

# Romancing Information: Romance Readers and Their Information Resources

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## Abstract

The romance genre is diverse and rich with sub-genres catering to various groups of romance readers. It is also arguably the most popular adult fiction genre and the majority of its readers identify as female (“Romance statistics,” n.d.). This paper aims to shed some light on the information resources associated with reading romance novels. The population at the centre of this study inevitably comprises romance readers. Three female romance readers residing in the Greater Toronto Area were interviewed using Diane Sonnenwald’s graphic research technique, the Information Horizon Interview. The resulting interview data illustrates five types of information resources: online sources, bookstores, book sales, library and recommendations. The overlapping resources comprise Indigo (online and in-store), Goodreads and recommendations. Marcia Bates’s Berrypicking model and the metatheory Socio-cognitivism will be used to examine the relationship between romance readers and their information resources. There is an ample amount of information resources used by romance readers that have yet to be explored in the field of Literature and Information Science (LIS). Researchers of the future would enrich this field through a close study of romance readers and their information resources.

## INTRODUCTION

Romance novels are highly influential in the publishing world, but they are easily criticized and dismissed despite their popularity among readers. Indeed, the romance genre accounted for a whopping 34% of the U.S. fiction market in 2016 (“Romance statistics,” n.d.). Research nevertheless suggests that the genre is wrongly criticized and that romance readers are shamed and stigmatized for their reading choices (Regis, 2003). Romance writers also experience stigma and feel “slut-shamed by outsiders through either their sneering disapproval or leering approval” (Lois & Gregson, 2015, p. 478).

Nonetheless, renowned romance authors nowadays aim to dispel the shame associated with romance novels. For instance, Sarah MacLean, a historical romance author, writes a monthly romance review column for The Washington Post to celebrate and recommend romance novels.

Similarly to romance novels’ ‘Happily Ever After’, this paper attempts to represent romance readers in a positive light by illustrating their ingenuity in finding various information resources to pursue their hobby of reading romance novels. Three romance readers were interviewed for the purpose of this study. The interview data reveals five categories of information resources: online sources, bookstores, book sales, library and recommendations. The common information resources among interviewees are: Indigo, Goodreads and recommendations. The data will be analyzed further based on Marcia Bates’s Berrypicking model and Socio-cognitivism.

Given the richness of the interviews and the fact that all three interviewees prefer in-print books to eBooks, this paper will concentrate on the information resources used to discover romance novels and procure them in-print only.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

When it comes to the romance genre, the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature primarily focuses on the relationship between public libraries and romance readers. Emphasis is placed on how public libraries can provide better services to romance readers. Research suggests that the romance genre, its authors and readers are marginalized and snubbed by some public libraries (Charles & Linz, 2005; Veros, 2012). In fact, some libraries fail to properly catalogue romance novels, thereby preventing romance readers from searching, finding and accessing the books they want to read (Veros, 2012). Common misconceptions about the romance genre, such as the explicit cover art, the assumption that the story only centres on sex and that the writing is formulaic, are criticized (Charles & Linz, 2005; Veros, 2012). These studies argue that libraries should embrace the romance genre and become more romance-friendly by collecting a variety of romance novels and cataloguing them appropriately (Charles & Linz, 2005; Veros, 2012).

Additionally, the literature provides recommendations on how librarians can attract romance readers to the public library and meet their informational needs through Reader’s Advisory practices (Charles & Linz, 2005; Veros, 2012). The goal is to pave the way for romance readers to become

avid library users, consequently leading to increased circulation (Charles & Linz, 2005; Veros, 2012).

Research also shows that information scholars have barely scratched the surface on the information behaviour of fiction readers (Broussard & Doty, 2016). Another study advises librarians and readers' advisors to write reader profiles in order to better understand readers (Ross, 2010).

The literature is lacking in studies on the information resources used by fiction readers, not to mention romance readers. The available literature focuses on public libraries as the main information resource for romance readers. Veros (2012) briefly mentioned other information resources that romance readers use, such as newsletter subscriptions and blogs, but they were not elaborative because the public library's inability to meet the needs of romance readers was the core of the study.

