer to it for the development of my thesis, but it will only be viewable by me and I will not provide anyone with identifiable information. Do I have your permission to record? Thank you (or "not a problem, I will just take notes if you can bear with me between questions" if they decline). You are allowed to exit the interview at any time. Are there any questions before we begin?**"**

Questions

Ice Breakers/Background

1. How long have you been working as an archivist and where do you currently work?
    a. Could you briefly describe your current role and responsibilities?
2. Where did you earn your degree and what specific degree did you get?
    a. Is that program accredited and/or standardized by any professional organizations like SAA or ALA?
    b. What degree did you earn prior to your graduate studies?
3. What, if any, continuing education or scholarship requirements are in place to maintain your role or to earn a promotion in your institution?
4. In your career as an archivist, would you say your role is more public-facing or more "behind the scenes"? Why?
5. Do you believe that you are fairly familiar with current trends, practices, critical studies, etc., in the archival field?
    a. Do you believe that archives are neutral? Why or why not?

Topical

"As we get into these questions, I just wanted to let you know that there are no right or wrong answers and it is just meant to explore your thoughts or feelings about this concept and

how it may relate to archives and how researchers might exhibit certain behaviors. Do you have any questions before we get into this part of the interview?"

1. As I mentioned earlier, information avoidance is any behavior designed to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information. How well does that definition resonate with your own understanding of information avoidance in your experience working with researchers, and what do you think influences your definition?
    a. If you have heard of it specifically, when/why/how/where did that occur?
2. If you've been able to identify information avoidance when working with researchers during your career, what were the characteristics and/or actions that made this recognizable?
    a. Can you give an example from your experiences working with a researcher without mentioning their name?
    b. What do you think it was about the material or the experience that caused the researcher to decide to avoid the information you were trying to give them?
    c. Would you say information avoidance has increased, decreased, or stayed the same in terms of frequency over the span of your career? Why?
    d. Do you think it is a particular concern in the archival field? Why or why not?
3. Some studies say that information avoidance is a *strategic* evasion: do you believe that information avoidance among researchers is always intentional? Why?
    a. Do you think there are varying levels/degrees of information avoidance? What do they look like, or how would you classify them?
4. Can you think of any archival standards or common practices that could cause a researcher to avoid information? Can you provide examples?
    a. What about standards or practices that can prevent it?
5. In what ways do you think that information avoidance can potentially lead to prejudiced narratives and ideals among researchers?
    a. In what ways do you think information avoidance can lead to misuse of archival materials?
6. Do you believe it is your responsibility as an archivist to intervene when a researcher exhibits signs of information avoidance? Why or why not?
    a. What are some things that you think you could do or that you have done?
7. Do you believe other professionals and the public have a shared responsibility to understand and combat information avoidance? Why or why not?
    a. Whose responsibility is it?
8. Do you think that more information literacy standards and programs would help? If so, what specifically would you recommend?
    a. What else do you think would help combat this phenomenon?
9. Do you think that there are types of archives that information avoidance among researchers is more common in? Can you provide examples?
    a. Do you think that the context of IA is different for an archivist than it would be for a librarian or a museum professional? Other professions? Why or why not?
10. Do you think that there is a particular type of person, demographically and/or psychographically, that is more likely to avoid information?
    a. What are those characteristics?

b. Why do you think this might be the case?
c. What would you do to mitigate information avoidance if you were working with this person?

Exit

Our hour is coming to a close so…

1. Is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview that you believe we did not cover?
2. Do you have any questions for me about the interview or what happens next, etc?
3. Do you mind if I contact you in the future if I have any questions or if I need any clarification?

"Thank you so much for your time, and please reach out if you have any questions or concerns in the future. To reiterate from the consent form, the recordings from this interview will be in a secure folder that only I will have access to and I will make sure that your identity is protected throughout the lifecycle of this project. I will go ahead and stop recording now and I hope that you will enjoy the rest of your day."

