

# Staying Afloat: Charting a Path to Longevity for Libraries of Things

*What differentiates success in lasting LoTs in the U.S.? What are the challenges experienced and strategies developed in the pursuit of longevity?*

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## Abstract

Library of Things (LoT) collections have re-emerged as a strategy that many public libraries use to adapt to the ever changing needs of their communities. Yet there is little generalizable information existing on these collections and how they are managed long-term. Research has primarily focused on specific single-category collections, such as Tool and Toy Libraries, for case studies of successful expansion of non-traditional collections. The research often centers private and non-profit organizations running LoT collections, as opposed to public library collections. Our research team instead focused on identifying attributes and trends in LoTs that may establish guidance to successful long-term operation. We utilized a mixed-methods data collection approach: distributed a questionnaire to library representatives (such as Library Directors, Branch Managers, or Collection Managers), recorded in-person and virtual interviews from the same respondents, directed field observations of collections, and analyzed public library social media accounts. In analyzing 52 survey responses from libraries in 25 states, 7 interviews, 2 on-site observations, and 20 Instagram accounts, we identified several trends in the sampled collections that may be predictive of longevity. The majority of collections have been operating for less than ten years, with close to equal respondents reporting operating for 1-5 years and 5-10 years, and reported a collection size of 100-499 items. Community input, space constraints, labor shortages, and public funding were reported as the main influencing factors to collection development, circulation, and engagement. Item diversity, experimentation, and adaptability of collections, as well as interorganizational collaboration and promotional caution were common themes throughout. Overall prevalence of LoT collections is still nascent, and further research is needed to monitor continuing operations to evaluate long-term success.

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## Introduction

### *Can you build a boat with your library card? Can you borrow a compass?*

Libraries in the United States have consistently expanded their roles to fulfill their need for meaning in society. These institutions, which started off as private repositories of information, focused on assisting and assimilating the masses, then moved to being a “cultural concern of the middle classes” (Söderholm & Nolin, 2015, p. 245), are again wrestled with the opportunity of redefinition. Can they answer yes to questions above? Libraries leverage the needs of their communities when designing their offerings, but communities’ needs are expanding alongside the sharing economy (Ameli, 2017); (Söderholm & Nolin, 2015). Some libraries are meeting needs by introducing innovative models for thing-lending, also known as Library of Things (LoT).

Most simply, LoTs lend non-document “Things” to the public. Beyond that, nearly every part of the model varies heavily. The openness of available formats to establish these programs frames LoTs as a convenient template wherein “the specific setup – business model, financing, staffing – is largely blackboxed” (Söderholm, 2018a, p. 31). Broadly, these organizations can be categorized based on their connection to public funding, staffing, and profit (Shareable, 2024), with four access-models for patrons ranging from no-cost, membership-based, per-thing fees (Tabor, 2013, p. 1) or hybrid models such as where wealthier patrons subsidize the cost for others (Broner, 2017, p. 66).

Despite a long history and flexibility, under 29% of LoTs operate for 10+ years, according to a recent international study of largely independent LoTs (Shareable, 2024). Of those that remain, the most well-known types are Tool and Toy libraries. The Mechanics’ Institute Library in San Francisco (est. 1854), LA County Toy Loan Program (est. 1935), Cuyahoga County Public Library Toy Collection (est. 1992), the Grosse Pointe Tool Collection (est. 1943), and the Berkeley Tool Lending Library (est. 1979) are some examples of long-running programs (Hamilton, 2021); (Moore, 1995). Literature is awash in toolkits to begin a “Thing” collection, but libraries need resources for continued operation and research on success factors to help this fleet of LoTs stay afloat. Our research sought to identify related factors or trends within US public libraries that have a designated Library of Things collection because of the legacy of public sector LoTs. We aimed to gather this data as a resource for information professionals and libraries.

## Literature Review

### Challenges in the Collection

Often, an adherence to a library’s existing strategic goals informs its LoT establishment. For some, accessibility is the highest priority, and thus those libraries choose to place “very few limits on how the items circulated, not requiring any waivers, and making a determined effort not to be punitive with fines and fees” (Lax, 2020, p. 57). Others align their LoT collection borrowing policies with their standard borrowing policies, including nominal fees for damaged or misplaced items. Since “Thing” collections cannot be digitized, imbalance in circulation such as high waits, low inventory, and demand is exacerbated.

LoTs historically face unique challenges in managing circulation. NSC University found that due to complex intake needs during peak usage, hold times were long and without wait estimates, leading to 33% hold non-retrieval (2012, p. 214). Remediating this required a formal assessment— rare for an LoT in the literature— resulting in variable lending windows and item depreciation. (Chapman & Woodbury, 2012, p. 217).

