The Information Behaviour of Mothers: Instinct as Information

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Abstract

Previous research on the information seeking behaviour of parents is extremely narrow in scope, focusing on parents whose children have medical or psychological concerns. This research hopes to share the information seeking behaviours of a broader population, parents of adolescents (children between 10-19 years old). Using the Information Horizon Method (Sonnenwald 1999), this research project incorporates semi-structured interviews with three mothers who currently have two adolescent children each. The interviews contained neutral questions regarding information resources used by parents when determining general information regarding their children's lives. The findings show that there is a great preference for interpersonal resources, with the most attended to and preferred ones being the resources inside the home, which include spouse, the child, or the child's sibling. It is only if they are not satisfied with the information gathered from those resources that the parents would go outside the home, at which point the resources are chosen based on the situation. Certain resources that parents are attempting to have in their information horizon are social media and internet use. Parents use different techniques to access information on their children's social media accounts or look at friends' private profiles. They also incorporate techniques with computers in general, such as allowing them only in open spaces, where parents are able to quickly glance at screens. Lastly, all parents depicted an indescribable embodied knowledge that concerned the state of their children. This intuition was the starting point of all information seeking processes depicted in this research project. They called this intuition maternal instinct.

Keywords: Informaiton Seeking, Information Behaviour, Parenting, Information Horizons Map, Mothers

Introduction

My research question involves the information behaviours of parents, specifically focusing on parents of adolescents. According to the World Health Organization, adolescents are between 11 and 19 years old, and the age-based definition of them is 'child' if they are under 18 years of age (WHO, 2017). It is also stated that children within these age ranges experience various physical and psychological changes, including self-development (WHO, 2017). These changes lead adolescents to want to gain independence, and disconnect from their parents (WHO, 2017). The goal of this research project was to determine both information resources, as well as the information seeking behaviours of parents during this stage where their children may become more distant, thus creating an information need. What resources do parents use to gain information about what is happening in the lives of their children, and why do they go to these resources as oppose to others? As every child is different, I also wanted to determine if the parent takes different pathways depending on the child's personality. As such, I interviewed parents who currently have two adolescent children each. Moreover, I wanted to determine how the information seeking behaviour changes, depending on whether the situation involves social life and relationships, online identity and social media, or medical concerns.

Literature Review

When analyzing the Library and Information Science literature, I found a lot of scholarly research done on the information seeking behaviours of parents. However, the population studied was parents whose children had medical issues, such as life-threatening illnesses (Knapp et al., 2010), or physical disabilities (Alsem et al., 2017). Alternatively, some research also narrowed down the parental population of focus. For example, some studies looked at first-time mothers (Loudon et al., 2016) or young parents between 16 and 23 years old (Greyson, 2017). They also focused more on information resources, in order to discover information seeking needs among this population. For example, the scholarly article "Information Seeking by Parents of Children with Physical Disabilities" by Alsem, Ausems, & Verhoef stated that there is a gap in the information needs of this population, and the study aimed to discover how parents fill these gaps (2017). It concluded that the main source of information was experience-based knowledge from peers, and that this source should be guided by health care professionals (Alsem et al., 2017).

Psychological research explored information behaviours with a focus on why parents consulted certain resources and the effect that had on the child. For example, the scholarly article entitled "Beyond the What and How: Why Parents Want to Know about Their Adolescents

Lives” (Babskie 2016) drew a link between parental knowledge and adolescent behavioral outcome. In doing so, the paper analyzed the relationship between parental motivations for knowledge (physical safety, future successes) and the knowledge seeking strategies used (direct solicitation, indirect strategies) (Babskie 2016). The research method was standardized, and parents filled out a survey where they would describe the use of their information strategies on a 5-point Linkert scale (Babskie 2016). The adolescent behavioural outcome was based upon whether the adolescent understood the parent’s motivations (Babskie 2016).

Altogether, the literature gathered on this topic area was narrow in scope or focused on the psychological outcome rather than the process itself, or as Bates describes it— an “information transfer” (2010). By interviewing general parents of adolescents, I hope to distinguish a larger scope in the population previously studied. I will also analyze the information seeking process including which resources are used and the order in which they occur. In layman’s terms, I would like to know what lengths will a mother go to in order to find out what is happening in her child’s life? Furthermore, I will distinguish if the information seeking process has any influences.

Research Methods

Research was gathered using the Information Horizon Interview (Sonnenwald, 1999). The IHI is a framework that suggests that there is an information horizon in information seeking scenarios, and this horizon is deemed the area in which people act. The interview is not standardized, and instead incorporates neutralized questions that focus on information seeking situations. A research guide was created that provided interview questions in advance. Each subject also completed an Information Horizon Map after the interview was completed.