Original research on the information resources associated with romance novels is consequently needed in LIS. My research will diverge from previous research and reveal the array of information resources that romance readers use to select print romance novels.

## RESEARCH METHODS

I conducted an Information Horizon Interview (IHI) with three romance readers to explore the information resources associated with reading romance novels. The IHI is a visual research technique revolutionized by Diane Sonnenwald for information behaviour studies (Sonnenwald, Wildemuth and Harmon, 2001). The interviewees were asked to draw a map of their information horizons to graphically portray the information resources they use when seeking romance novels. They described the role and importance of each information resource while drawing their information horizon map.

The interview guide was arranged in a semi-structured format, thus defining the content and order of topics during the interviews (Hartel, 2017a). This format also allowed for a degree of freedom in exploring other issues that came up during the interview (Hartel, 2017a). Some context questions were asked to engage the interviewee on the topic of romance novels, followed by episodic and information-focused questions. Finally, the interviewees were asked to graphically represent the information resources they use to seek romance novels. See Appendix 1 for the interview guide. It should be noted that each interview diverged depending on the depth of the interviewee's answers.

Each interviewee was given an alias of a historical romance hero's peerage title: Villiers from Eloisa James's *A Duke of Her Own*, St. Vincent from Lisa Kleypas's *Devil in Winter* and Chatham from Elisa Braden's *The Devil is a Marquess*.

Villiers is a female graduate student who reads romance novels when she is not busy with school or work. St. Vincent is a female in her early twenties who is wholeheartedly

involved in the romance community. Chatham is a middle-aged woman who loves reading romance novels, but does not actively search for them.

All three women love reading romance novels in the privacy of their rooms. Villiers and St. Vincent prefer historical romances, whereas Chatham reads romance in general.

## FINDINGS

The interview data reveals overarching informational patterns that can be best analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis method. The overlap of information resources also provides an excellent basis for this method of analysis. The maps and interview transcripts reveal five informational themes: online sources, bookstores, book sales, library and recommendations.

### Online Sources

Social media plays a role in bridging information to romance readers. Goodreads is a primary resource that both Villiers and St. Vincent use to discover romance novels. They reiterate that Goodreads is the first and best resource they access to browse romance novels by authors, tropes and similarities. Reviews and ratings do not influence their decision to read or buy books. St. Vincent only relies on reviews and ratings when she is unsure about buying books by unfamiliar authors. Both readers' decision to read and buy romance novels highly depend on the synopses on Goodreads. St. Vincent also participates in giveaways hosted by authors and publishers on Goodreads and Facebook. She is a member of an online romance book club on Facebook where links to giveaways and discounted books are posted.

Indigo is the most popular consumer website that Villiers and St. Vincent use. The latter uses a variety of online consumer websites like Book Outlet, AwesomeBooks and the Book Depository. She also subscribes to authors' newsletters and consumer websites like Indigo by email to receive deals on romance books. Additionally, she uses the Book Sale Finder website to learn about local used book sales in her area.

### Bookstores

It comes as no surprise that Indigo bookstores are popular because all three interviewees are Canadian citizens who reside in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). It should be noted that both Villiers and St. Vincent prefer Indigo's online platform. St. Vincent also frequents BMV Books to search for used romance books. Chatham buys her romance novels exclusively in-store at Indigo and Walmart (Figure 3). Her purpose for visiting these stores is to buy other products, not to seek romance novels. She merely browses romance novels in the book sections in the aftermath.

### Book Sales

St. Vincent attends local book sales to buy used romance books: library book sales, university book sales and fundraising book sales. She also refers to her memo notes at book sales, which carry a list of books she wants to buy.



Author searching is an approach whereby users browse for items by authors (Bates, 1989). This technique can be an essential part of subject searching (Bates, 1989). St. Vincent and Villiers both use the Goodreads platform to search for books and authors. This website allows them to browse by author and find similar titles to books they love. St. Vincent also searches for books classified in certain lists. For example, her favourite book *Devil in Winter*, is classified in the list ‘Marriage of Convenience’, which helps her discover other romance novels based on the same trope. Chatham also browses romance books by author in-store.