With Thing lending, the need for maintenance, repairs, and cleaning are also challenges for circulation. For example, the importance of being able to clean and sanitize items effectively, and anticipating the need for continued cleaning can impact selection of items for the collection (Broner, 2017); (Kirschner, 2017). Baden et al. suggest LoTs face tradeoffs of external attractiveness and internal complexity (2020, p.6). While greater item diversity attracts patron engagement, larger collections are more challenging to maintain, as well as more costly to establish and operate.

### **Challenges in Funding**

Maintaining long-term funding is a common challenge. A wide array of alternative funding strategies have been employed to build a budget for LoT collections, including municipal or institutional micro-grants, crowdfunding, charitable funding, item and space donations, volunteer labor, patron membership, and per-thing usage fees (Baden et al. 2020); (Shareable, 2024). Without established and consistent funding, some collections become influenced by the changing funding tides.

For example, short-term grants utilized in funding, such as “Community Development Block Grants” (CDBG), may have tertiary requirements to maintain eligibility (HUD, 2024). Broner details an initial \$30,000 CDBG for the Berkeley TLL in 1979 that required regular measurement of patron income and outreach metrics, and an independent panel to provision the funds (2017). Less than a decade into operation, the panel halved disbursement, which led to a multi-year effort to maintain operation until they could secure public funding through a voter-approved tax amendment (Broner, 2017, p. 66).

Furthermore, grant stipulations on collection makeup can limit a LoT’s capacity to grow by “overprioritiz[ing] program innovation and experimentation, referred to as ‘novel initiatives’, at the expense of supporting arguably more primary operational aspects like infrastructure and (strategic) management” (Lynch, 2023, p. 168). Even with tax-based public funding, The Fitzroy Public Library, which shuttered their tool program, explained that they still lacked necessary staffing and support, making routine use of core library resources, such that “the efficiency of the mainstream Library Services [was] hampered as a direct result of providing the TLS” (Bruwer, 1987, p. 31).

The convergence of complicated operations, expanding public service expectations in a post COVID-19 world (Lee, 2024), and the decline or stagnation of public funding in many states and municipalities, has created a potential storm of financial challenges (Jones 2020).

### **Challenges in Perception and Promotion**

Upon launch of new LoTs, there may be initial appeal and press to accompany it. For example, the Toronto Kitchen Library appeared in local and national news, as well as several

high profile magazines, but closed after only three years and 600 loans (Boyer, 2016). This highlights an ongoing challenge for LoTs: managing engagement and demand.

Since each library determines how their collections are promoted differently, the use of inconsistent labels and terminology affects visibility to patrons. Even the term “LoT” is far from universal; many organizations refer to their collection by item (e.g. Toy, Seed, Tool) or structure (e.g. Collection, Library, Catalog, Program). Anderson and D’Arcy note “some libraries have not fully embraced the title ‘Library of Things’” and it may take time for terminology to solidify (2020, p. 2). As such, patrons may have difficulty knowing if their library offers these special collections. Further, there is a lack of continuity with how these collections are depicted online and in physical spaces. One librarian noted the need to have visible thing-lending specialists distinct from typical librarians for patrons to see, requiring “that all working at the tool library ‘have a tool belt’, literally and figuratively” (Söderholm, 2018b, p. 381).

## **Defining Success**

Lynch articulates the importance of recognizing that “the successful operation of LoTs is deeply connected to a range of cultural, political, economic and spatial dynamics” (2023, p. 165). Defining success is often up to the individual LoT related to their foundational mission, rather than reliant on outside assessment (Shareable, 2024). Community engagement, local leaders’ investment (Lynch, 2023), and traditional quantitative metrics such as circulations statistics or workshop attendance numbers (Robison & Shedd, 2017) are identified as being some indicators of success for established LoTs. Tabor also noted that at present, existing surveys and case studies are largely qualitative and to reach a scientific definition of a successful LoT, a much more focused approach that isolates dependent variables would be necessary (2013, p. 18). Within the literature, there is a gap in efficacy assessments when regarding long-term LoTs.

Major contributing factors to a LoT program existence is the sustainability of the funding, promotion, and engagement. For many collections, there is inaugural enthusiasm and fundraising, however, more research into the factors of program directives, item suitability, and continued funding methodologies is needed. Filling this research gap is pressing as funding risks affect physical space management, collection acquisition and development, organizational management, promotion and accessibility, and growth. While case studies highlight the importance of visibility, platform accessibility, and marketing, there appears to be a lack of consensus on what promotional strategies, terminology, and resources contribute to success.

## **Research Methods**

Our methodology for requesting participation was impacted by the limited time frame and what libraries were relevant to sample. Our criteria for potential libraries was informed by desk research and knowledge of known institutions with LoTs. We determined a mixed methods approach in order to triangulate several types of qualitative and quantitative data. We contacted 74 US libraries via their website contact forms, public email addresses, or phone calls. Our data collection was timeboxed to 7 days, and we completed a total of 7 interviews, 2 observations, 20 Instagram profile analyses and received 52 survey responses (a 70% response rate).

