

Too Many Catfish in the Sea: Information Behaviour and Dating Resources

Peter A. Szuban

INF 1323H F The Information Experience

Faculty of Information

University of Toronto

Professor Jenna Hartel

T.A. Christie Oh

30 November 2017

Author's Bio

Peter Szuban (peter.szuban@mail.utoronto.ca) is an MI student at the University of Toronto's School of Information with a concentration in Library and Information Science.

Abstract

This paper examines the information behaviour of subjects in their early twenties who are looking to go on a date. Mobilizing Bates' berrypicking model, this paper investigates the Information Horizon Interviews of three subjects and discusses the prevalence of the friend information resource as authority and control, the divide between face to face information resources and online information resources, and the rates of satisfaction using information resources. The paper concludes that in spite of the prevalence of online resources, friends continue to be an important source for twenty year olds in Toronto when deciding whether to go on a date.

Introduction

Bates' "The Design of Browsing and Berrypicking Techniques for the Online Search Interface" (1989) introduces the berrypicking model to conceptualize everyday information behaviour. According to Bates (1989), berrypicking is an evolving search wherein "the query is satisfied not by a single final retrieved set, but by a series of selections of individual references and bits of information at each stage of the ever-modifying search" (p. 410). Consequently, the berrypicking model emphasizes the mobilization of multiple resources when formulating a query, thereby enabling an evolving search that responds to the undirected tactics of information retrieval in the everyday (Bates, 1989, p. 409).

My project examines the information behaviour of subjects in their early twenties who are looking to go on a date. I limited the scope of this project to heterosexual subjects living in Toronto, Ontario who self-identify by their assigned gender at birth. As such, my project is not representative of the information behaviour of broader sexual orientations nor of subjects living in different municipal and national communities. Moreover, all the subjects self-identify as Canadian and are from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

For each subject, going on a date is an information behaviour activity belonging to the everyday. Accordingly, I will mobilize Bates' berrypicking model to analyze and synthesize the data collected from the subjects' Information Horizon Interviews. From this analysis, three themes will emerge: first, all three subjects continued to refer back to friends, even when primarily using other resources; second, each subject created a binary distinction between resources: short-term dating and "hook-ups" were strongly associated with online resources, while long-term dating was strongly associated with friends and places; and third, ultimately, friends held the most authority, and were consulted on all other resources. Friends provided the

most emotional satisfaction, while online resources had the least satisfaction with greater levels of anxiety and mistrust. There were fears that not enough accurate information was available through online resources to verify that the person was who they were claiming to be.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding dating information behaviour foregrounds teens, social media, and abuse. Topics that do not fall into these three categories are underrepresented, necessitating a reliance on a broader literature that examines methodology and adjacent concerns. On that account, the literature remains an eclectic collection of information science, psychology, and sociology.

Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, and Harmon's "A Research Method to Investigate Information Seeking using the Concept of Information" (2011) provides the framework for my research project by delineating the Information Horizon Interview along with its application. Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, and Harmon position the Information Horizon Interview as an effective tool in collecting research on populations beyond the academic and professionalized sectors.

Additionally, Bates' "The Design of Browsing and Berrypicking Techniques for the Online Search Interface" (1989) and Buckland's "Information as Thing" (1991) provide models and concepts to analyze the collected data. Bates provides a theory of information retrieval that applies to everyday searchers, while Buckland articulates a distinction between types of information and their relationship to resources.

Hollander's "Expert Advice on Dating and Mating" (2011), Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, and Ortega-Ruiz's "Cyberdating Q_A": An instrument to assess the quality of adolescent dating relationships in social networks" (2015), and Lopatovska's "Searching for Good Mood: Examining Relationships Between Search Tasks and Mood" (2009) examine the impact of print,

digital resources, and emotions on the search process. Hollander's assertion of the dubious usefulness of contemporary print dating resources presages the reactions of all three of the subjects. Perhaps due to age, Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, and Ortega-Ruíz's conclusions on online dating resources positive impact on the emotions of users is contested. Granted, Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, and Ortega-Ruíz focus on direct messaging between already dating couples.

My project intends to examine the use of different dating resources, rather than examining one dating resource and its implications. In this way, the impact and use of a dating resource is contrasted against the others.

Research Methods

Research was conducted in accordance with the Information Horizon Interview procedure (Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon, 2001, p. 69). Each subject was interviewed separately by the author according to the interview guideline included in appendix one. Each interview was recorded, and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Throughout the interview, each subject was candid about their experiences with dating and appeared comfortable with the subject matter. At times, the author had to reign the subject in to keep them from exceeding the prescribed time limit.