Socio-cognitivism refers to how individuals’ thinking and use of information is influenced by the social world in which they operate (Hartel, 2017b). This metatheory can be applied in the romance community where authors and readers engage with each other on online book clubs. This social engagement can take place on online platforms such as Goodreads and Facebook. Socio-cognitivism is linked to St. Vincent who is a member of a romance book club on Facebook where she actively engages with other romance readers. She receives romance recommendations as well as information on how to find romance novels at a discounted price. She emphasizes that she takes these recommendations into consideration and would further explore them on Goodreads. Her thinking and use of information evolves the more she interacts with members of her book club. For instance, she joined a subgroup for members who live in the GTA and met one of the members, whom she describes as a “seasoned reader” with helpful feedback “about certain authors.”

Previous research focuses singularly on how public libraries can improve their services for romance readers. Other information resources used by romance readers have not been exclusively studied. This paper merely scratches the surface of the informational sphere of romance readers. Considering that information resources for romance eBooks were not explored in this study, future studies on romance readers will reveal other interconnecting information resources involved in discovering, selecting and buying print and electronic romance novels. Larger population samples can also reveal diverse informational patterns that may be true to romance readers only. The LIS field will undoubtedly benefit from the study of this population, consequently opening the door for richer discussions on informational models and romance readers.

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Villiers and Chatham enjoyed drawing their horizon maps and they loved to talk about their activities while drawing simultaneously. However, St. Vincent struggled to draw and speak at the same time. She preferred to speak freely about certain resources first. She would then briefly list them to herself and lastly include them in her diagram. I put her at ease and encouraged her to speak and draw in the order she was comfortable with. I wrote down notes while she spoke

to ensure that she assembled the information resources she discussed on her map. Whenever I noticed that she missed an information resource, I would ask probing questions such as, “You previously mentioned this information resource. Would you include it on your information horizon?” She would then nod and express her thanks for the reminder and include that resource on her diagram. Probing questions thus improved my interview techniques.

## CONCLUSION

This paper puts a spotlight on the informational sphere of romance readers by illuminating the array of information resources they use in the pursuit of reading romance novels. The findings suggest that romance readers use a variety of information resources ranging from online sources, bookstores, book sales, the library and recommendations. Having interviewed three romance readers residing in the GTA, it was unsurprising that they all use Indigo to satisfy their romance cravings. Villiers and St. Vincent prefer using Indigo’s online platform to order books, while Chatham prefers buying in-store. The two interviewees who are comfortable with online buying also use the social platform Goodreads, which they iteratively consider as their most important information resource. Surprisingly, the library was not a popular resource since only one interviewee has experience borrowing romance novels. Excluding Indigo, recommendations from friends is another resource that all three interviewees have in common.

The remaining information sources are as follows: giveaways, email subscriptions, book sale websites, used bookstores, local book sales and online book clubs. These information resources were used exclusively by one interviewee to discover new romance novels.

The romance genre is a force of nature and its readers are deserving of scholarly study. As demonstrated by this study, romance readers rely on a variety of information resources and information searching techniques to select, buy and discover romance novels. It should be kept in mind that a number of information resources for romance eBooks were not studied. The dedication of romance readers is unparalleled and LIS can do justice to that realm of information. Information studies on this topic can also alleviate the misconceptions and critiques of the genre, its readers and authors. It is my firm belief that LIS and romance readers will eventually find their ‘Happily Ever After.’

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## AUTHOR'S BIO

B. Lubnaa Jaumdally ([lubnaa.jaumdally@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:lubnaa.jaumdally@mail.utoronto.ca)) is a graduate student at the University of Toronto's iSchool. Her two main concentrations are Library and Information Science (LIS) and Knowledge Management and Information Management (KMIM). Her work experience shaped her interest in LIS and KMIM. She is steadily learning that information is a crucial part of not just work and school, but also her hobbies. She hopes to explore the relationship between information and reading romance novels (one of her hobbies) in a series of concatenated studies.