The interview was audio recorded, then transcribed and deleted. All research subjects, including any names mentioned were given an alias in the transcription. The alias will also be used for the purpose of this report. This information was told to the research participants beforehand.

Lastly, it was explained that their participation was voluntary, and they can remove themselves from the interview at any time.

Sonnenwalds’ Information Horizons theory has influenced the direction of this study. More specifically, its intentions are to examine the impact of context and situations on information seeking. The research guide embodies this objective by containing various situational questions. It is also prevalent in the purposeful gathering of research participants. Each subject has two adolescent children between 10 and 19 years of age. All parents are in their

mid-40s, Italian, and have parents that immigrated from Italy. This selection was intentional, in hopes to deduce information trends among this population. It is ideographic in the sense that each mother is being interviewed independently and is expressing her unique information behaviour. In using this approach, this research hopes to develop “underlying themes or tendencies” (Bates, 2005).

Findings

The findings were amalgamated into three common themes across the interviews. It would not have been productive to use a quantifying data analysis as there was not much diversification of resources, or order to their use. There was no concept, theory or metatheory in mind when creating the research guide, thus looking through a certain research lens was inapplicable. Instead, the intent was to have theories and concepts develop from the data.

Figure 1: Inductive Analysis and Representation

The inductive analysis diagram in Figure 1 was created based on parents’ responses. It hopes to represent both preference and order of resources. Family is in the inner circle, and thus the preferred choice of mothers. Other oral channels, such as doctors, professionals, and fellow parents are considered a second choice, and thus they are placed on the outer circle.

Social Media is being pulled into the information horizon either by mom herself (by making an effort to follow the child on social media through her own social media account) or through other resources (going on child's account or asking spouse or other sibling). The dashed arrows represent this effort. This was an accurate way to present trends in the information seeking process including the commonality among resources used.

Theme 1 - Maternal Instinct as the Catalyst

Maternal Instinct was mentioned by all research participants. It was prevalent in responses to situational questions including bullying, relationships, bad moods, and medical issues. Moreover, it was the first resource described. This took the indescribable response of "I'd just know something was wrong", "I'd just know something was different", or "You just know your child," which was then explicitly defined by all participants as "maternal instinct". This intuition was based on one's personal knowledge of the child, which is determined as a unique and trusted resource.

The presence of this feeling determined whether to begin an information seeking process or not. Examples where this occurred were in questions revolving physical information seeking through children's rooms or personal belongings. For this question, all participants stated they did not go through that process, as they felt no need. In this case, maternal instinct itself dismissed a lack of knowledge, thus prohibiting an information seeking process. However, this instinct could also prompt a mother to go into detective mode. For example, when one mother was asked whether or not she has attempted to look through her children's phones, she mentioned that they were password protected, but, if maternal instinct motivated her, then she would definitely try.

Theme 2 - Pulling Social Media into the Information Horizon

All participants stated that they did not read books, look at magazines or watch television to gain information about parenting. For parenting advice in particular, they stated that they use their own knowledge. Social media was the only media channel mentioned by parents. More specifically, they gathered information from social media to understand what was happening in their children's lives, including their current whereabouts.

Only one parent classified using social media for goal-oriented searching. This parent had Instagram herself. For example, when her daughter was dating a boy she had never met, she used social media to attempt to infer if he was respectable. However, when attempting to look at private profiles (thus acting outside of her information horizon), the parent asked someone she knew had access to them (the sibling) in order to obtain this information.

The other two parents who did not have Instagram stated that they look for information on social media as well. Since they do not have social media, it is outside of their information horizon, yet they use certain techniques such as going to someone who does have Instagram (sibling, spouse) or accessing the child's account directly (though the child is aware that the parent knows their password).

Lastly, when it came to computers and internet use, all participants stated that they keep computers in open spaces and disallow them in private spaces (such as bathrooms, bedrooms), which would make them outside of their information horizon. All participants admitted to glancing at children's cellphone and computer screens. One participant specifically mentioned reading open online conversations, and another mentioned going through online browsing history.

Theme 3 - The Contextualization of Information Seeking

The information seeking process is highly contextualized. The process is dependent on the child, and the accessibility to resources.

This contextualization was represented by one of the mother's in their IHI mapping, where she created two different lists of resources. The first list was representative of general information seeking, and the second list represented goal-oriented health information seeking (see Figure 2).

