The high-performance fencer's equipment purchases: Serendipitous social berrypicking and cognitive self-autonomization

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Abstract

This study explores how high-performance fencers make decisions when purchasing equipment. Three university students who regularly participate in high-level tournaments, ranging from the national to Olympic level, were interviewed using the Information Horizon Interview method, creating Information Horizon Maps to accompany their interview responses. This research represents a new branch of the library and information science literature, extending from the currently underrepresented fields of sports hobbies and serious leisure activities. From the data, two models of information behaviour are proposed: serendipitous social berrypicking and cognitive self-autonomization. These models could possibly be extended to future research concerning fencers and other athletes in niche sports. The findings emphasize the influence of the social world on high-performance fencers’ equipment-purchasing decisions.

Keywords

information behaviour, Information Horizon Interview, serious leisure, amateur sport, high-performance fencing.
INTRODUCTION

I have been a passionate member of the Ontario fencing community since 2011, but at my first tournament, I barely knew how to put on my borrowed pile of equipment correctly, and when I saw the other fencers’ equipment, I thought, “What happens when I need to buy my own? How am I ever going to figure all of this out?” Having now uncovered the methods of information seeking that worked best for me, I became curious about the methods that other fencers use to acquire similar information. What about those with much more experience than I have? How do high-performance fencers make decisions when purchasing equipment? I decided to interview fencers who, other than the level of performance, were of a similar demographic to myself: Canadian university students on their school’s varsity team, who are currently competing regularly at national-level tournaments and above.

After three half-hour interviews, some common themes emerged. I will examine the results of the study through two that arose through inductive thematic analysis: the serendipitous social berrypicking that influences eventual equipment-purchasing decisions, and the long-term collection of information in a process that I have called “cognitive self-autonomization.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because fencing is unrepresented in the library and information science literature, I investigated the literature surrounding the purchasing of sports equipment in general, but still found little. Hartel (2010)’s summary of Leisure and Hobby Information and Its Users in the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, states that “…sports hobbies are relatively unknown,” and then tentatively outlines some possible information behaviours based on previous studies in hobby gaming, such as rules “codified in handbooks and learned by all participants to maintain fair play” (p. 3270). In the case of high-performance athletes, is fencing truly only a hobby? Stebbins (2001) clarifies that a serious leisure activity involves a long-term commitment to a “leisure career,” defined as “the typical course, or passage, of a type of amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer that carries the person into and through the leisure role” (p. 9). A key aspect of the serious leisure activities that Hartel (2010) describes are the resulting “social worlds” (p. 3271), defined by Unruh (1979) as “…an internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants” (p. 115). As a fencer myself, this was a familiar-sounding concept; “serious leisure” is an accurate activity label for fencers who commit to their athletic development over a long period of time. The idea of the social world and its effects on equipment-purchasing decisions within the fencing community is further explored later in this study.

Despite Hartel (2010)’s statement that the leisure field showed “promising trajectories for
future inquiry” (p. 3271), not much progress has been made specifically regarding information behaviour in sports purchasing since then. The most notable writings on the subject come from a dissertation from the University of Minnesota several years ago: Yoo (2014) examines a model for the online purchase of sports products. The sections on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of a system as determining factors for online purchasing, as well as users’ trust in these systems, illuminate some of the information behaviours associated with this area (Yoo, 2014). However, the research does not seem to distinguish between consumers who are mainly sports fans and the athletes themselves. In addition, limiting the study to only online purchasing neglects the live social interactions that have the potential to influence consumers equally or more than online vendors.

With this study, I seek to address some of the “innumerable unanswered questions” in the leisure field that Hartel (2010) describes (p. 3271).

**RESEARCH METHODS**

I gathered data using the Information Horizon Interview method, first defined by Sonnenwald (2005). I conducted three semi-structured interviews, in which I asked a selection of predetermined questions, with flexibility for follow-up questions based on the informants’ answers. This was followed by a drawing exercise where each informant was asked to sketch their Information Horizon Map (Sonnenwald, 2005), detailing resources that they would interact with while researching fencing equipment.

