Submitted on: 13.10.2025

Digital Repository for Preserving Queer Archives Histories in Indonesia

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Abstract:

The preservation of queer archives in Indonesia is a critical issue. Historically, queer communities have been marginalized and often erased from mainstream historical narratives, either deliberately or systematically. Since 2020, Queer Indonesia Archive (QIA) build a digital archiving project that aims to collect, preserve and disseminate materials depicting queer life in Indonesia. The project is volunteer-run, community-focused and non-profit. With digitalization, collection of queer archives will be source of knowledge and history value. This study explains how queer digital repositories in Indonesia were formed and managed. Then it examines the motivations, values, and strategies behind this digital repository initiatives. Furthermore, this study seeks to uncover the social, political, and technical challenges faced by repository managers and contributors. Methodologically, this research combines case studies and interview the QIA then analysis of Indonesia's legal landscape. This research found that values of this digital repository are conservation, safety and privacy, and accessibility.

Keywords: Digitalization; Digital Repository; Histories; Queer Archive; Preservation.

Introduction

Indonesia is the largest archipelagic country in the world, with a population that is ethnically, religiously, racially, and educationally diverse. Indonesia is a democratic country that uses Pancasila as the foundation of its state and society. In the context of statehood, Indonesia is not a religious state, but the first principle of Pancasila, which reads "Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa" meaning "Belief in One God," establishes religion as the foundational principle of Indonesian society.

The diversity within Indonesian society has led to differing assumptions about the queer community. The term "queer" was originally used to describe people who did not conform to societal norms (Butler, 1990). Queer is a celebration of the attitudes of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual people that desire is complex, and its human dimensions and aesthetics are too immense to be conceptualized within a heterosexual framework (Tempo, October 12, 2003:72). It can be said that queer is eccentric and "strange," but this is normal because it is a consequence of democracy.

Queer individuals and groups choose to live outside the "normal" state expected by society. Judith Halberstam (2005) states, "Queer time is a term for those models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance." In his writing, Halberstam critiques the dominant life trajectory in society, such as marriage, building a family, having children, or pursuing economic stability and inheritance. He opposes this structure and creates a new understanding of how to live, especially for queer communities and groups that do not or may not follow dominant norms. This opens up space to understand the life experiences of queer people, which are often seen as subversive to dominant norms.

The conceptual development of queer continues to evolve toward progressiveness and generalization (Pratama, 2025). According to Pratama (2024), queer is a theory, paradigm, perspective, and resistance movement of marginalized people against systems that marginalize them. Quoted from Pratama (2025), Indonesia, through the National Commission on Human Rights or KOMNAS HAM, incorporates a queer perspective in the Yogyakarta Principles 2006, which states that queer people have the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and to assemble and associate peacefully (Komnas HAM, 2015).

However, in regions where traditional norms, culture, and religion remain deeply ingrained, it is challenging to accept the presence of queer groups. Dede Oetomo, as cited in Siti Kholifatur Rosyidah (2017), explains that queer groups

in Indonesia still face mockery and discrimination. According to Dede, this rejection and discrimination occur because of strong norms, culture, and religion, coupled with a lack of information about queer groups.

The social and cultural diversity that exists in Indonesia should be an asset for archival institutions to support the documentation of marginalized communities. Bawono in Astuti (2018) explains that marginalized communities are still part of the culture that needs to be preserved, or even if the culture has been lost over time, archivists as information agents have an obligation to manage these documents so that they can be used as research material for future researchers.

According to Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 43 of 2009 on Archives, archives are records of activities or events in various forms and media in accordance with the development of information and communication technology created and received by state institutions, local governments, educational institutions, companies, political organizations, community organizations, and individuals in the implementation of social, national, and state life. Referring to this law, every group or individual can create their own narrative or history. Like the queer community, they have their own materials and activities that are documented and become archives containing their stories or experiences.