## APPENDIX 1

The questions asked during each interview are as follows:

### (Grand tour questions)

1. What made you start reading romance novels?
2. What was the first romance novel you remember reading?
3. What was the reason you started reading romance novels?
4. Where do you usually read your romance novels?

### (Mini tour questions)

1. What is the most recent romance novel you read?
2. How do you decide on which books to read?
3. Probe: Tell me more about your reading preferences. Are there any romance sub-genres that you read the most?
4. Where do you find your books?
5. Probe: Long-Question – Do you prefer reading eBooks or print? What are the reasons for your preference?

### (Information/red thread questions)

1. How do you look for books to read? What are some of the resources you use?
2. Do you buy or borrow books or do you do both?
3. Guide me through the steps you take to find romance novels to read, buy and/or borrow.

### (Information Horizon follow-up questions)

1. You may have mentioned some of this information already, but now I would like you to put yourself on this piece of paper and draw all the information resources you associate with reading romance novels. Please talk about it as you're drawing it.
2. Earlier, you mentioned resource x. How do you use that resource and would you include it on your information horizon?
3. Why do you use resource x first before using going to resource y?
4. Do any of these resources proactively provide you with information? Are there any other resources that you use?

## APPENDIX 2

Below is a collection of memorable quotes from the interviews:

### Villiers

**How do you prepare yourself to read them [romance novels]?**

I usually always like to read them without people around me. I like that private space when I read, because it brings me into the mood. Since I live alone, that's not a problem. I like to make sure it's quiet and I have my own private space. That's about it.

**Is there a reason why you go on Goodreads first before you go on Chapters?**

It has a huge list of the books out there, of the ratings associated with them, of the excerpts and people heavily use that website when it comes to books. I think it's a great resource for a reader to go check out books and what people are saying about the books. It's the best place to also find an excerpt for all the books, as opposed as going in to Amazon and typing in a book and have it come up. Goodreads is the best resource that readers have available right now.

### **St. Vincent**

**Since you buy a lot of used and new books, does this mean that you have a personal collection of romance novels in your house?**

Yes I do. I have books in my bookshelf that I haven't read yet. I know which ones I have read and which ones I haven't read. The books are organized in alphabetical order by author's last name for my own convenience so I know where to find them. For example, my Julia Quinn books are organized in the Q section. After that, they are organized by series – the books will be in order (Book 1, Book 2, etc.).

Sometimes for ongoing series, I would write the books down on a memo note on my phone so that I know which books I have and which ones I don't have. These notes are valuable when I'm attending a book sale.

### **Chatham**

**So did you start reading them [romance novels] because you wanted to or did you just come across it?**

It was a comfort zone for me. Because living at the West Indies, at this young age, I wasn't allowed to go to parties or have a boyfriend. So reading romantic novels, I just took myself away into that place with them, I journeyed with them and I enjoyed it. I transformed myself into the book, like I was this person with this guy. So I transformed myself into these people. I was up all night living. It was fantasy and I lived it.

**Guide me through the steps you take to buy romance novels.**

I like a certain author so I would look for her books, like Danielle Steel, she's my girl. She takes you away into this magical world and it's a story of people living an everyday life. People living in this romantic world in the place that we live in. All that's going on in the world, you just want to take yourself out of the news and all that garbage and just sit down to read a books. Once in a while, I get into certain other books, not only romance novels, but it has to have a story that I will enjoy.

### APPENDIX 3

Below are enlarged copies of the visual data: Figures 1-3.