Appendix C: Code Book Definitions

RQ# Finding #	Code Identifier (# of mentions)	Definition	Example Quote
1 1	Archivists exhibiting IA (42)	Participants sharing examples of an archivist engaging in IA themself or imposing IA on another individual.	"For archivist's, it's just, I guess, for collecting…if the information avoidance is that you're only collecting certain things…" (A2).
	Researchers exhibiting IA (32)	Participants sharing examples of a researcher engaging in IA themself or imposing IA on another individual.	"A researcher could be, you know, influenced to go and seek some collection or not based on the description that's provided" (A1).
1 2	Scoping (113)	Parameters and boundaries of a study regarding the exclusion of certain types of information.	"…[it's] always a challenge of historians and researchers that your scope is supposed to be one that is manageable… and so you really might be, even though you see information that kind of contradicts your point of view, you're specifically avoiding that" (A1).
	Self-preservation (103)	Examples of exclusion of information in order to preserve positive emotions, morals, ideals, attitudes, habits, opinions, privacy, safety, trust, reliability and/or reputation.	"…when [archivists] fear the materials themselves or the words and they're changing their actions based on that…" (A12). "…[donors may not want to] share things because there may be political and maybe racial [language]…" (A2).
	Access (89)	Ability to physically, digitally or intellectually access information in respect to amount of information, ability to contextualize or interpret information, difficulty, or access to staff.	"When you're simply not available to the public in any sort of way, and you're non-responsive, that just takes you out of the running as a source of information" (A4).

RQ# Finding #	Code Identifier (# of mentions)	Definition	Example Quote
1 2	Experience level (69)	Level of experience with archival research specifically, or research in general as it impacts archival research.	"[Experienced] individuals will have only, like, one collection that they're interested in" (A4). "It just happens to be that you don't necessarily have 100% institutional knowledge and knowledge of every single thing that's in the collection, and because your ability to search and whatnot may not have uncovered the thing that the researcher was looking for" (A4).
	Bias/Worldview (61)	Alignment in favor of one thing over another (Note: This does not always mean racism, sexism, etc., and in this case means preferring one type of media over another, etc.)	"It's a form of biasing, like if you're looking in a subject area for evidence and you are eliminating some of the evidence from your review, that's a biased look at the subject" (A12).
	Type of Archive (56)	Examples where a characteristic about the type of archive could cause IA.	"[A private archive might] cherry pick what information gets kept or accepted into a place" (A5).
	Obscurity (44)	Anytime the word obscurity was used or in reference to things that may not be obvious or clear to understand.	"I feel very strongly that archives are to the average Joe… people have no idea what we're talking about in archives" (A7).
	Outside influence (42)	When things outside of the individual's control impact their decisions (e.g., subordination, legal mandates).	"Moreso within maybe a government institutional context that's kind of guided by, you know, collections related to public officials and city bureaus where politics with a capital 'P' is at play and things are coming from a certain political perspective" (A6).

RQ# Finding #	Code Identifier (# of mentions)	Definition	Example Quote
1 2	Resource availability (28)	Lack of money, time, materials, etc., leading to IA.	"[Older researchers have a] limitation on their end to contact us electronically" (A7).
1 3	Omission of information (58)	The acceptance of some information and later exclusion of it.	"I can tell you right now that the way that they're going to craft the narrative is not going to include [that part]" (A5).
	Purposeful denial/ Misdirection (35)	The outright denial of, or misdirection from, particular information.	"We will not provide information about [certain items], because we are concerned that that item and that paperwork is potentially so inflammatory that it just… seems ethically wrong to [provide it]" (A7).
2 4	Anecdotal evidence (55)	Any story that the participant provides in which they clearly experienced it (e.g., "I"/"We" statements, mention of particular collections, etc.).	"In my experience... it tends to be those people who are not, again like, that affected community, they're not a member of a community of consequence in whatever situation..." (A12)
	Hypothetical evidence (40)	Any potential situation that the participant provides in which they may not have experienced, but could imagine it occurring (e.g., they say "hypothetically…" or pondering questions).	"Hypothetically, if... a researcher were to be looking for images related to vascular surgery or something like that, of which they've got three images that they're particularly interested in... it really comes down to how they're utilizing it and what they're open to" (A4).
2 5	Experience with archival research (45)	Examples where archival research experience level is referred to as a potential means of avoidance (e.g., less experience = more avoidance, more experience = more avoidance, etc.).	"With, like very amateur researchers who tend to come in with preconceived ideas, and to be pursuing an obsession rather than an idea" (A11).