Throughout Indonesia's history, the narratives and experiences of queer groups have often been marginalized from official documentation. Many stories, collective memories, and forms of expression from queer communities are not recorded in state archives or formal institutions. This has made queer history in Indonesia vulnerable to being lost, forgotten, or even deliberately erased. However, historical documentation from various community groups is crucial for building an inclusive collective memory that reflects the social diversity of the nation. Eric Ketelaar (2002), in “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection,” states that “Archives are not innocent storehouses, but powerful sites where knowledge, memory, and identity are negotiated and constructed.” In line with Ketelaar, Terry Cook (2011) writes in his journal article titled “We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are: Archival Appraisal Past, Present, Future” that “Archives are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social memory is constructed, contested, and reconstructed”. Both theories explain that archives are not neutral or passive but are shaped by human values and decisions and play a role in shaping collective memory in society. Archives reflect who has the power to determine collective memory. In the queer context, this theory is important to understand why queer history is not formally archived because it is considered taboo and deviates from dominant norms in society.

Amidst the limited recognition of queer identity in the Indonesian social and legal context, there is an urgent need to create alternative spaces in the form of digital repositories. Information technology enables the development of

platforms that not only store archives securely but are also accessible to the public, including young people who want to understand the dynamics of queer groups in Indonesia. A repository aims to provide a place to store an institution's electronic documents, thereby facilitating the retrieval process (Tello-Leal et al., 2015). Furthermore, digitizing archives aims to help preserve the physical form of archives and save the information they contain so that they can have a long life. Digital repositories can serve as a documentation platform that includes various non-conventional archives such as magazines, photos, zines, diaries, sound recordings, films, and videos. The development of digital repositories is not merely about storing data, but also a curatorial act to preserve narratives that have been neglected.

However, the establishment and development of digital repositories to preserve queer archives face several challenges, ranging from infrastructure limitations, censorship risks, content blocking, hate speech, to ethical issues in documenting personal identities online. Therefore, a careful and community-based approach is needed in building safe, ethical, and impactful queer digital repositories.
Pancasila, as the state ideology, does not recognize queer groups, nor does Indonesian legislation regulate or acknowledge them (Artina, 2016; Samsu, 2018). However, the second principle of Pancasila, which states “Kemanusiaan yang Adil dan Beradab” meaning “Humanity that is Just and Civilized,” implies that Pancasila views humanity holistically (Nurgiansah, 2020). In terms of values, culture, religion, and ideology, Pancasila clearly opposes queer groups. However, this remains limited to social norms, and there are no written laws prohibiting it (Manik et al., 2021). These conflicting elements place queer groups in Indonesia at a crossroads between legality and illegality.

Despite this, Indonesia, as a country that does not officially recognize queer groups, has a digital repository containing queer archive content in Indonesia. Queer Indonesia Archive, or qiarchive.org, is a digital archive project aimed at collecting, preserving, and disseminating materials that depict the lives and experiences of queer people in Indonesia. Various queer-focused magazines, documentation of community activities, films, newspaper clippings and magazine articles with queer themes are neatly organized on this website. The well-organized archive makes it easier to access and retrieve materials. This not only enriches Indonesia's historical heritage but also preserves queer archives from loss and damage.

This research aims to find out how queer digital repositories in Indonesia were formed and managed, to understand the background and strategies behind these digital repository initiatives, and to reveal the social, political, and technical challenges faced by repository managers and contributors. This research is qualitative in nature and uses case studies as its method. In this study, data were obtained through field observations, interviews, analysis of the legal landscape in Indonesia, and literature studies related to queer groups both in Indonesia and

globally. The author conducted interviews with informants from QIA to obtain more complete and accurate information.