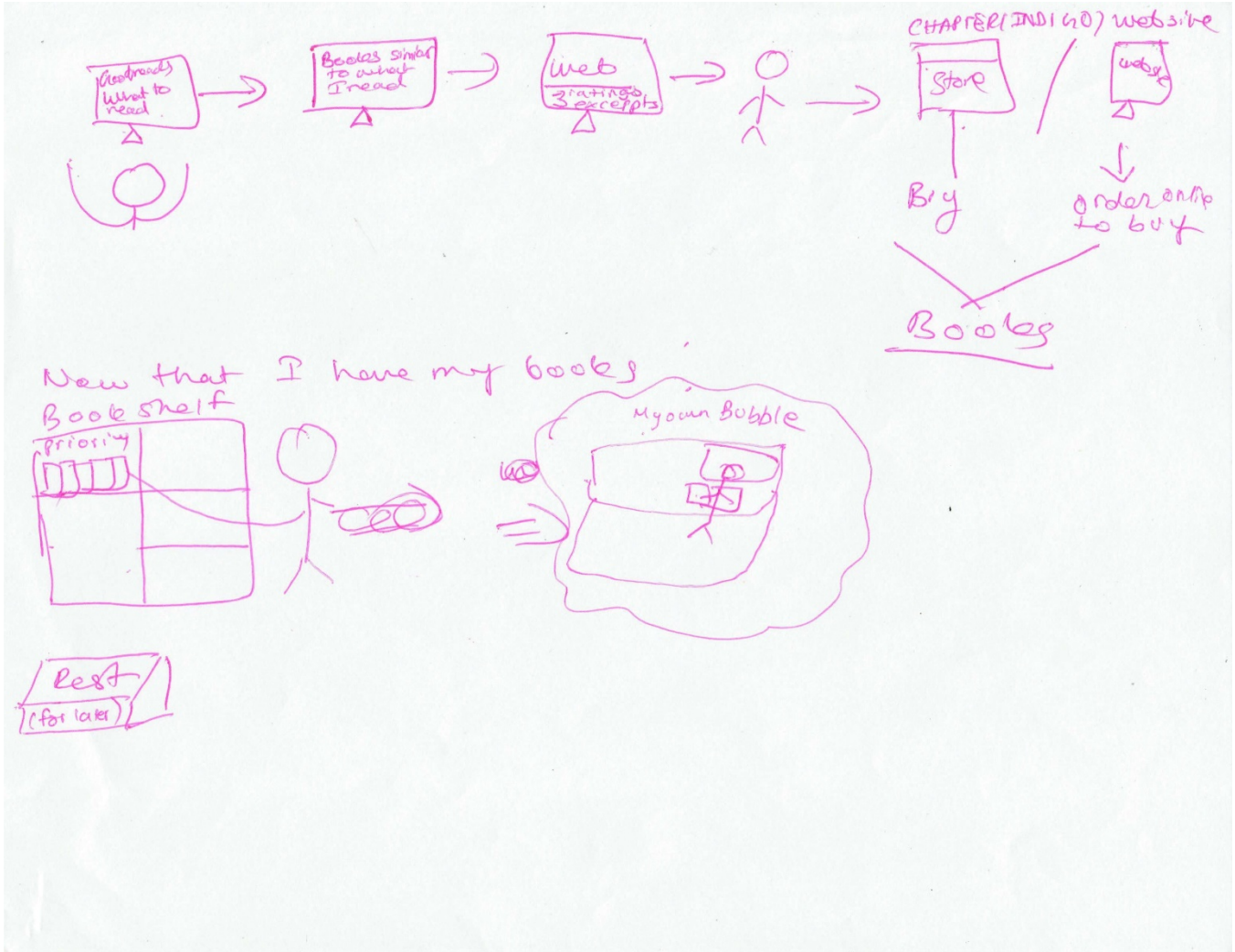


Figure 1. Villiers's IHI map.

