

It's a Nice Day for a "Wired" Wedding: The Information Behaviour of Brides Planning a Wedding

Shannon Deverell

Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Shannon.deverell@mail.utoronto.ca

Abstract

This paper examines the information-seeking behaviour of brides planning a wedding. Through three original interviews with women who have planned a wedding in the last five years, I examine the main themes common to their planning process. All three subjects were planning their first (and only) wedding, and they all emphasized the fact that Google was the first source consulted after friends and family. The interview was a semi-structured interview followed by an Information Horizon (IHI) Map to provide a visual interpretation of the information search. These IHI maps illustrate an information-seeking process that is nonlinear and evolves over time. The fluid nature of wedding planning is better served by digital applications and online tools as opposed to the more rigid structure of traditional wedding planning books and binders. Brides today appear very comfortable tackling the task of wedding planning on their own, without the help of a professional wedding planner, and they place a great degree of trust in family, friends and the feedback of online wedding communities.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper seeks to explore the information-seeking behaviour of contemporary brides planning a wedding. In the scope of everyday life, the wedding is unique in its emphasis on both the reverential and the commercial. It is also unlike any other ritual in terms of the incredible degree of detail and planning involved. While the wedding is a cultural rite of passage, it is also a complex event that evolves along with larger cultural changes: the desirable wedding dress of 25 years ago is not the choice of today and the bridal magazine is no longer the access point it was before. Constant developments in digital and mobile technologies have led to a planning process that is virtual at every step: from the inspiration stage, to planning and organization. In addition to online tools, the participatory nature of much of the digital interface has created online communities that mirror and complement brides' real-life support systems. Through interviews with three recently-married women, the key resources, strategies and tools used will be considered within the context of the recent literature on documentary tools in everyday life. This paper will illustrate that the red thread of wedding planning is now observed within the web interface rather than in the binding of a book.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There were many resources that I found useful in situating this research paper within the literature of LIS and within the broader social context of the wedding industry. Three of these articles were particularly helpful in directing my research and communicating my findings in a way that I hope contributes some new insights into the information-seeking work of planning a wedding.

McKenzie and Davies envision the bride as a sort of "novice" in pursuit of a hobby, and use the framework of bird watching guides to examine the usefulness of nine commercial wedding-planning books. They found some common drawbacks in all these documentary tools, mainly "troubles with the bulk of the manuals" and with the rigid, linear structure that the format of the books suggests (McKenzie & Davies, 2010). Interviews with my informants pointed to the fact that the planning process was, in fact, extremely nonlinear and many of the activities are intertwined. This case study also underlined the need for more discussion around the digital tools used for wedding planning in addition to more traditional formats.

Blakely links feminist ideals to the commercialization of everyday life through interviews with several wedding planning professionals (Blakely, 2008). She argues that, to "have it all," women are in the habit of outsourcing the "traditional" tasks of housekeeping, dry cleaning and even

their own wedding planning. None of my informants employed or even considered enlisting a professional to plan their wedding. Though this could have been due to budget constraints, the plethora of free, digital planning applications available makes the task of managing such an event possible. In fact, one of my informants mentioned that she enjoyed the “freedom” of being able to browse the web at her own pace, which suggests a contentedness to reclaim some of these traditional roles with the efficiency that new technologies can provide.

Finally, Lankes’ study of credibility on the internet was useful in contextualizing my informants’ comfort placing their faith in the hands of several online tools. Lankes argues that capability for user participation in many interfaces leads to a new form of credibility based on reliability rather than the traditional concept of “authority.” Lankes describes a “reliability approach” where the user synthesizes information from several different sources on the internet rather than adhering to one trusted source (Lankes, 2008).

RESEARCH METHODS

Profile of informants:

Interview #1: Charlotte, age 32

November 9, 2017, at subject’s home in Toronto

Married in 2013

Interview #2: Carrie, age 31

November 15, 2017, at subject’s home in Toronto

Married in 2014

Interview #3: Miranda, age 32

November 17, 2017

Married in 2017

I have attended the weddings of many friends over the last several years, and the wedding as “an event” struck me as a cultural ritual with so much to think about from an information science perspective. In terms of sensitizing concepts, my research methods were aimed mostly towards the organization and research of the different tasks involved in wedding planning rather than the emotions behind the decision to get married. I did take into consideration in my interviews the fact that there might be issues of anxiety and privacy around discussing an event as personal as a wedding. I was clear with my informants that I would not ask any questions regarding budgets and monetary figures. I was also clear that they were not obligated to discuss any part of the planning process that might cause them undue stress, such as family tensions that might have arisen during the task of wedding planning. I used convenience sampling when selecting informants for these interviews as they are personal friends of mine. However, I chose friends whose weddings I was not involved in (not in the bridal party) to maintain some distance and a certain “stance of ignorance” (Hartel, 2017).