### *Survey Methodology*

Given that our research seeks to identify general trends in existing LoT collections, we realized the need for large scale quantitative data gathered through the form of a survey. We utilized a Qualtrics 20 question survey composed of both quantitative and qualitative questions. This was informed by prior research questionnaires from Shareable, Neil Tabor, and Jonas Soderholm for comparative analysis.

### *Interview Methodology*

Given the diverse iterations of LoTs, we determined that interviews would provide insight to the unique set of challenges each library faced. Interviews with select survey respondents were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed with permission. We utilized a guided qualitative interview guide that overlapped questions from the survey while allowing for open conversation.

### *Observation Methodology*

Qualitative observations were conducted with a prepared guide. With permission on-site, one researcher would notate or photograph experiences every 15 minutes in relation to the physical space, patrons, and staff. Observing existing collections was identified as an opportunity to experience how LoTs may function for patrons and staff. We were concerned with observing any behavior that we hypothesized as commonalities or differentiators, and observing physical spaces allowed us to reflect on the data collected via surveys and interviews.

Two libraries were observed; one Library of Things (comprising two separate collections: toys and other mixed items) located at the main branch of a four branch county system, referred to as observation Site A; and a specific Tool Library of a county system that was housed in a community space, or Site B.

### *Social Media Analysis Methodology*

Readily available respondent Instagram profiles were analyzed with a document guidebook notating account details, language, imagery, and posts within 60 days. We noted all LoT collection posts and compared their prevalence to non-LoT posts, summarizing themes and patterns in account usage.

## Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Prominent Themes and Subtopics in Libraries of Things

Broader Theme	Subtopic
Community is Necessary for Collections	Fulfilling Need in Community
	Community Impact on Collections
	Interlibrary Collaboration
Collection Adaptability	Collections are Diverse
	Experimentation is Critical
Limited Resources and Funding	Funding Strategies / Budget Reallocation
	Physical Space as a Limit
	Labor / Staffing Shortage
Engagement as Challenges and Goals	Social Media Promotion
	Embodied Promotion
	Engagement Strategies

### Community is Necessary for Collections

#### Fulfilling Need in Community

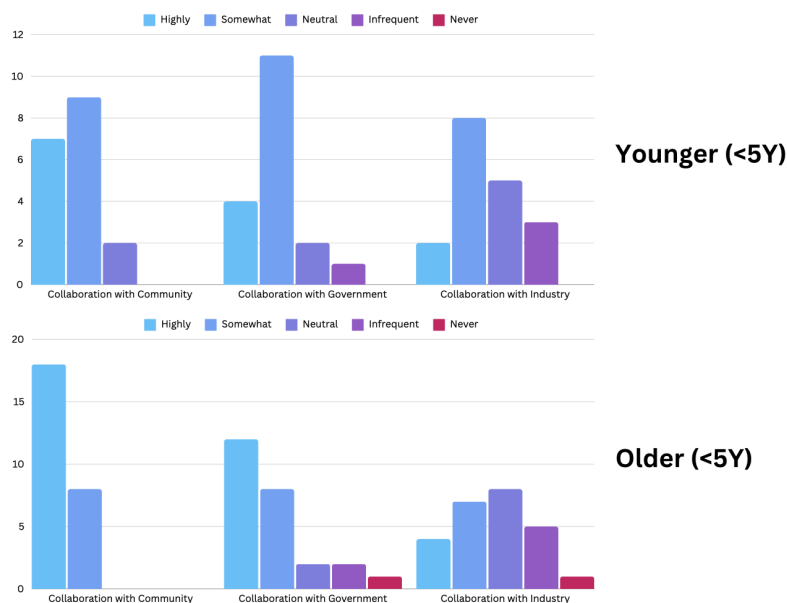
Survey responses show the most significant factor influencing collection development is community need, which challenges our initial belief that funding would be the most significant factor based on the literature. Multiple interviewees described using variations of community needs assessments or interest surveys to gauge interest in the LoT collections. While being community driven seems fundamental to LoTs, sometimes community demand is ill-aligned to library capacity, whether in terms of sourcing, circulating, storing, and maintaining the item. In contrast to the literature, the majority of our library respondents do not take Library of Things donations due to concerns for consistent safety and quality. Additionally, respondents discussed many collection-level policies that adapted over time to assure item accessibility. Respondents occasionally detailed shifting holds policies for items that a long hold time may not be compatible with its purpose or demand; for example, one interviewee explained pressure washers were made available only for walk-in circulation.