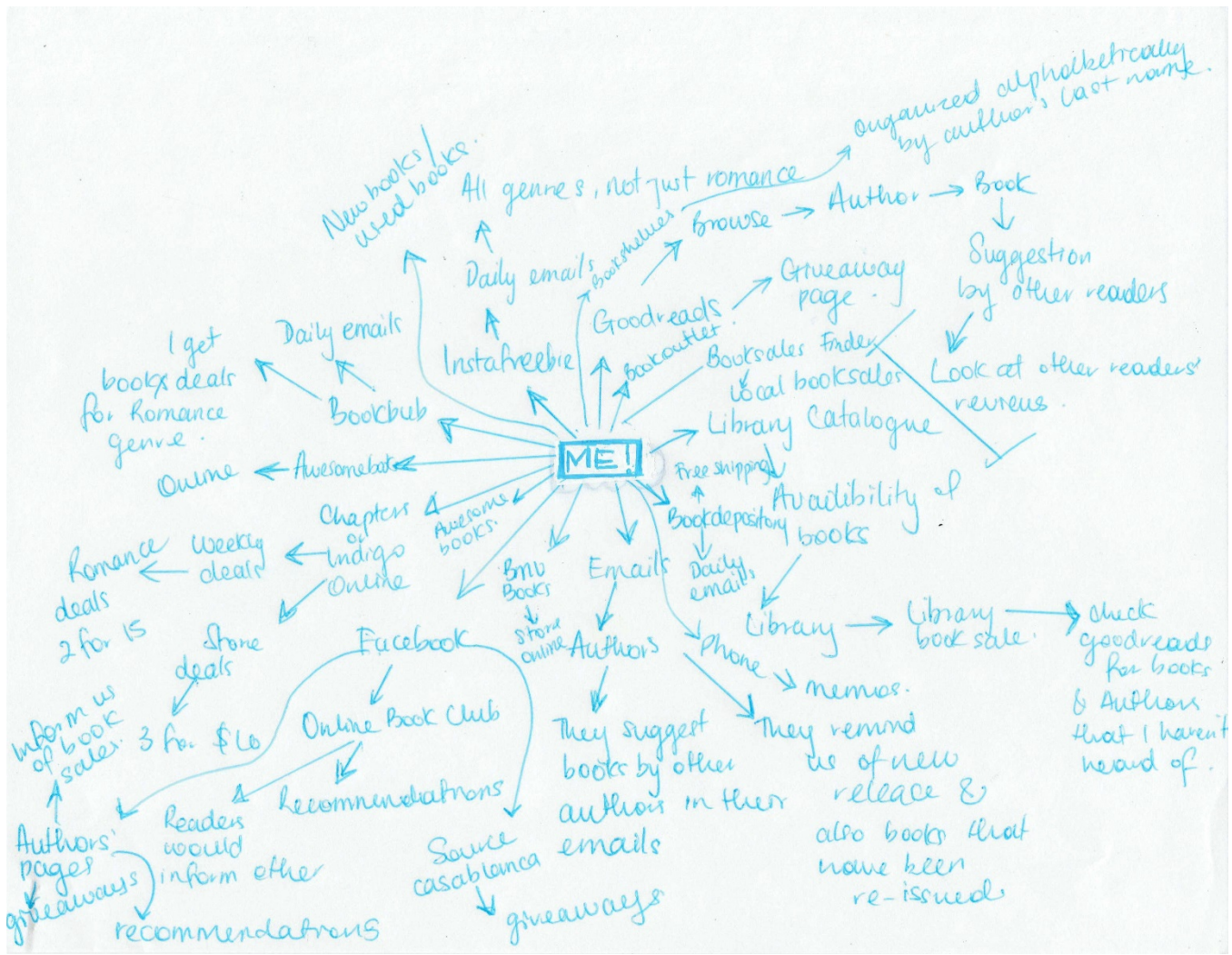


Figure 2. St. Vincent's IHI map.