As a fencer myself, I selected Bates (1989)’s “berrypicking” model as a sensitizing concept, wondering if others might pick and choose from different sources on their information-gathering quest – refining their question along the way – as I tend to do when making equipment-purchasing decisions.

The informants were all Canadian varsity fencers in university, ranging from ages 19 to 37; two were female and one male. They all compete at the high-performance level, which is defined here as regularly competing at national-level tournaments and above. One informant introduced an interesting ethical concern. Donna Vakalis has competed in Modern Pentathlon at the two most recent Olympic Games. There was a possibility that even if her transcript was anonymized, references to her Olympic career would make it easy to discern her identity. After consulting with the informant and obtaining her permission, it was decided that Donna would be referenced in this study by her true identity. It is unclear to what extent this may have influenced her interview responses. The other two informants are referred to by the pseudonyms “Robin” and “Walter.”
FINDINGS

Serendipitous Social Berrypicking

The existing berrypicking model primarily describes online searches (Bates, 1999). Although all fencers interviewed did mention online websites as a primary resource, they said that when going online they usually already know exactly what they want to buy. Although they often use the websites of equipment suppliers to make final purchases, those sites do not make significant contributions to the decision-making process, beyond cost comparison.

The other information resources mentioned by participants were overwhelmingly social. Over their fencing careers, they have surrounded themselves with people they trust to provide them with accurate information. Friends, coaches and armourers, and equipment vendors were all listed multiple times as valuable resources. These interactions mainly occur at fencing-related events such as practices and tournaments.

There is an international governing body – the Fédération Internationale d’Escrime (FIE) – that dictates rules and regulations surrounding equipment, but none of the participants initially mentioned it by name; they would often begin by referring to a mysterious “they” who dictate what is or is not acceptable at different levels. When asked directly to elaborate, Walter seemed to come to a sudden realization of just how much this organization influences his decisions. He then added the FIE to his diagram (Figure 1), connected to other, social resources. This oversight arises from the fencers not necessarily reading these regulations themselves; requirements are taught and absorbed as part of their fencing education, with any changes in policy filtering down through interactions with friends, coaches, and referees.

Fencers do not often actively search for this information. They may hear something in conversation, then mentally file it away for later, to draw upon once they need to make another purchase. The three aspects of decision-making that I have discussed combine to form a sort of serendipitous social berrypicking.
Cognitive Self-Autonomization

It was difficult to pinpoint a cognitive authority within their social world that these fencers looked to for information. When asked about coaches, they generally said that, although they may have gone to them for assistance when they were beginners, they do not anymore. Although they discussed how interactions with others in the fencing community inform their decision-making, fencers also expressed a distrust of these sources in certain situations, for example, Robin’s dad’s distrust of a former coach’s advice. Walter prefers a physical experience with a potential new blade, rather than hearing about it from a vendor.

The filing away of information over many years has made high-performance fencers into their own cognitive authorities. They have fashioned themselves into living, evolving, human libraries of fencing information, including equipment expertise, in a process of cognitive self-autonomization. Donna’s IHI diagram is an excellent representation of this phenomenon. Her map, shown in Figure 2, is essentially a flow chart of her own thought process. The other sources listed are mostly where she plans to acquire the equipment itself, rather than the information to make the decisions, which she usually already knows from her numerous years of experience. Any external information resources had to be investigated through follow-up questions after the drawing exercise.
Robin appears to be an exception to this model. Her dad is her primary resource and she relies upon him for the majority of her information. However, he could also be considered as an extension of herself in this scenario. As seen in Figure 3, she has drawn him the largest and in the centre of the map, where other participants placed themselves. If she did not have a close family member who was a fencer whom she trusts as the others trust themselves, would she have become the authority out of necessity? We cannot know that, but this aspect of the construction of her IHI diagram indicates this as a possibility.
DISCUSSION

The model of serendipitous social berrypicking draws upon three key concepts: Bates’ (1999) berrypicking, Unruh’s (1979) social worlds, and Erdelez’s (1999) information encountering. I did not set out to combine these three concepts at the beginning, but as patterns emerged from the data, elements of each became apparent in the information-seeking process.