Based on responses, a potentially important part of community influence on the collection is dependent on whether or not their needs are able to be met with other non-profit, public, or for-profit entities. A LoT collection does not benefit by overlapping, or competing with local entities' offerings due to needing to efficiently allocate limited resources. Meanwhile,

collection engagement may be higher with items and services that the local industry does not offer. Further research on LoT circulation is needed to better understand the ways in which geographic differences might affect the collection makeup.

## Community Impact on Collections

Please rate how you would describe the following relationships?



**Figure 1.** Respondents described their relationships to community, government, and industry based on a scale of how collaborative they are.

Older and younger collections both rate collaboration with the community as the most significant relationship. Often, collections begin with just a few items or categories based on patrons' needs demonstrated within the library itself. For example, the Bristow Public Library described how they benefit from a close relationship with local social service programs that have influenced the library's services. They built quiet conference rooms to accommodate families meeting with social service programs. This led to the idea of the toy collection to keep children occupied, as well as Chromebooks for parents. Beaverton, Bristow, and Whatcom County library interviewees described conducting community interest surveys to help with collection establishment, initial item selection, or collection expansion. Beaverton staff created two internal committees: one to decide and circulate surveys to patrons on item choice, and another committee to focus on item logistics, what would be at each branch, and other borrowing policies.

Apart from the types of items themselves, the community also impacts the types of programs and engagement strategies each item needs. In one survey example, an Information Systems Coordinator referenced their obligation to create patron training for their launch of new memory care kits. Community engagement programs, such as "Challenges", workshops, or trainings paired with LoT collections, were reported by 58% of survey respondents overall, with collections older than 5 years reporting 69% usage, versus younger collections' 43%.

Further, collections change over time due to changing community needs. For example, in



response to Covid, many collections had the opportunity to purchase hotspots, showing collaboration between the LoT, community needs, and government. Tighter integration with community partners may help collections anticipate needs as they grow.

### **Interlibrary Collaboration**

Managing interlibrary relationships appears to be key to collection maintenance in the form of shared user preferences and cataloging information. When interviewed, Beaverton City Libraries reported only starting their LoT after seeing the success of Hillsboro Public Library's collection. Due to having a shared catalog system with other libraries meant some of the heavy lifting was already done in terms of necessary logistics. Similarly, Whatcom County Library System's collection manager mentioned contacting other LoT collections to assess the risk of trying an item, such as robotic cats, that the other library was already circulating. They also worked with a coalition of other libraries to create a standard LoT collection manual.

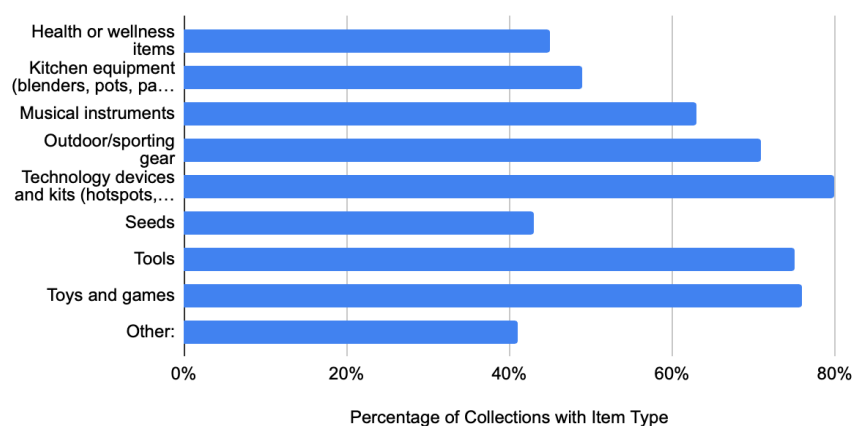
Furthermore, during our research, we were directed to a Mutual Aid Group connecting LoT collections all across the country. In addition to advice and item selection, a public library's existing relationships play a key role in allowing these collections to do maintenance and repair. Many LoTs leverage city or library departments to assist in operations, such as printing new booklets for board games, 3D printing new pieces that go missing, repairing equipment through local city repair events, and more.

Finally, connection with other libraries is crucial for staying on top of circulation needs, as multiple libraries are impacted by local or regional viral trends. Richland Public Library mentioned that new items at neighboring collections often cause exhaustion of their collection, such as "When [neighboring Orangeburg County] launched their State Park Passes, we had a run on our State Park Passes like immediately. [...] Literally within a week, we'd doubled the amount of park passes we'd had in our collection, and then all those still got booked out" (Kelsey Andrus, RPL). Similarly, Lisa Gresham of Whatcom County Library System mentioned during COVID-19 they hadn't yet offered hotspots but realized many of their patrons were trying to collect them from the nearby Bellingham Public Library, prompting them to expand their collection.

These kinds of established connectivity and strong relationships in the community, if managed efficiently, may be one factor outside of funding contributing to why public library LoT collections may be more likely to survive than independent ones.