Using Sonnenwald’s Information Horizon research method, I created an interview guide of approximately six questions aimed at illuminating the resources and information behaviours involved in wedding planning. This research method also involves a drawing exercise where participants attempt to visualize their information search (Sonnenwald, 2001). Due to time constraints, I chose to interview three informants that were all women in heterosexual relationships. The informants all planned weddings outside of any kind of religious institution.

FINDINGS

To analyze the research collected for the Information Horizon Interview I chose to use inductive thematic analysis. Though there were nuances within the three interviews, the main components of a wedding proved to be very similar. I chose three themes to focus on that I think would be useful in directing more extensive research on the information behavior of wedding planning. I think these themes would also be applicable to the broader sphere of daily living and the tools that people trust to organize and manage their personal lives.

The Wedding Binder is Dead

Upon examining the research findings, what was immediately evident was the complete lack of print resources consulted. Neither Charlotte, Carrie nor Miranda made use of a commercial wedding binder or print copy of a wedding guide to help them plan their wedding. In Figure 1 Charlotte illustrates her wedding planning process as involving interactions with her mother and Google. As an offshoot of Google, she lists the social media site Pinterest. All three informants listed Google as their first resource consulted after family. They also all described inputting detailed queries, such as “top 15 wedding venues in downtown Toronto” directly into the Google search bar.

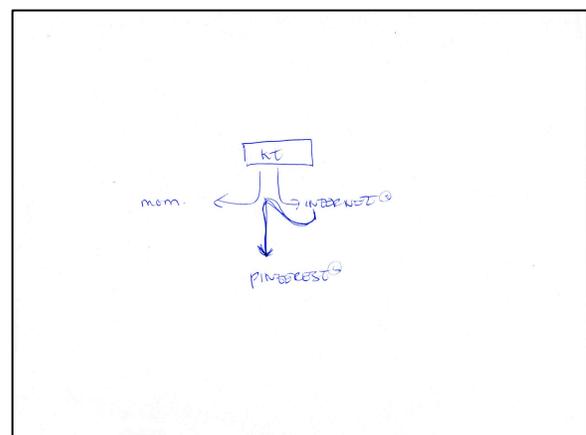


Figure 1. Charlotte’s IHI map

The one exception to this finding is the fact that Charlotte created her own planner by purchasing a generic binder from Staples and inserting page dividers to delineate different tasks. Miranda received two wedding planning books as

gifts, but admitted that she did not use either of the books. She said it was easier to install applications on her phone that she could consult at any time. This example builds upon McKenzie & Davies' findings that wedding planners proved to be cumbersome and not very portable (McKenzie et al., 2010). Instead of consulting these "ready-made" resources, all three subjects first consulted Google which then lead to wedding planning websites such as The Knot and WeddingWire. Both sites offer free mobile applications to create to-do lists and connect with vendors. In terms of self-made planning tools, both Miranda and Carrie created complex spreadsheets that they could access from both their phone or computer at any time rather than relying on any templates or timelines found in books.