The model of cognitive self-autonomization takes Wilson’s (1983) concept of “cognitive authority” and re-centres it on the interview subject, acknowledging the high-performance athlete as their own most-trusted resource. This arose as a solution to my own difficulties pinpointing cognitive authorities within the high-performance fencers’ social world.

As suspected, Yoo’s (2014) model of the online purchase of sports products misses out on a complex social world whose impact on decision-making, at least for these three fencers, is much greater than that of online vendors. Yoo was focused on how to increase profits for online vendors, but it is important to acknowledge that these websites may not be the greatest contributing factor toward making purchasing decisions. Especially for sports with relatively small communities, where a large portion of the community gathers at a common set of events, vendors may want to take advantage of this avenue for directing consumers to their online stores, as many fencing vendors do already when they attend tournaments in person.

It would be interesting to see if the proposed models could be extended to other social sports, particularly other niche sports with tight-knit communities, like fencing, to describe some of the information behaviours surrounding their social worlds. As Hartel (2010) has pointed out, hobby sports and serious leisure activities have been neglected thus far in the LIS literature. It is currently difficult to generalize even within the sport of fencing, since only three unique cases have been studied, and one (Robin) already shows an inconsistency with the model of cognitive self-autonomization. With further studies on the information behaviour surrounding sports equipment purchases, these models can be tested and refined.

The social world of the fencer is crucial for their information-seeking process and their quest to build their own mental library of information. This network of fencers, coaches, armourers, equipment vendors, and others in the community offers a rich source for further study. This preliminary study barely scratches the surface of fencers’ information behaviour. Future research could focus in on the social world, perhaps exploring the broader exchange of information amongst fencers in an ethnographic study. On the subject of equipment-purchasing decisions specifically, it would be interesting to examine how the information-seeking process differs for beginner fencers just starting to develop their networks.
METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

A prominent issue that arose consistently throughout the interview process was the struggle to uncover the information resources that each fencer referenced when they sought to buy new equipment. Being experienced, high-performance fencers, their methods of information seeking are well-defined – they do not have to consciously think about where to find information anymore – and so they tended to focus more on what Hektor (2011) calls “life activities,” rather than “information activities.” Most of the time, it wasn’t until the mapping phase that they were able to focus in on the actual information resources that they referenced. The mysterious “they” became tournament officials and governing bodies as participants were prodded to explain their maps. Perhaps it would have been more effective, in this instance, to introduce the drawing exercise earlier in the interview to focus their answers on information activities much sooner.

CONCLUSION

This study has surveyed several individuals within the world of high-performance fencing, with a focus on the information behaviours associated with decisions surrounding the purchasing of equipment. It branches out into a new area of LIS research, building on a small set of loosely-related studies. The three Information Horizon Interviews and their corresponding diagrams have given insight into the complex social world of the fencer, giving rise to proposed models of serendipitous social berrypicking and cognitive self-autonomization.

A modification to the Information Horizon Interview method was suggested in cases where the subjects’ familiarity with their own processes makes the elucidation of information behaviours more difficult for the interviewer.

This research emphasizes the necessity of addressing social worlds in sports research and the impact they have on equipment-purchasing decisions. A fencer’s community is important to them.

“I dreamed of having [my own wireless equipment] so I could just go out fencing wherever I wanted to, like in the forest with friends.” – Donna Vakalis

These results open up a world of possibilities for further research into the information behaviours of fencers and other athletes in niche sports, at all levels of performance.
REFERENCES