## Collection Adaptability

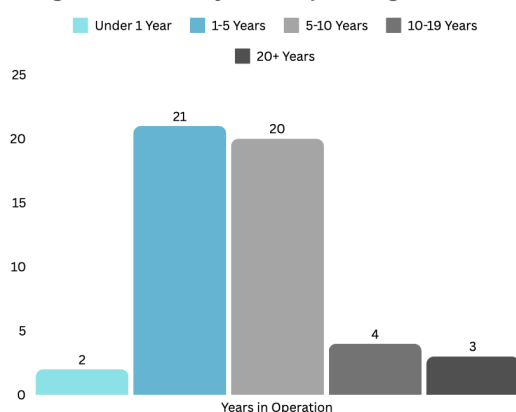
### Collections are Diverse



**Figure 2.** Responses to, *What type(s) of item(s) do you have in your Collection?* Select all that apply.

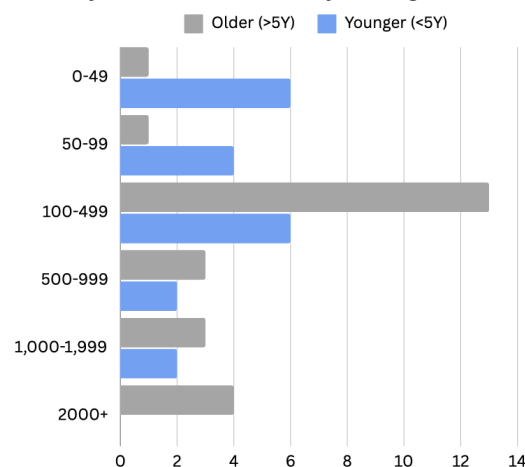
We found that, unlike single-focus collections often featured in the research, LoT collection makeup is extremely diverse. The survey offered an open-text field for respondents to elaborate on what other item categories exist in their collections. “Other” contained a wide variety of additional categories: single-use items such as nails, screws, etc.; sewing machines; learning tools such as microscopes, telescopes, coding kits, crafting devices, puzzles; and miscellaneous items like laminators, paper shredders, telescopes, and nostalgia items. Technological devices and kits are the most prevalent category, reported by 79% of our survey respondents.

**How Long has the Library Been Operating this Collection?**



**Figure 3**

**How Many Items are In Your Library of Things Collection?**



**Figure 4**

Interviewees stressed that their collection makeup changes over time, mainly due to items falling into disrepair or dating out, often as a result of lack of expertise in properly

maintaining an item. New items are then added in an experimental manner, filling the space of the vacated items. In this way collections vary over time, yet general collection size remains relatively consistent, as seen in Figure 4.

The majority of respondent collections have been operating for less than ten years, with nearly equal respondents reporting operating for either 1-5 years and 5-10 years (Figure 3). The majority, 39%, report a collection size of 100-499 items. Figure 4 depicts total collection item count between the two sub-groups and demonstrates that while older collections have more items, there appears to be limiting factors related to collection size. However, we noted a discrepancy in talking with interviewees that also completed surveys; they considered “size” to be unique items, and their count did not include duplicates. Further research on collection makeup should specify these distinctions to better articulate the size and scope of LoT collection diversity.

### **Experimentation is Critical**

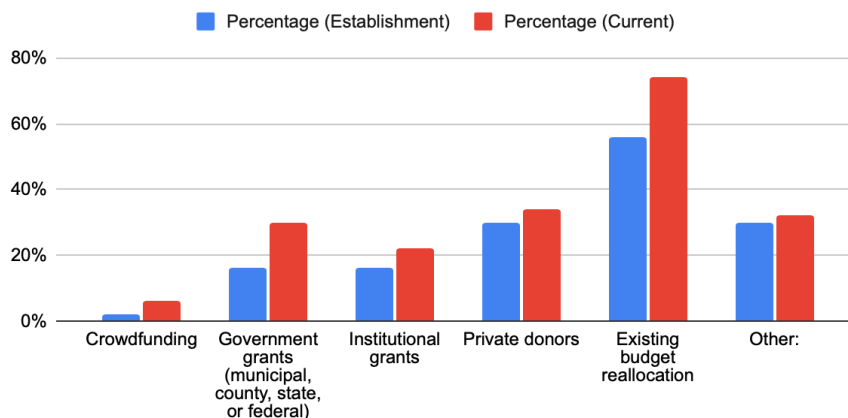
Experimentation is how collections end up circulating surprising and unique items: model skeletons, ghost hunting equipment, cake pans, spice kits, air quality testers, therapy and wellness devices, exercise equipment and much, much more. It can also lead to unexpected challenges for collection upkeep and maintenance.