Subject one is aged twenty-three, female, and is in a long-term monogamous relationship. She works in the Toronto film industry in the production capacity, and has produced and directed several short films. She comes from a highly religious Baptist background and was born in Singapore. Her spirituality has shifted in recent years, and she no longer adheres to the precepts of her original faith.

Subject two is aged twenty-two, male, and is in what he described as "several open relationships of varying lengths." He studies general arts at Ryerson University. His family is

from Ontario, and he has resided in the province all his life. He describes himself as an agnostic when it comes to spiritual matters.

Subject three is aged twenty-two, male and is single. He studies Aerospace Engineering at Ryerson University. His family is from India, and he grew up on Canadian west coast. He is an atheist.

After the aims of the project were introduced to each subject, each subject was asked questions related to their use of dating resources while field notes were taken. Following the completion of this part of the interview, subjects were asked to draw their Information Horizon Map by placing themselves on the map with branches to information resources used when trying to go on a date. During the subject's drawing of the Information Horizon Map, the subject was prompted by further questions to include all information resources that were applicable. Attention was directed towards print media such as books and magazines which had been ignored by all the subjects. All subjects rejected the use of print media as an information resource, with the first subject having suggested that the quotation from a print media source by a potential dating partner served as a disincentive to going on a date with that person.

Findings

As stated in the introduction, my categorization of going on a date as an everyday information behaviour phenomenon prompted the application of Bates' berrypicking model (1989) to the data collected from the Information Horizon Interviews. Subjects pursued a query by mobilizing multiple information resources that changed the query to reflect specific information needs related to going on a date. These shifting information needs included appearance, education, geographic location, age, gender, hobbies, favourite food, and aesthetic preferences. Frequently, the mobilization of information resources was conducted unconsciously;

the subject did not perceive an information resource by its relation to gathering information. As a result, although Bates' article emphasizes online search interfaces (1989), the information behaviours of all three subjects mirrored the described searching behaviour. Therefore, the berrypicking model was an appropriate model to mobilize in the analysis of the data.

The Prevalence of Friends

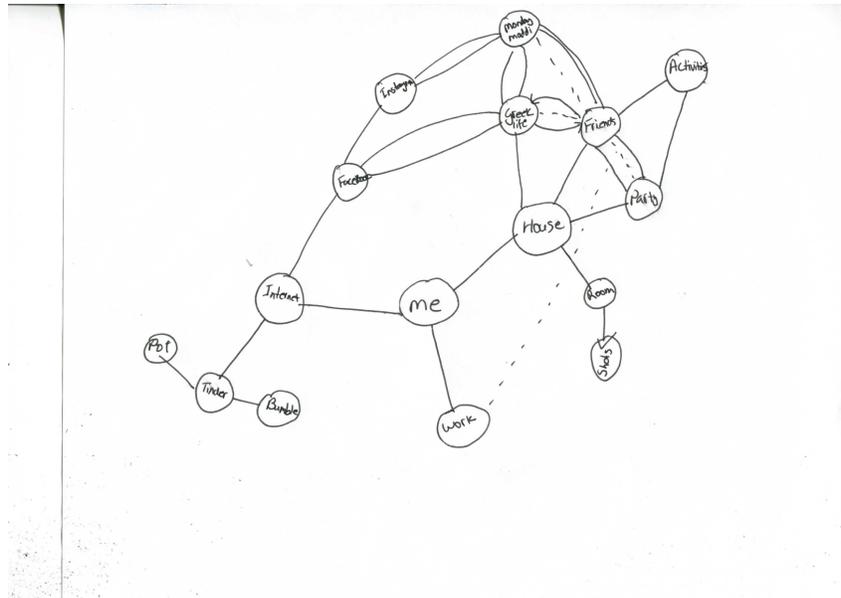


Figure 1: Subject Three's Information Horizon Map

All three subjects relied heavily on friends as both authority and emotional controls. Friends were used to verify other information resources, whether an online or physical resource, and featured the most incoming connections in the Horizon Interview Maps. The frequency of these connections, and that the connections were incoming to friends, suggests that the subjects vested authority in friends as an information resource that supplemented other information resources. Moreover, friends were an adaptive resource that were not restricted to a subset of information resources as seen in figure 1.

