“The Lady,” the story, and the machine: Information seeking behaviour in the McDonald’s restaurant ordering process

Danielle Heifa

Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic investigations into the McDonald’s indoor ordering experience, this paper presents findings from a preliminary examination of information seeking behaviour within one single North American restaurant location. The investigation draws upon theories of information infrastructure, and both digital and sensory ethnography. Through data collected from 3 hours of unobtrusive observations and 3 semi-structured interviews, it first focuses on the master narrative of McDonald’s, and how its branding and history informs information behaviour and bias within the restaurant. The focus will then move to remediation, online and offline dynamics, and media ideologies that impact decision making about the mediums used for information communication in the ordering process.

Keywords
INTRODUCTION

Retail ethnography is on the rise, as corporations wish to create branded end-to-end experiences for users of their products and services. McDonald’s, a corporation and restaurant chain with a long history around the world, leverages both its brand loyalty and universality in tandem with its evolution, to create retail environments conducive to enjoyable and convenient modern customer experiences. To narrow in on this specific retail space, this study seeks to understand information seeking behaviours in the ordering process at a single Canadian McDonald’s location with digital ordering kiosks. It explores the master narrative of McDonald’s (the information acquired by consumers about the chain before they step foot in the restaurant), and focuses on the negotiation between “the lady” (as referred to by the study’s participants to indicate the person at the front counter) and “the machines” inside. It asks the question: how do consumers of the technology-forward McDonald’s restaurants of today seek ordering information when they enter to order or pick up food?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature within the information behaviour field was explored and integrated with the results of this study. The following scholars and research informed the analysis of the results of the data collected.

In order to gain a better understanding of the notion of media ideologies in the way that age is interpreted as a factor in shaping information behaviour in the ordering process at McDonald’s, this paper looked to Gershon (2010), who built upon Silverstein’s (1979) concept of linguistic ideology. The analysis also uses the concept of remediation, coined by Bolter and Grusin (1999), to incorporate spatial and temporal context into the analysis of information behaviors in the negotiation between accessing humans or machines. The concept of online/offline dynamics and “decomputerisation,” highlighted by Varis (2014) is also engaged with and, in this context, fused with the concept of remediation. The distinction between online and offline behaviour in McDonald’s disappears, as the study uses one single restaurant location as a general ethnographic melting pot of information behaviour. On this note, the topic also taps into the practice of microethnography, in that it is concerned with how interaction is socially and culturally organized in a particular situational setting. Lastly, this paper pulls in ideas from Leigh Star’s (1999) concept of information infrastructure and the field of sensory ethnography, as it explores the way Sarah Pink (2013) so eloquently explains, “we move through the world, react to it, turn it to our needs, and engage with it to solve problems” (p. 10-11). Here, we attempt to argue that the “meaning that the world has for us is revealed” in the way we interact with it (p. 10-11). In the case of this study, we find meaning in the most unexpected of places—behind the tacky, giant, ubiquitous yellow arches that scatter our cities, suburbs and even our small towns. Investigating information behaviour in one single McDonald’s restaurant helps to reveal insights that start to peel away the layers from the gimmicks and the happy meals, and allow us to understand how the restaurant’s customers learn to move through its space, and what motivates their decisions.
RESEARCH METHODS

The McDonald’s location used for this study is in Concord, Ontario, at the intersection of Highway 7 and Centre St. on the dates of Saturday, November 3rd, 2018 between 9:00AM-1:00PM and Sunday, November 18th, 2018 between 9:30AM-11:30AM. Customers were studied through unobtrusive observation as the restaurant location, bustling and busy with the morning rush, organically permitted this type of access. Field notes (jottings), diagrams and photographs were used as recording devices during observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three individuals, using Sonnenwald’s (2001) Information Horizon Interview Method to elicit visual and textual responses to a subject’s information seeking experience. These three interviews were conducted inside the restaurant after each customer purchased and ate their respective items. The process began with each subject drawing two information horizon maps—one for their methods in the process of ordering and one for the rating of important informational sources consulted during their order. The three subjects were all male, between the ages of 21 and 62 years old. All had visited and ordered from McDonald’s several times before, and were familiar with the restaurant. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms for these subjects are used throughout this paper.

These methods, however, present certain limitations that are important to address. Firstly, only males were available for interview on the days of study, which could have provided a gendered point of view. Secondly, the fact that unobtrusive observation took place only on weekends, in the morning, does not provide the most comprehensive overview of behaviour during different daily time periods. The findings, therefore, are not representative of conclusive results, but instead encourage further investigation.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Historical information: the master narrative of McDonald’s

Historical information and the “master narrative” of McDonald’s as a whole is brought into present day orders in individual and isolated restaurants. The first example of this arose in an interview with Sergius, age 62, who had just purchased a Big Mac at the front counter.