When asked about the maintenance requirement for collections items, 46% of survey respondents reported that maintenance or repair of items was required once a week, with 28% reporting 2-3 times a week. While this appears to imply that maintenance is a regular demand on staff time, several interviewees spoke about only carrying out minor repairs, while major damage to collection items can result in retiring the item, often without replacement. At one observation site, a larger tool item was marked as needing maintenance, dated over three months preceding the observation. To reduce maintenance demand, several libraries reported that they would prioritize purchasing items that could “afford” to lose parts and still be circulated.

While experimentation offers a way to weed and update the collection to better suit patron needs and interest, it may also lead to impractical purchasing. For example, one library spoke about the challenge of identifying the right amount of copies of each item, especially new items, without knowing what patron demand will be. Many LoT collections do not survey patrons about their use or satisfaction of the collection, therefore leaving potential community needs unsatisfied. Other libraries indicated some types of novel items like software or robotics might run into end-of-life or licensing issues, or be more difficult to repair than expected. Establishing a firm and thoughtful collection experimentation plan at time of selection, with guidance on how to react when things may fail, can be crucial.

## Limited Resources and Funding

### Funding Strategies / Budget Reallocation



**Figure 5.** Responses to, *How was the Library of Things collection originally funded/established? How is the Library of Things collection currently funded?*

The majority of respondent LoT collections are funded almost entirely with existing budget allocations, while private funding, non-profit funding from Friends of the Library, and government grant funding are minor factors. Interviewees explained that LoT collections are picking up funding from decreased needs in other parts of library budgets (such as physical print and out-dated digital media). One reference librarian stated that without any additional funding, they could still keep the LoT running for a while, but the collection would stagnate. This was in contrast to the literature, where the ability to maintain consistent funding specifically allocated to the collections was a primary concern (Baden et al., 2020) (Bastiansen & Wharton, 2015) (Leach & Stilwell, 2023) (Nicholson 2013).

The topic of funding highlighted the larger disparities that public libraries face throughout the US. Unlike most other interview subjects, Bristow Public Library's existing budget was insufficient across all categories. This results from their service population, in rural Oklahoma, being eight times the size of the municipal population that their tax funding is allocated for. Similar to the literature, the challenge of scaffolding together sufficient funding is Bristow's primary concern, which further leads to limitations on labor and other challenges.

For other libraries with sufficient funding for daily operations, moving to the next stage in growth is a challenge. Many public libraries rely on government levies and are often unable to plan any expenditures for special collections until they know the outcome. Even in the case of fully funded libraries, there was a latent worry that managing public stakeholder expectations will be a challenge in the future, as the collections still enjoy a certain novelty.

## Physical Space as a Limit

Challenges with managing the collection within physical space was often identified as a major factor, which is consistent with the literature (Baden et al., 2020), (Broner, 2017), (Hamilton, 2021). Needing various spaces for holds, storage, repair/maintenance, and transport, including storage at multiple locations, was a trend in the data. 100% of open-text responses for *How would you like to improve your collection?* were space related (7 responses). In nearly every interview, and many survey responses, respondents reported that high rates of circulation also currently offer a buffer to storage needs, as Carmella Hatch of Duluth Public Library mentioned, “Fortunately we only ever have about half or less of the collection checked in at any given time. Otherwise they would not all fit in the cabinets we store them in. The collection is very popular and continues to grow, but we do not have the ability to easily increase space for it.”

Observation offered a glimpse into the varied strategies LoT staff employ regarding space. Staff at both observation sites commented on their perceived challenges, regarding their respective spaces as not effective or too small. Observation Site A was a smaller, branch-specific collection stored behind circulation in two cabinets. This was a stark contrast to Site B’s space, in a mixed-use community building. This site was the size of a small office, with items stored on various tall shelves and an additional shed outside that held items too large for the indoor space. The Tools at observation Site B are not repaired in the studio space where the Tool Collection lives, but rather with a specialist librarian at the system’s main branch. Both libraries stored the collection separately, had organization methods known to staff, coded items with unique identifiers, and require patrons to return the item to the space/branch it was borrowed from. Even when LoTs have spaces to store, transport, check in/out, and repair the items, almost all sampled libraries had communicated staffing challenges.

## Labor / Staffing Shortage

However, staffing may be the limiting factor over both funding and space, as there is often more LoT collection work than current staff can keep up with. While some of the literature identified the ability to acquire and maintain collections with appropriate staffing as a main concern (Kirschner, 2017), it was not as widely discussed as physical space and funding.

Our interview with Richland Library was the only one that had a dedicated collection manager for their LoT collection. This contrasts the struggles that many other libraries faced borrowing resources from their main collection. Even still, collection manager Kelsey Andrus wondered about what will happen if the “hype” fades for LoTs and hopes libraries continue to find ways to stress the value of Library of Things.