When asked about their frequent recourse to the friend information resource, all three of the subjects responded that they felt better about their query after using the resource. The role of

the friend source in the information search varied: the third subject reported the friend information resource providing new information that changed the query, while the first subject reported that the friend information resource confirmed the information gathered from other resources and did not change the query. Consequently, the friend information resource was correlated with authority and emotional satisfaction.

Nevertheless, in contrast to Lopatovska's (2009) association of ease of search with emotional satisfaction, the use of the friend resource was considered by all of the subjects to increase the ease of information retrieval. Conversely, the friend resource was considered by all three subjects to be a more difficult resource to use.

Online Information Resources Versus Friends and Places

Each subject created a distinction between online information resources and face to face resources that reflected the type relationship that was projected to result from a date. Online resources were aligned with short-term dating and "hook-ups," while face to face resources were aligned with longer-term monogamous relationships. Although only the first of the three subjects was involved in a long-term monogamous relationship, yet all three subjects preferred the face to face resources over online resources. When subjects two and three were prompted by the author to explain the preference, both subjects responded that online resources were easier to use. Subject two elaborated that he used online resources such as Tindr out of boredom. As such, the use of these resources was enabled by the ubiquity of smart phones.

Although each subject indicated that online resources such as Tindr and Okcupid were easier to use, the information provided by these resources was perceived by the subjects as less reliable. All three subjects expressed concerns that information was falsified in online resources.

In contrast, subjects trusted face to face resources such as place and friends. They justified this trust by stating that it was more difficult to transmit false information in a face to face encounter.

Affect and Satisfaction

In opposition to Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, and Ortega-Ruíz (2015), none of the subjects reported greater intimacy through social media. Instead, all three subjects correlated social media resources with awkwardness. The ease of online resources provided factual information without the emotive information encountered through friends or through interactions with the potential date.

In addition, satisfaction with online resources was consistently lower than with face to face resources. This rate of satisfaction was constant regardless of the intended result from the date. Subject three described satisfaction rates for all resources as low, reasoning that going on a date carries the caveat of not needing to undergo the process in the future. According to subject three, dating information resources would only be used once because a life-long partnership is formed.

Discussion

Buckland's (1991) distinction between information as knowledge, information as process, and information as thing denotes the schism between face to face dating resources such as friends and online dating resources such as Tindr. Whereas online dating resources provide textual and image information that function as thing, face to face dating resources constitute information as process through ongoing interactions and the non-tangible transfer of information. Moreover, each subject distinguished face to face dating resources as knowledge, regardless of the outcome of search result, or whether the retrieved information was accurate.

Each subject expressed distrust of online dating resources by highlighting the information's mediation through another party. As information as thing is ordered and constructed, and the party ordering and construction the information as thing in online dating resources possesses a vested interest in the outcome, the information retrieved is deemed less reliable by the three subjects. Moreover, the information as thing in online resources functions as a representation of the information source. This representation creates a distance between the source that allots for alteration.



Figure 2: Subject 1's Information Horizon Map

Conversely, the three subjects all considered print and popular culture to be the least reliable of the dating resources. All three of the subjects echoed Hollander's (2011) conclusion that print dating resources reflect the cultural mores and assumptions of the country of publication rather than providing accurate dating information. In her Information Horizon Map, subject one created two maps and stated a preference for the upper map. As seen in figure 2, subject One indicated that she used text and popular cultural dating resources in the past, but had since considered them untrustworthy resources.

Nevertheless, these results are culturally specific to a digitally literate demographic. Studies that examine a broader population from different geographical areas may discover the persistence of the use of print and popular culture dating resources, as well as a greater trust in online resources. There may be substantial differences based upon socio-economic class and nationality, and there may be a divide between rural and urban demographics that otherwise fit into the same categories. Through further studies, patterns may emerge between dating resources and one or more of these facets, thereby revealing a relationship that impacts information behaviour. From that point, the studies could be expanded to other information behaviours that rely on different and competing information resources.

Methodological Reflections

The Information Horizon Interview provided an effective investigation of the subjects' use of dating resources when going on date. Both the questions and the drawings encouraged the subjects to self-reflect upon their use of dating information resources, and provided a richer discussion than through a regular interview.

Notwithstanding, the Information Horizon Interview takes more time and effort than a survey to complete. This form of data acquisition is better suited for in-depth research with a smaller sample size, rather than wider population studies. Furthermore, the directness of the interview precludes the discussion of sensitive topics unless the subjects are comfortable enough to share information. If one of the subjects had had a particularly negative experience with a date such as unwanted sexual advances or stalking, this may have impeded a subject's ability to comfortably participate in the interview.