Berrypicking

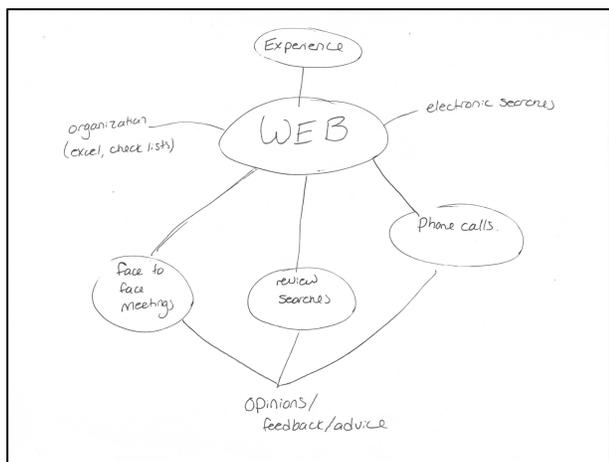


Figure 2. Miranda's IHI map

Another recurring theme in both the interview and visual data was the nonlinear nature of the information seeking. While the format of physical planning tools suggests a sequential process - where you can complete one task and move on to the next - Miranda's map in Figure 2 illustrates that the process involves gathering small bits of information at a time, often returning to friends and family or "the Web" as her query evolved. She places the internet at the centre of her search, alluding to the iterative nature of information seeking that aligns with Bates' berrypicking model (Hartel, 2017). Since most browsing was done online rather than in physical stores or trade shows, the online search form itself seemed to facilitate the evolving nature of berrypicking rather than, for example, Erdelez's information encountering (Hartel, 2017). I also found it interesting that both Figure 2 and Figure 3 (Carrie's map) show friends and family at the beginning and end of the process, suggesting that loved ones were influential throughout their search.

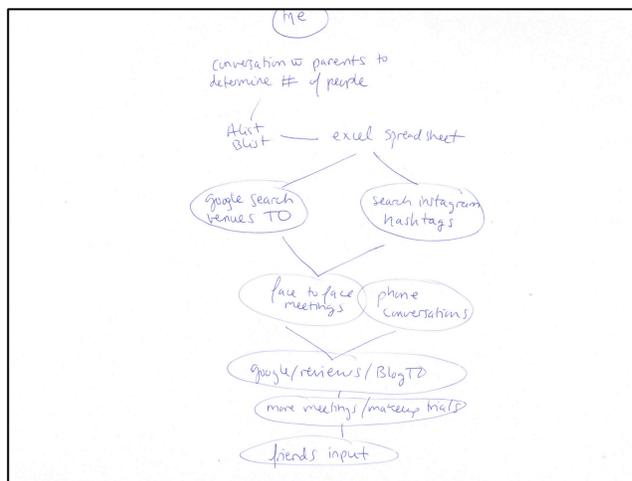


Figure 3. Carrie's IHI map

Reliability is Credible

The focus on online resources and the input of family and friends suggests that "the red thread" of wedding planning is very much a virtual thread. As discussed in class lectures, "the red thread is locked in a dance with culture" and this proves to be true within the culture of wedding planning (Hartel, 2017). In contrast to literatures of the past five to 10 years, wedding planning is less focused on hiring professional help and purchasing planning guides, and more focused on online platforms and recommendations from friends. As Miranda described in her interview, often an online review of a service or product would serve as an equal substitute to a personal recommendation. As technology evolves it is more commonplace to find these "personal" reviews quickly and easily through various community platforms. Even the online platforms themselves appear to be evolving at great speed: where Charlotte placed a high importance on the website Pinterest in 2011, Carrie and Miranda, planning in 2013 and 2016, had already moved on to newer platforms such as Instagram.

DISCUSSION

All three informants described a search process similar to Kuhlthau's Model of the Information Search Process (Hartel, 2017). The beginning of a wedding planning search involves many different emotions, and a certain sense of uncertainty for all the steps that lay ahead. In her interview Carrie referred to herself as "a disorganized bride" and Miranda said that "she was not sure if she would be much help" when I explained the purpose of the IHI. Both comments allude to the "Assessment" stage of Kuhlthau's model: the task has been completed and, even though the brides might be satisfied with the results, they do not see themselves as experts.

According to these findings (just seven years after the McKenzie and Davies study of commercial wedding planners) the physical wedding planning binder appears to be nearing obsolescence. It would be valuable to expand this

line of study to perform a more in-depth analysis of the online resources used so that we have a strong point of comparison as platforms continue to evolve. For instance, in another five years will The Knot and WeddingWire still be popular? Will Instagram still be a main source of inspiration or will that also be replaced? It would also be valuable to expand the scope of the research population to better understand the role that grooms play in the wedding planning process. For instance, are there particular tasks that they tend to manage, and do these have any links to traditional gender roles?

Finally, building again on McKenzie and Davies' view of the bride as novice, it would be interesting to quantify the number of brides who, upon completion of the wedding planning process, decide to pursue wedding planning as a profession. Charlotte, after planning every part of her wedding, decided to run her own wedding planning business, and has now specialized in event florals. Are there any other life events that involve so much search activity for something that you hope to pursue one time? A further study could examine the information seeking behavior of brides planning their second wedding. Since a key component of Kuhlthau's model is the Assessment stage, it seems almost wasteful to assess and reach a certain self-awareness about something you are unlikely to attempt again.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I found that the semi-structured interview process made for a comfortable and natural discussion, however, the informants were all people I was well-acquainted with. I wonder if my interview guide would have been sufficient to perform an informative interview with subjects I was unfamiliar with. I found that the Information Horizon map caused some anxiety and confusion, and wonder if the instructions for that portion of the interview can be developed and improved a bit further.