Establishment and Management of the Queer Indonesia Archive

Digital repositories enable archives to be managed collaboratively. In Indonesia, there are individuals who initiated the establishment of a digital repository for queer group archives, namely the Queer Indonesia Archive (QIA). QIA is a digital archive project that collects materials such as magazines, zines, newspapers, films, TV shows, correspondence, and oral histories relevant to the lives of queer people in Indonesia. QIA was founded by Indonesians and Australians in early 2020. At the time, one of QIA's founders was working at Yayasan Gaya Dewata (YGD). YGD is a non-governmental organization established on February 14, 1992, focusing on public health, particularly the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and AIDS. YGD collaborates with transgender communities and men who have sex with men (MSM) communities. The foundation is also actively involved in disseminating information on the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, particularly among high-risk groups, and providing support for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) in Bali Province. YGD also actively engages in empowerment activities and the development of education, health, and human rights through a multisectoral approach (Mahadewi, 2017).

In 2020, when YGD was preparing to relocate its office, they discovered a collection of photos and documents related to YGD. This discovery became the catalyst for the formation of QIA. The materials lacked context and systematic archival organization, prompting the founders of QIA to create a digital archive project to preserve and share the history of the queer community in Indonesia.

Their archiving work continued during the COVID-19 pandemic through collaboration with Tom Boellstorff, an anthropologist from the United States who had researched MSM communities in Indonesia in the 2000s. In his research, Boellstorff scanned many zines and community publications created by MSM organizations at the time. Boellstorff's archive was found to contain many names, events, and queer organizations, serving as a foundation for QIA to connect with these primary sources.

“At any scale, large or small, a commitment to preserve collections of digital surrogates represents a decision that the value of the investment in their creation is not temporally bound.” (Conway, 2014). Conway’s explanation emphasizes that digitization is not merely about creating copies but about changing how users interact with sources and creating a sustainable responsibility for preserving digital collections.

QIA focuses on digitizing conventional archives. Archival digitization is the process of transferring physical archives to digital formats with the aim of facilitating access and dissemination of information, protecting physical

archives from damage, and improving the efficiency of archive management. They take a personalized approach to individuals who own queer archival materials so that they can digitize their archives. QIA has its own steps for digitizing archives. Sometimes, they receive digitized materials from the owners of the archives, but other times, QIA takes the initiative by visiting the owners of the archives and bringing their own digitization equipment. In addition to obtaining permission to digitize the archives, QIA also requests permission to publish them.

Figure 1. Homepage of Queer Indonesia Archive
(source: qiarchive.org)

When you visit their website, you will find that it is quite simple, without many frills, but very neatly organized. They only use simple digital tools, such as Notion to create catalogues, Adobe Photoshop to edit photos, and AI-based transcription software for oral history. Their website is built using WordPress. Although the team does not have formal archiving training, they consult with experienced archivists from organizations such as the Indonesia Visual Art Archive (IVAA).

QIA's archiving criteria are that the material must be more than 10 years old, especially from before the rise of social media in Indonesia. They believe that material less than 10 years old is still a current issue and does not yet have historical value. They focus on the situation of queer people in Indonesia in the pre-social media era, so their collection mostly consists of magazines, zines, newspapers, films, photographs, research, and oral history. However, QIA also tries to archive some social media such as websites, blogs, and forums. Their queer archive material currently comes from Java, Bali, Makassar, and East Nusa Tenggara.

The QIA digital archiving project is non-profit. QIA is managed by volunteers from various fields, each of whom has a day job and contributes their time and skills to this archiving work. According to an interview with one of the founders, QIA's website, visual design, photo editing, archival research, transcription, and cataloguing/classification of archives are all assisted by volunteers. QIA volunteers are recruited through open recruitment, so they come and go according to the projects being worked on.

To date, QIA has collaborated with various formal and non-formal institutions, namely Siniarkeo, Gadjah Mada University, and participated in international events, such as collaborations with archive and queer communities in Australia and the College of Arts and Letters University of Philippines. These collaborations open up opportunities for knowledge sharing and mutual support.