Ultimately, the Information Horizon Interview is dependent on knowledge and memory of the interviewed subject.

Conclusion

In spite of the ease of online dating resources, satisfaction and trust in the friend dating resource pushes online dating resources towards dependency on other resources in verifying information. Following, the friend dating resource's supplementary position to all other resources demonstrates the resource's authority in information verification, and in providing emotional stability for the user. Notwithstanding, online dating resources remain preferable to print and popular cultural resources, which the subjects deemed the least reliable of information resources that did not warrant consultation.

If greater curator control was exerted over online dating resources, it is unlikely that they would rise in authority for the subjects. Tindr, a dating app that links to facebook profiles and has more accurate visual information, failed to supplement friends as the dominant dating resource. The use of Tindr lay in its easy user design rather than satisfaction in outcome. These implications suggest that deciding to go on a date relies on information behaviour that conceives of information as knowledge and process rather than thing (Buckland, 1991). Consequently, the information is more elusive than first supposed and is not based upon general descriptors such as occupation or hobbies. Instead, the information required when deciding to go on a date is more elusive, and representatives the emotive qualities of the activity rather than the purely objective.

References

- Bates, M. J. (1989). The Design of browsing and berrypicking techniques for the online search interface. *Online Review*, 13(5), 407-424. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb024320>
- Buckland, Michael K. 1991. Information as thing. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 42(5): 351-360.
- Hollander, P. (2011). Expert advice on dating and mating. *Society*, 48(3), 251-257.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1007/s12115-011-9426-7>
- Lopatovska, I. (2009). Searching for Good Mood: Examining Relationships Between Search Tasks and Mood: *ASIS&T 2009 Canada Thriving on Diversity: Information Opportunities in a Pluralistic World*. New York, NY.
- Sánchez, V., Muñoz-Fernández, N., & Ortega-Ruiz, R. (2015). “Cyberdating Q_A”: An instrument to assess the quality of adolescent dating relationships in social networks. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 48(Complete), 78-86. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.01.006
- Sonnenwald, D. H., Wildemuth, B. M., & Harmon, G. L. (2001). A research method to investigate information seeking using the concept of information horizons: An example from a study of lower socio-economic students’ information seeking behavior. *The New Review of Information Behaviour Research*, 2, 65-86. <http://eprints.rclis.org/7969/>

Appendix One: Interview Guide

1. Could you think about when you recently needed information about dating? --Going on a date.
2. What dating information or type of dating information did you need? Why?
3. What did you feel about the dating information? What did you feel about dating in general?
4. Who did you go to for help, or what dating resources did use, to find the information you needed?
5. Can you take me through a particular instance of using a dating resource?
6. What did you do next?
7. Were you satisfied with the outcomes?
8. Would you do it this way again? If not, what would you do differently?
9. Could you think about a time when it was particularly difficult to find information you needed?
10. When was it particularly easy to find information you needed? What resources were easier to use? What made them easier to use?
11. What resources were particularly dissatisfying?
12. What resources were particularly satisfying?
13. Did satisfaction change through multiple use of a particular resource?
14. Please draw an Information Horizon Map.

Appendix Two: Transcription Excerpts

Subject One

Interviewer: So, the bible is no longer an information resource for you? If anything, it is something you actively avoid?

Subject One: Yeah. In fact, one time I was considering whether to go on a date, then he threw these bible quotes at me, and I knew I had no intention of ever dating him. The quotes were about the oxen and being yoked.

They were,

“Thou shall not plow with an ox and an ass together.”
Deuteronomy 22:10

And this one:

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?”
Corinthians 6:14

Subject Two

Subject Two: I just think, ‘you look like a cute person.’

Interviewer: Presumably followed by a swipe to the right.

Subject Two: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, there are problems with Tindr? Gender disparities?

Subject Two: Lots of chauvinism, for sure. It’s not a perfect system, definitely based on first impressions.

Subject Three

Interviewer: How would you rate your satisfaction?

Subject Three: Was I happy? No. Was I satisfied? Maybe. Was I confused? Yes. Really, most dating is a shot in the dark. Satisfaction tends to be low. We wouldn’t date again if it worked the first time.

[After looking at his finished Information Horizon Map]

Subject Three: Looking at this, I feel like such an [expletive]. It’s as if my life was something straight out of the Jersey Shore.