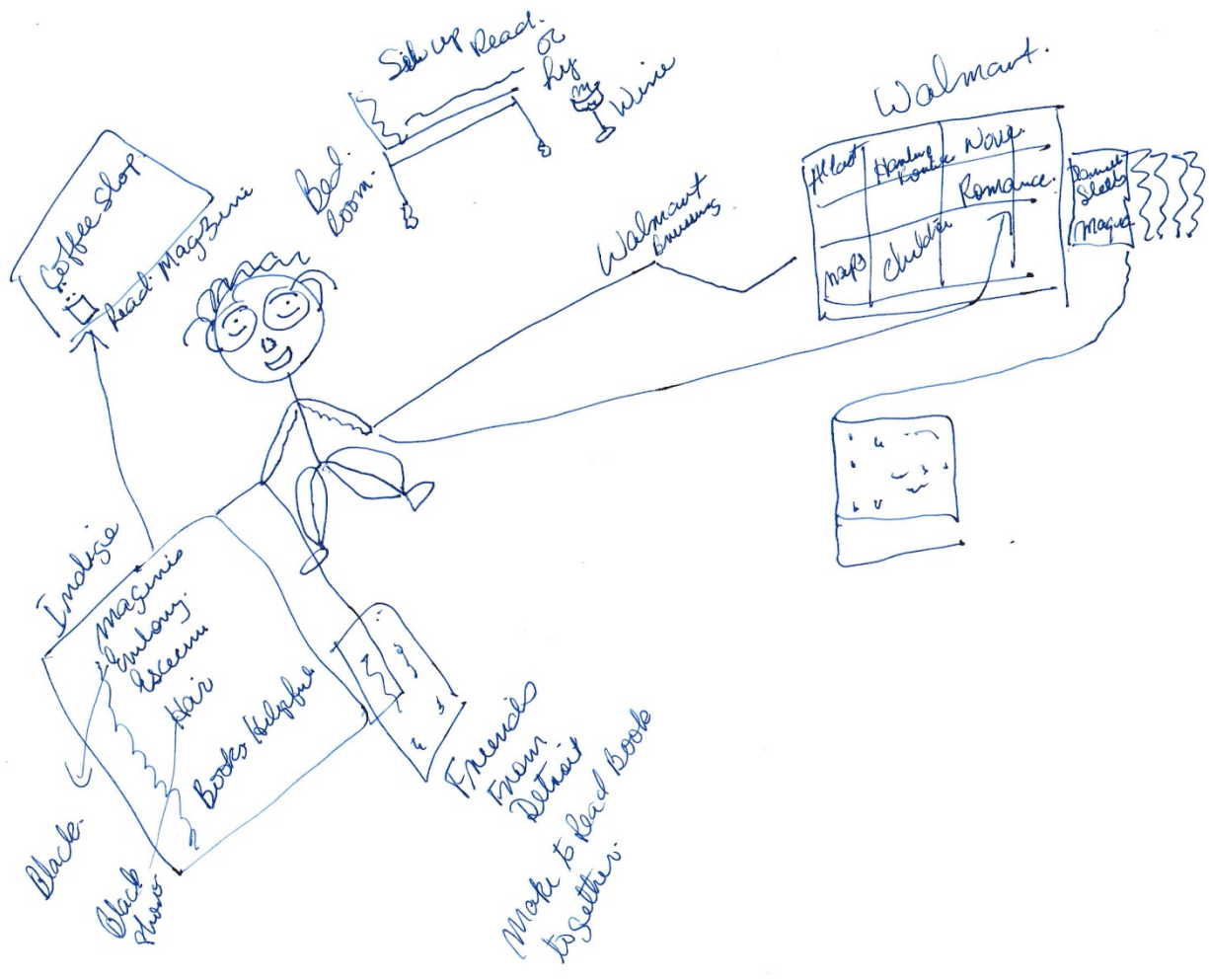


Figure 3. Chatham's IHI map.

## APPENDIX 4

All three interviewees buy their own romance novels. Chatham donates her romance novels after she reads them, but Villiers and St. Vincent collect theirs. Please see below for Villiers's and St. Vincent's collection of romance novels.