Motivation, Values, and Strategies Behind the Establishment of Queer Indonesia Archive

Ephemera archives are a special type of archive that is temporary in nature and refers to objects that hold "memories," such as museum artifacts, posters, zines, and community documentation, and are often not recognized as legitimate archives by formal institutions. Halberstam (2005) argues that the value of these ephemeral archives lies in their invisibility to the dominant system. He highlights the importance of appreciating collective memory and forms of expression from marginalized communities that are often excluded from official historical narratives. Although they do not have legal status as "official archives," ephemera archives are important for representing marginalized communities.

Choosing which history to remember and which to forget is political and complicated. QIA believes that public awareness of an issue can be shaped through an understanding of history. QIA not only encourages the queer community in Indonesia to learn about its own history but also invites Indonesians outside the queer community to recognize that queerness is not a recent phenomenon or a foreign import, but has existed for a long time and has its own story.

The existence of queer groups in Indonesia has been around for a long time, as evidenced by the many queer magazines such as GAYa Nusantara, Jaka-Jaka, and Chandra Kirana that were circulated from the 1980s to the 2000s. In fact, long before that, Indonesia had a manuscript titled "Djalan Sampoerna," an autobiography of a Javanese youth of noble descent named Sutjipto, who recounted his youth and came out as gay. The manuscript was written by Sutjipto around 1920 during the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia.

In addition to showing that queer groups have existed in Indonesia for a long time, the establishment of QIA aims to counter the narratives circulating among the general public in Indonesia. Until now, narratives about queer groups in

Indonesia have been dominated by negative stories, such as murder, fraud, bullying, and other criminal and sad events. In reality, however, queer people live happy and productive lives despite society's disapproval of their existence. QIA's digital archive focuses on queer materials that record their activities just like any other human beings, such as making friends, networking, partying, and even their love stories.

Society is always dynamic, and culture is always changing. The main motivation behind the establishment of QIA is to ensure that the history of the Indonesian queer community is remembered and documented from their own perspective. The queer archives managed by QIA aim to provide a sense of belonging and a historical foundation for future generations of queer Indonesians. A QIA representative stated, “We have the right to be remembered and the right to document our community from our own perspective.”

Building trust within the queer community is crucial to QIA's work. The organization often relies on respected figures such as Dede Oetomo, a queer activist from the 1980s, to introduce them to local queer communities. The involvement of these senior queer activists fosters trust among queer individuals and groups as owners of archives with QIA.

QIA's archiving work is based on the security and privacy of the archive owners. Archive owners may agree to have their archives digitized but not published, or they may agree to publication after a certain period of time or after their death. The archive owners give their consent for digitization and publication by filling out a consent form provided by QIA. QIA has a system for categorizing materials into public, restricted, and private collections, with access to restricted and private collections requiring permission. Decisions about the category of an archive are made in consultation with the archive owner. In addition, contributors may withdraw their consent to the publication of archives at any time. QIA also edits sensitive information, such as full names and addresses, from zines to protect the privacy and security of individuals. This is because zine and queer magazine collections from the 1980s often included complete personal data in “matchmaking” columns, which was common practice at the time. QIA's archiving principles emphasize the active involvement of queer groups in the entire archiving process. This provides space for queer groups whose narratives have been neglected and is in line with the essence of participatory archiving, which directly involves queer groups in creating, managing, and determining the use of archives according to their own context.

Security, sustainability, and public access are the guiding principles for QIA in building and managing this digital repository. Security is particularly important for the team running the project and those who are “archived.” In terms of sustainability, QIA observes that many queer organizations, both in Indonesia and abroad, are still centered around a single figure. This is one of the reasons QIA aims to develop into a foundation so that its existence can be continued by

future generations. Public access is also important for QIA's managers, who use digital formats to ensure that everyone can view the archives they manage.

Challenges Faced by Queer Indonesia Archive

QIA faces several challenges from various fronts. These include a heteronormative and sometimes repressive social environment, internal issues within QIA, challenges from contributors, and political challenges. To mitigate risks, QIA hosts its website outside Indonesia and has a "kill switch" to quickly take down the site if necessary. The organization also experienced an incident in Makassar, South Sulawesi where a planned community visit was cancelled due to a recent police raid. A representative stated, "We must be cautious and build trust with the queer community."