***Despite this section being the shortest, staffing may be the largest and most consistently identified barrier to longevity.***

## Engagement as Challenges and Goals

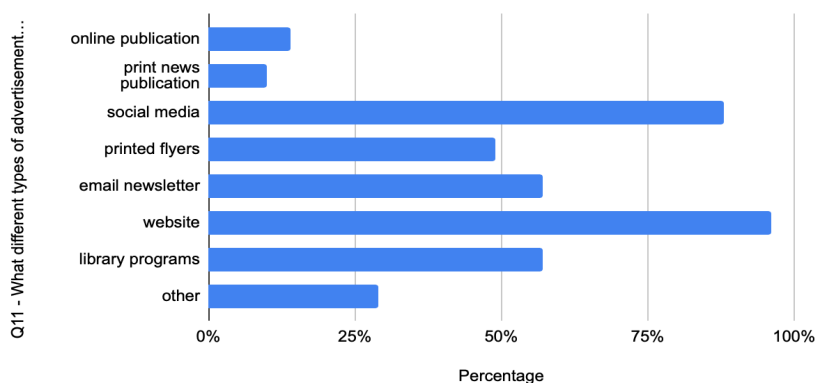
### Engagement Strategies

Previous research discussed patron awareness and responsible access as some of the most significant challenges to LoT collections (Lax, 2020); (Kirschner, 2017). Interviewees discussed promotion as both a challenge and goal. They recognize the need to promote, but there is hesitancy for fear of overpromoting. Many use social media but admit they do so sparingly as it would increase demand. They want to ensure good management at the existing volume, manage high capacity utilization, and still maintain low wait times, which the literature claims as being key to sustaining engagement (Chapman & Woodbury, 2012).

Some respondents advertise items front and center in the library; others use promotional signage; some have none. Pairing collections with special library events, word-of-mouth/conversational promotion are identified as the most commonly cited ways of advertising the collection. In survey responses to an open-ended question, the most consistently self-reported effective engagement strategies included *word of mouth*, *physical in-house displays*, and *social media*. The most commonly cited, least effective strategy was, by far, outside-the-library display of print media, such as flyers. We saw polarizing variance in the effectiveness of promotion at community events such as farmers markets, news coverage, or website wayfinding.

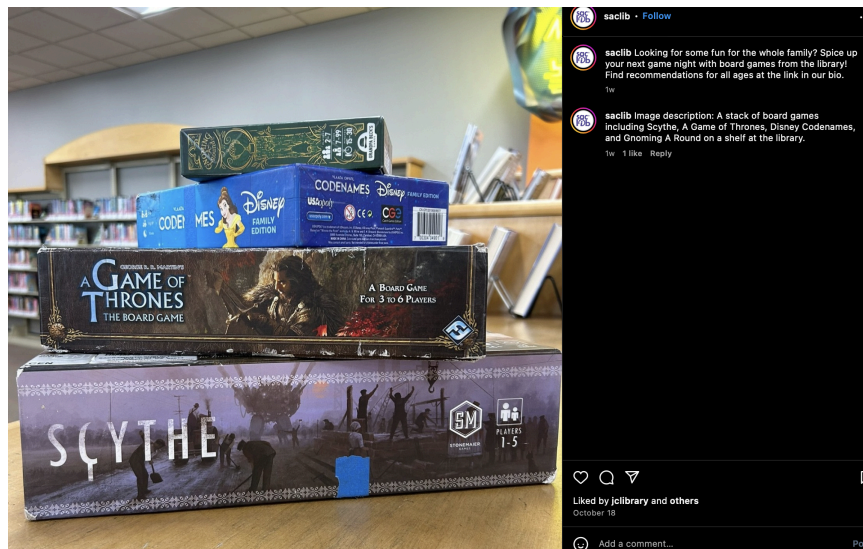
An analysis of website language, wayfinding, and content relating to LoT collections may be a critical area for further research.