It’s history. I’ve had 40 years of history of coming to McDonald’s. All of the things on their menu, I know. McDonald’s has been around a long time, it has always been the go-to place. They also suffered in the last decade or so with the junk food image. Their profits have dropped down drastically, but they seem to be going back up-- I’m not sure why. Some say they have made their menu more healthy, but I don’t know what is really healthier. I follow the stock market and financial news in the newspaper, that’s where I get my information. So they’ve been up and down. They were having hard times and they’re trying to adapt.
Marko, age 32, expressed in his interview:

They have a poor history of health, they don’t have a good reputation. I associate the food with not being good for you. Health is very important to me and because of that, I don’t give this restaurant much attention. I learn this from the news, from documentaries, from society itself; it’s common knowledge. I know they have hamburger laws in the states. You can’t sue McDonald’s for making you obese because you should know better than to eat too much of their product.

What’s interesting here is that two individuals, 30 years apart in age, have come to the same master narrative about this 63 year old restaurant chain. As Sergius was born 1 year after the restaurant’s opening, he has literally grown up with McDonald’s, evolving alongside the multi-million dollar corporation and this gives him a more comprehensive point of view. Marko, however, was raised in a time when McDonald’s was well established, and had perhaps already accrued the reputation he speaks of. Both subjects ordered food with their respective historical information in mind— Sergius a Big Mac and Marko hashbrowsns and an apple pie. Sergius admitted that when he orders at McDonald’s he always feels like he is picking between “the lesser of two evils” when it comes to health. To explain why he ordered his Big Mac Sergius said:

McDonald’s is just around, they’re just there. You kind of know what you’re going to get, even though it’s junk...but you only go there when you’re in the mood, there’s nothing else, and you just feel like junkin’ out.

Marko, a vegan, admitted to looking up the McDonald’s menu months ago online to understand what he would be able to eat at the restaurant. Upon looking up this information, it appeared to him that there are only three items on the McDonald’s menu that are considered vegan, which makes his ordering decisions at the restaurant quite limited.
The excerpts above show, is each subject’s awareness of the information infrastructure of McDonald’s. They both order at the restaurant with a distinct sense of cognitive dissonance-- an discomfort with the McDonald’s master narrative, its transparency, its embeddedness, the reach and scope of its power-- with the simultaneous feeling of giving in and surrendering.

It is the restaurant’s pervasiveness, combined with an evolving hegemony of a more health-conscious society that has, as Star puts it, surfaced “invisible work (Star, 1999).” Sergius, admitting that he has read about how health related media attention has contributed negatively to the company’s image and bottom line, is also highlighting exactly how the infrastructure of McDonald’s became as Leigh also states, “visible upon breakdown.” (Star, 1999) And it is in this breakdown, in the grand PR disasters, that the invisible work surfaces-- the work of marketing directors and designers and CEO’s. It is in the breakdowns that the gaze of the public redirects itself to infrastructure and becomes skeptical of its embeddedness.

David, a millenial (21), also appears to have an awareness of the infrastructural breakdown:

I don’t think this food is the healthiest for you. All the facts that I’ve seen about where their meat comes from and their processes... I see this on social media like Instagram, Twitter, news outlets posting about it. Some of my friends will talk about it, too.

The breakdown and the surfacing of this invisible work appears to have spanned generations. Sergius, in his own lifetime, has seen the restaurant “fix itself in modular increments, not all at once or globally,” (Star, 1999, p.382) as it has opened chains all around the world. He admits that he has encountered McDonald’s restaurants all around the world while on business trips and family vacations. He has witnessed the building of the infrastructure: the invention of the Happy Meal, the Big Mac, the person with the visor at the counter. He has also witnessed the dismantling of the smoke and mirrors: the categorization of breakfast, lunch and “combos,” into distinct categorizations of their own-- the land of junk food.

The New Age: “The Lady” or the machine?

Within the restaurant, interactions with ordering information technology and its perceived effectiveness, is contextual-- based on remediation, pre-existing media ideologies and online/ offline dynamics. The following excerpt illustrates how context plays a role in David’s ordering process:

I usually use the digital kiosk whenever I walk into McDonald’s and the line is long. I didn’t use it this time because there was absolutely no line, so there was no reason for me to use it. But mostly, I order at the kiosk. I find it much easier to use. I can skip talking to the lady and trying to figure out all this stuff. When I know exactly what I want, I just click the things, and it’s easier. It makes the process quicker I guess. Maybe someone who doesn’t know what they want, they may need to ask the lady questions, but I know what I want. I get the same thing every time.

What is interesting here is the remediation at play in David’s order. As described by Gershon (2010), remediation refers to how individuals define each technology in relation to the other technologies available to them, eventually making communicative decisions based on what they deem the most ‘appropriate’ medium for the specific task at hand.
On the day of his order, David demonstrated remediation by choosing to order with the human at the front counter instead of ordering at the kiosk, his normal course of action. The fact that there was no line up was a key contextual factor in his decision, evidently outweighing the perceived effectiveness of the kiosk for the task at hand. Additionally, David has made clear that the kiosk is specifically effective for individuals ordering “combos,” and for people who know exactly what they want to order. This kind of negotiation demonstrates that information behaviour in negotiation between “the lady,” or the human behind the counter, and “the machine” is not a one-dimensional decision, but rather incorporates layers of context specific to the task at hand.