As discussed, queer groups in Indonesia are marginalized and vulnerable to bullying and persecution, and discussions about queer groups are considered taboo by some members of the general public in Indonesia. At times when QIA has been highlighted by one of Indonesia's mass media outlets, instead of receiving support, QIA has received negative comments and hate speech.

Operational reasons also pose challenges for QIA, such as limited funds and manpower to process archives so that they can be accessed by the public, because they are community-based, involve volunteers, and operate on a non-profit basis. Another challenge arises from how to balance the publication of archives and the security of the subjects in the archive material. In response to these challenges, QIA has created a system of three types of material privacy. The first type is a public collection that can be accessed freely on the QIA website. The second is a restricted collection listed in the archive catalogue and accessible only with QIA permission. The third is a private collection, which can be accessed only with the approval of QIA and the archive owner. Interestingly, so far, the determination of archive access levels is entirely up to the primary archive owner. Most of QIA's queer archives are publicly accessible, with around 5-10% classified as restricted collections, and no archives have been classified as private collections.

Gaining the trust of individuals and queer communities to be archived is a challenge for QIA from contributors. This is because queer groups in Indonesia have strong reasons to be cautious and tend to be selective in allowing people to explore and document them. QIA addresses this challenge by taking a personal approach to queer individuals and communities. QIA is also facilitated by Dede Oetomo, a senior Indonesian queer activist and founder of GAYa Nusantara magazine, so that queer individuals or groups who own archives are willing to allow QIA to digitize and publish their queer archives.

The Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology Regulation No. 5 of 2020 on Private Electronic System Providers, Article 9, states that electronic system providers must ensure their platforms do not contain

and/or facilitate prohibited content, including indecency, gambling, and hate speech. This article includes "indecency," where LGBTQ+ content is considered indecent in Indonesia. As a result, many websites containing information or education about queerness have been blocked because they are deemed indecent. This situation has led QIA to host their servers outside Indonesia to avoid the risk of content censorship.

Currently, QIA is in the process of applying to become an officially recognized foundation under Indonesian law to enhance its operational capacity and facilitate fundraising efforts. This will enable them to open a formal bank account and potentially access free services from Google and Adobe. The organization prioritizes the safety of its members and contributors, as well as the sustainability of its archives. They hope that QIA will continue to grow and provide a sense of history and belonging for future generations of queer Indonesians.

Conclusion

The difference between human rights and socio-religious norms in Indonesia remains strong. This results in a complex legal landscape regarding queer material in Indonesia. Although there is no explicit prohibition against queer identities in national law, in practice, the queer community is often restricted in producing and distributing material that represents their group. This situation makes material about queer groups vulnerable to rejection. Conservation is the care of archives that are still in use.

Queer Indonesia Archive plays an important role in preserving the historical memory of the queer community in Indonesia. Digitalization is taken by QIA in order to conserve Indonesian queer archives. The work of digitizing queer archives carried out by QIA is a form of activism in the field of archives and aligns with one of the issues raised by IFLA WLIC 2025 on problems and successes related to LGBTQ+ services in libraries. This due to the fact that QIA has curated, maintained, and preserved queer archives, documenting the history of social justice activities and community history that are not affiliated with government or archival institutions, connected archives to living memory, made it easier for people outside the queer communitiy to understand and comprehend the state of the queer community, while also challenging prejudices and negative portrayals of the queer community often featured in the media.

The existence of QIA, which has attracted the attention of institutions outside Indonesia, still requires community involvement, ethical archiving practices, and strategic decision-making so that this digital archiving project about marginalized groups can survive longer. The QIA team is open to collaboration and welcomes assistance, including feedback on their work. Marginalized communities have the right to be remembered and the right to write their own history without being written by others.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by Queer Indonesia Archive and funded by National Library of Indonesia.

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