CONCLUSION

It does not require in-depth research to determine that wedding planning takes a lot of work. And, just as the puffy sleeves and frills of the 80s have evolved, so too have the information practices of the contemporary bride. Where she was once tied to bridal magazines and bulky wedding planners to keep herself organized, now digital technology allows her to carry all her important decisions in her cellphone, with a backup file on her computer at home. While she still trusts the opinions of friends and family, she can also consult online reviews and message boards to provide advice. Weddings have always been one of the most important events in a person's life, with a wealth of documentary tools, both print and otherwise, surrounding this occasion. Just as we enjoy looking back on the fashion trends of weddings past, it is fascinating to maintain a history of the information-seeking tools and practices over the years. I think these three interviews within the context of the larger literature show how much the process has evolved in just the

past decade, and I hope that we continue to examine this aspect of everyday information seeking in more profound ways.

REFERENCES

- Bates, M. J. (1999). The invisible substrate of information science. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 50(12), 1043-1050.
- Blakely, K. (2008). Busy brides and the business of family life. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29(5), 639-662. doi:10.1177/0192513X07309453
- Hartel, Jenna. (2017). The Information experience [lectures].
- Lankes, R. D. (2008). Credibility on the internet: Shifting from authority to reliability. *Journal of Documentation*, 64(5), 667-686. doi:http://dx.doi.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1108/00220410810899709
- Lo, C. (2011). Evaluation indicators for decision-making model for weddings. *Advances in Information Sciences and Service Sciences*, 3(7), 147. Retrieved from http://myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login?url=https://se-arch-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/docview/1671317422?accountid=14771
- McKenzie, P. J., & Davies, E. (2010). Documentary tools in everyday life: The wedding planner. *Journal of Documentation*, 66(6), 788-806. doi:http://dx.doi.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1108/00220411011087814
- 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.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Shannon Deverell completed her undergraduate degree in Art History at Carleton University followed by a postgraduate certificate in Book Publishing from Humber College. She spent several years working in book publishing before deciding to pursue librarianship. She is currently pursuing her Master of Information at the University of Toronto with a concentration in LIS. She works part time at the Laidlaw Library.

APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

Q1: How many months were there between when you became engaged and the day of your wedding? When and where was the wedding event? When you first became engaged, how did you go about planning the wedding? What was the first thing you did? What was next? (*and so on through different components of venue, dress, florals etc.*).

Q2: What resources or organizational tools did you use throughout the wedding planning process? For instance, did you use any commercial wedding planning binders/books?

Q3: What type of information did you need at the very beginning and where did you go for help? Were there resources that you used many times throughout the process and others that were only consulted once?

Q4: Was there any part of the planning and research where you found it particularly hard or frustrating to find information? Why and how did you resolve the issue?

Q5: Was anything surprisingly easy? What part of the process left you with the biggest sense of relief/accomplishment? Was there anything you were dissatisfied with in the end? Why?

Q6: Having gone through the process and knowing what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently? What sources would you recommend to a friend?

APPENDIX 2

Charlotte (1)

Q: When did you get engaged and what was the first step in planning for the wedding?

A: We got engaged in June of 2011 in Santorini on our second last night of our trip. I was in no rush to get married

immediately, but my parents were kind of pushy about it, 'well, you have to pick a date, you've got to pick a date'."

Carrie (2)

Q: How did you go about finding the venue? Did you already have an idea of where you might want to get married before the engagement, or was the search from scratch?

A: First we had to establish the number of people, so we talked to our parents and made an A-list and B-list. Venue was the top priority but to book a venue in downtown Toronto you need to know numbers because most of them have a cap. Then we googled 'good wedding venues in downtown Toronto' and put some of those searches into Instagram to see people's photos..."

Miranda (3)

Q: When did you get engaged and what was the first step in planning for the wedding?

A: The starting bit was all experience. From hearing people say, 'you have to get your venue.' And hearing people struggle with finding a venue, since we've had a lot of friends get married recently. So that started the order of things.

Q: So, what was involved in searching for possible venues?

A: We knew we wanted downtown Toronto and we knew we had exclusion criteria, like we didn't want to get married at a convention centre or a golf course. But the venue is the one thing you can't really ask your friends about because you can't get married at the same venue as your friend. So, I literally googled 'best wedding venues Toronto' and then went to those websites.