David’s ordering justification also sheds light on a potential pre-existing media ideology. Gershon (2010), drawing on Silverstein’s (1979) notion of “language ideology,” defines media ideologies as a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning. Gershon argues that the way people think about the media that they use actually shapes the way they use it.

David remarked that he felt that ordering at the kiosks was “fun.” He expanded later by saying:

You skip the interaction at the kiosk. If someone doesn’t want to talk to someone, maybe they’ll use the kiosk. I use it for convenience, it’s quicker, I skip the whole process. I can pay at the front or at the kiosk, but obviously it’s much easier to pay at the kiosk.

His remarks come with a specific lightheartedness that appear to be remarkably subjective. His use of the word “obviously,” without justification, presents itself as a glimmer of bias or ideology that feeds into his ordering behaviour. David also outlined that when he visits McDonald’s with his friends, that they all order from the kiosk individually. This could perhaps be indicative of the fact that his media ideology might in fact be generational.

Online/Offline dynamics

Continuing with the premise of contextually influenced behaviour in ordering at McDonald’s, the following field notes and diagram illustrate how context in the form of offline and online dynamics played a role in two different ordering scenarios. Both orders in these scenarios were completed using McDonald’s brand new mobile ordering system. The basic premise of this system is that an individual can order food online, via their phone or computer, and then pick the food up at the restaurant in person.

Scenario 1

A young man and woman walk into the restaurant and wait in the back pick up area. They are both on their cell phones and have not gone to the kiosks or the front counter. Shortly thereafter, the woman at the food counter yells, “Tanya?” and the young woman goes to pick up her bag of food. The young woman starts eating her fries from the bag as the young man still waits for his food. Moments later, the woman behind the counter yells, “Harry?” and the young man walks to the counter to get his food, smiles with the look of pride on his face, and the two of them find a seat at a table and unwrap their food.

Scenario 2
In scenario 2, the individual depicted in the diagram was on the phone with his wife at home the entire time he was at the restaurant. It was evident that the wife, online, had input the mobile order from home and that he had been delegated to go and physically pick up the food at the restaurant, offline. When he arrived, the order was not ready and the kitchen or front counter had no idea what his wife had ordered. What ensued was a twenty minute debacle of moving from food counter to ordering counter with this individual trying to let the kitchen and the ordering staff know what his wife had ordered from home. This was all in the midst of the morning rush— a full and busy restaurant with other customers ordering and picking up their food. It seemed, from his phone call and communication with the front counter, that his wife at home had not confirmed the order on her cell phone after she had selected her items. Thus, the kitchen was left completely in the dark. When this individual entered the restaurant to pick up his food, the online and offline worlds and the information they were receiving were not aligned. What is fascinating, here, is that the man picking up the food had no idea who to blame. At moments his tone seemed angry with the employees and then angry at his wife on the phone. At the end of the tumultuous experience, as he picked up his 5 bags of food, he said out loud to the employee at the pick-up counter: “It’s not your fault. I just don’t understand what happened.”

What these two excerpts show are polar opposite examples of how online-offline dynamics influence information behaviours during the ordering process. In scenario 1, the young man and woman seem to have had a seamless mobile ordering experience. They input their order information into their respective cell phones online, waited for their food and then retrieved it “offline” at the in-person ordering counter.

In scenario 2, to order his food, this man had to gather information from his wife at home, from the kitchen staff at McDonald’s and also from the ordering staff. An experience that very well could have been as seamless as scenario 1, resulted in information gathering techniques most likely not anticipated or desired by the invisible designers of McDonald’s. Thus, the
information infrastructure, yet again, became visible upon breakdown. The chasm between the offline and online world had expanded and this man fell between the cracks.

CONCLUSION

The information behaviour discovered in this study illustrates that historical information and the “master narrative” of McDonald’s as a whole is brought into present-day orders in individual restaurants. Within the restaurant itself, interaction with ordering information technology (and its perceived effectiveness) is contextual—based on remediation, pre-existing media ideologies and online/offline dynamics. Information brought in from the outside, and then in turn information gathered from the inside and brought out, is the centrepiece of this study. The information behaviours on two mornings, inside one restaurant location, are evidently dependent on a slew of factors not immediately obvious to an observer. This highlights Bateson’s (1978) statement, “What can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships, never a ‘thing’” (p. 251). We bring our biases into the restaurant, pass them over the counter and, in turn, the counter passes them back over to us. It is this that is the true negotiation that determines information behaviour at McDonald’s.

REFERENCES