### Social Media Promotion

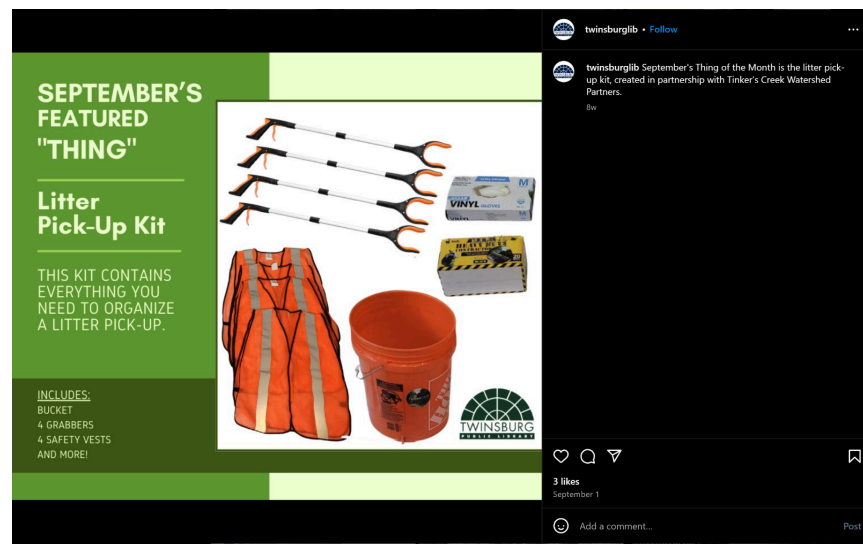


**Figure 6.** Respondents reported types of advertisement or promotion currently used.

Social media was listed by participants in our survey as the second most prominent advertisement method for their LoT collection. Interviewees also confirmed this finding. However, during analysis of 20 Instagram accounts and nonephemeral posts for the last 60 days, we found that overall usage of these accounts to advertise LoT collections was actually very limited. Accounts averaged 1.4 posts referencing the collection per 60 day window versus 51 average posts total, and a per-account aggregate ratio of LoT posts of approximately 2.1%.



**Figure 7.** This post by Sacramento Library (CA) showcases a set of lightly used board games, new to their collection, with a reference to a linked article on age recommendation.



**Figure 8.** Twinsburg Library (OH) regularly posts about their LoT items in a consistent campaign of Featured “Things” at the beginning of each month.

We noted that libraries had three main social media strategies: dormant, intentional, and viral. In nearly all queried cases, an Instagram profile was linked directly from the respective library website. Most library Instagram accounts utilized “intentional” posting and posted only about the LoT collection during seasonal events, new item additions, or workshops related to the collection. This mirrored the predominant posting strategy for book collections and affirms some of the “promotional caution” that respondents mentioned.

This poses both a discrepancy and confirmation of our survey and interview results, which dictate most libraries do use social media and consider it important, but are cautious about over-engagement given the constraints on their collections. Interestingly, while we were limited by Instagram’s obfuscated engagement statistics, we noticed that most, if not all, Library of Things posts and accounts were liked by other libraries that did and did not have LoT

collections. This also affirms that perhaps rather than promoting the collection to patrons, social media can serve to promote the collection and the viability of particular items for both existing or future LoTs.

### **Embodied Promotion**

Collection observations demonstrated a lack of promotional or wayfinding items at both observation sites. Site A only had signage immediately near the Toy Collection catalog, in the Children's area, with no other promotional materials existing elsewhere in the branch. Site B had signage directing to the correct studio space, but no promotional material within the space.

Comparatively, self-identified embodied promotion was effective for our respondents. This includes tangible modes of promotion, such as physical displays, accessible catalogs, merchandising, and other in-house mediums or methods, as well as word-of-mouth promotion between staff and patrons and patron-to-patron. When asked about their most successful promotion strategy, an Adult Services Librarian stated that, "the best promotion we have is the collection itself."

### **Conclusion**

Our research determined that community input, space constraints, labor shortages, and public funding are the main influencing factors to collection development, circulation, and engagement in US public LoTs. Item diversity, experimentation, and adaptability of collections, as well as interorganizational collaboration and promotional caution were identified as prominent and important aspects for currently operating LoTs, regardless of age.

Participant enthusiasm in our work led us to seek out an efficient way to share the results of our research. In addition to our paper, we decided to create a website to share research and resources that we collected throughout the project, such as collection manuals. Additionally, we identified the need for tools to assist libraries in carrying out program evaluation and improvement strategies. Our hope is that by sharing our findings, others will be inspired to conduct further research on these collections and more public libraries will consider establishing a Library of Things collection.

### **Action Items to Support Your LoT Collection**

- Visit our website, <https://thelothouse.neocities.org/>, to browse resources we collected
- Do a Program evaluation, including a Community Needs Assessments (Check out our question bank and sample questionnaire on our website)
- Seek out interlibrary support, guidance, and wisdom
- Enlist the help of local advocacy groups and government to help support the growth of LoT collections with general fundraising and most importantly, for labor

### **Areas For Further Research**

There are two waves of common establishment from the sampled collections, 10 years ago and potentially 3-5 years ago. Considering Figure 1 (page 8) depicts relative LoT collaboration with different groups, younger surveyed collections reported higher collaboration with the government, which could point to the potential influence of COVID-19 funding. We were



really intrigued by this finding, and further research on this phenomenon may be better addressed by targeting library management or those who are responsible for determining library budget.

Further areas of interest include:

- Program directives, item suitability, and continued funding methodologies
- Collection size and diversity (duplicate items vs unique)
- Geographic impacts on collection characteristics and funding needs
- Analyses of website language, wayfinding, and content relating to LoT collections on library websites

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