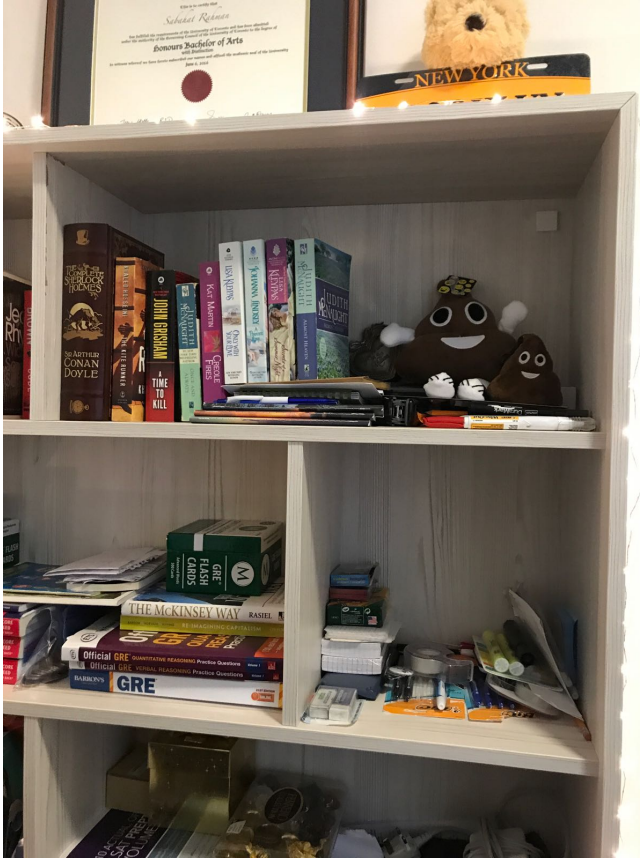


Figure 4. Villiers's collection of priority romance novels to be read. The rest of her romance novels are stored in a box in a storage room.

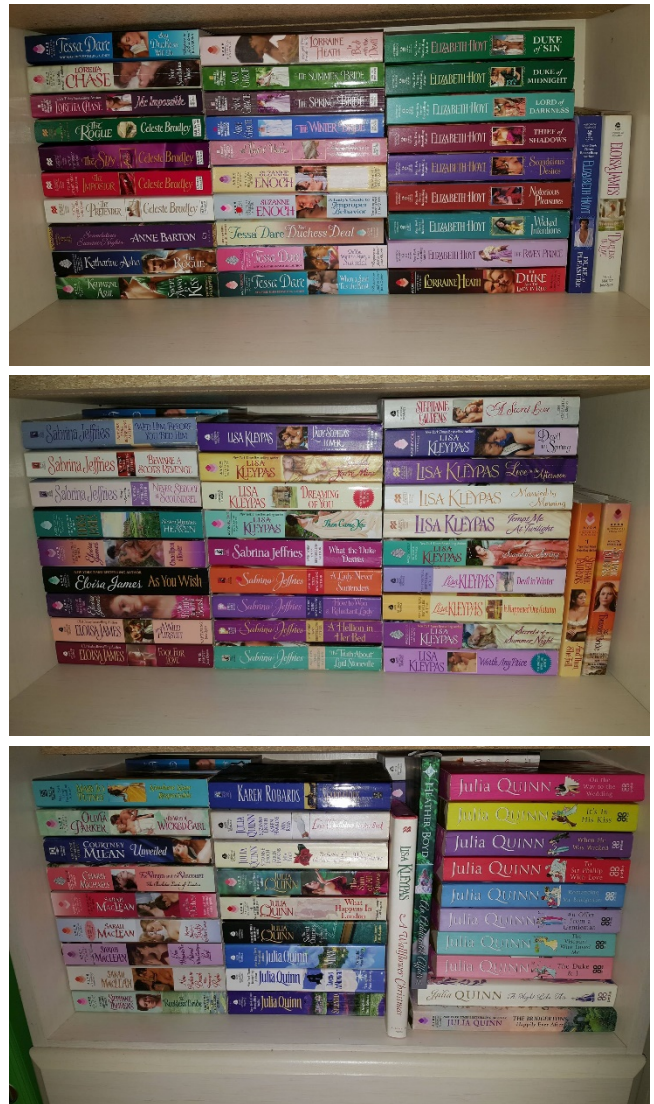


Figure 5. St. Vincent's collection of romance novels triple-stacked on one shelf in alphabetical order by author.