RQ# Finding #	Code Identifier (# of mentions)	Definition	Example Quote
2 5	Collection management (39)	Policies and decisions that govern an institution's collections (what gets in, what gets tossed out, etc.) and how those may impact avoidance.	"…we're a state chartered institution and what we store, in a sense, being supported by tax dollars should be open... I have to keep in mind that we do have sensitive information in the records, but I don't, in terms of collecting, I try to avoid those sorts of materials because we have a different mandate in terms of access" (A2).
	Overall visibility of archives (35)	Mentions of the lack of universal understanding of what archives are, how they work, who can access them, etc.	"…it could be the lack of familiarity with archives and the nature of archival collections…" (A6).
	Digital access (32)	Examples where digital technology serves as a barrier to information because of technophobia, lack of internet access, software problems, etc.	"People who exist in a world where, like, you maybe haven't… gotten sat down and learned how to use computers…" (A5).
	Description (29)	Representative words that help identify content about archival material or collections (Note: Trigger/Content warnings were sometimes discussed as elements of descriptions; these were tagged as both codes).	"When people are describing things and writing out metadata or whatnot, that's where I think that's definitely where something could be left out…" (A10).
	Reference skills (27)	Skills associated with face-to-face or virtual interactions between an archivist and a researcher to help identify archival materials of interest.	"I don't really see us as being taught to sort of be so active within that person's experience when up at the reference desk…" (A1)

RQ# Finding #	Code Identifier (# of mentions)	Definition	Example Quote
2 5	Archivists' training/ experience (25)	Anytime a participant brought up an archivist's number of years of experience, their educational background, professional development, etc.	"I think in that situation, you could certainly see [information avoidance] more so when you have volunteers and people that are non-professionals working in information capacities that could definitely be a catalyst for information avoidance to occur" (A10).
	Archivists' bias (23)	Anytime a participant brought up how an archivist's preferences could lead to IA.	"…bias within archival institutions and collecting efforts in what's deemed of historical value, who's deemed notable, who's been talked about and researchers in the past that then prompts people to have additional questions and research" (A6).
	Physical access (19)	Examples where a barrier to the physical archive or archival material causes IA (e.g., limited hours, COVID-19 shut downs, etc.).	"…the barrier to entry for using archives is already so high" (A9).
	Processing (16)	The umbrella process of what happens when a collection comes to an archive and must be prepared for use. This may include arrangement, metadata, description, and others, but those can be ongoing, and this code is specifically referring to collections which are new or unprocessed and therefore underutilized or unknown by potential researchers (or the archivists in some cases).	"Kind of related to… just standards around more product less process, MPLP… something could be very minimal and that, I mean, it's unknown like, whether that's actually… beneficial for the researcher or not" (A1).

RQ# Finding #	Code Identifier (# of mentions)	Definition	Example Quote
2 5	Trigger/Content warnings (8)	Statements used to warn people about content or topics that are dubbed as sensitive by the describing archivist (e.g., graphic material, harsh language, etc.)	"…content warnings in collection description can foster or create an environment where people would be avoiding information for sure" (A3).
	Exhibits/Public displays (6)	The act of taking archival material and publicly displaying them in a way that they may not have been intended for.	"Our use of the material say in [an] exhibit label, I think, certainly we do our own kind of internal avoidance… avoiding the more difficult parts…" (A7).
	Arrangement (4)	Organizing materials in a way that makes sense of the material, and in a way that preserves the material for longevity, however, archival standards for arrangement are not universally considered to be common sense so it may cause IA.	"It's the foldering structure, you know… there by sort of sorting things into semi-arbitrary categories, just to keep it organized and make it easier to navigate, we end up making all kinds of statements about the collection and which parts of it may be of interest…" (A11).
	Metadata	"Data about data." Considered part of description at times, these make materials discoverable by trying to utilize controlled vocabularies.	"[Using] cataloging terms that are out of date [can] carry over into how the researcher might engage with the collection" (A9).

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