1. - Opposite Sibling
- 2 - Father.
3. - Father to Search Social Media
4. Friend- Very Close - Like Family

1. Mom First
2. Child Info.
3. Occasionally Search Internet For Different Viruses.
4. Pediatrician

Figure 2: Information Horizon Map from Interview 1

However, regardless of the situation, the information seeking process always began within the home. All processes began with maternal instinct, then went to the child. All parents deemed that direct solicitation would be successful for one child but not the other, so they used varying techniques. For example, one parent stated that she asks questions in the car, so the child does not have to make direct eye contact. If this did not work, then she would ask the child's siblings (who go to same school and share information grounds) or her spouse (all parents stated that children told their spouses more information).

That being said, only after they have exhausted the initial resources, do they go outside of the home, and this is where diversification in the resources is dependent on the situation. All parents stated that knowing their child's friends' parents was extremely important in order to gain knowledge about the children they are spending time with. Each parent described an instance where she received serendipitous information from this source about a child's school life. One participant depicted this jump in the information seeking process as a line on her Information Horizon Map (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Information Horizon Map from Interview 2

Discussion

The antecedent for information seeking always begins with what participants have defined “maternal instinct”.

Dervin's Sense Making Model states that as people move through life, they come to situations where they are faced with information "gaps" or needs. They search for necessary information to create a "bridge" across the gap, evaluate the outcome of the information seeking to see if it satisfied the need, and move on (Case, 2012). Since this model represents an internal process, emotions are an important aspect of information seeking for mothers. For the purpose of this research, maternal instinct acts as the situation in Dervin's Model. Its presence or strength is what begins or prohibits the information seeking process. For example, all parents mentioned they would have a sense if something was happening with the child, even if they did not exactly know what it was. That would begin the next phase of the information seeking process where the parent would infer from the child's actions or directly/indirectly ask the child themselves. However, they also used maternal instinct as a reason to not begin an information seeking process. When asked whether they look through their children's backpacks and rooms for drugs or cigarettes, parents claimed they felt no need because they knew their children were not participating in any of those activities.

To make sense of their intuition, parents begin an information seeking process determined by content (is this a medical issue or a social issue?), individual (is this child open or more reserved?) and accessibility (what must I do to access this resource?). Parents incorporated various techniques depending on the child's personality traits. This includes gentle probing or indirect solicitation in an attempt to get the child to open up.

As seen in the research, parents typically accessed the same initial resources in all situations. These included themselves, the child and then other family members such as sibling or spouse. Children's friends' parents can be depicted as an information ground (Fisher, 2005), where serendipitous information is shared. Despite the common resources and them all being oral channels, these information seeking behaviours were not examples of the Principle of Least Effort (Case, 2012) because according to parents these resources were deemed trusted, and of high quality; meanwhile, the Principle of Least Effort assumes people accept lower quality resources because they take less effort (Case, 2012). All participants specifically said they would not go to their own parents, as their information is outdated. Another example is when a parent specifically stated they would not go to a sibling, as they felt the two children were not close enough to exchange such information.

Hektor's "Relation of Behaviour and Activity" theory states that humans fulfill four modes of information behaviour which are represented through information activities in daily life (2001). The following diagram (Figure 4) displays Hektor's theory, with the information behaviours in the inner circle and the information activities displayed on the outer circle (2001).

Figure 4: Hektor's Relation of Information Behaviour and Activity (Hektor, 2001)

Social media played a big part in how the parents manifested Hektor's information behaviours. The "Search and Retrieve" behaviour was reflected by one parent who had an Instagram account and followed her children (Hektor 2001). She deemed her social media use to be goal oriented and, thus, fitting the definition of actively looking for information (Hektor 2001). In this example, she was specifically interested in the discourse between her daughter and her daughter's boyfriend through Instagram comments. However, the two parents who did not have social media labeled this information activity as "browsing" (Hektor 2001). This parallels Hektor's "Browse", which is defined as "an act of moving in a limited environment, with some level of perceived probability to encounter a resource of some value" (Hektor, 2001, p. 82). The limitations would be that they do not have a social media account themselves, and consequently do not have much knowledge concerning all of its components.

The "Monitor" and "Unfold" information behaviours were more discreetly mentioned throughout the interview (Hektor 2001). When asked about the concern of whether the child is doing homework on the computer or not (considering there are so many online components to elementary and high school education now), one mother stated she monitors Google Classroom to make sure submissions were made or to be aware of work the child has been assigned. Likewise, the mother with the Instagram account previously mentioned, stated she monitors comments made on her daughter's Instagram to see if she noticed any red flags or inappropriate directions.

The interactions between parent and child mentioned above can be deemed “Exchange” (Hektor 2001). Exchange is defined as a mutual conversation concerning a specific topic (Hartel et al., 2016). For example, according to Figure 4, the participant exchanges information with her spouse, the child’s sibling and fellow parents. Though it is possible for exchange to occur digitally, through a comment on a forum, none of the participants expressed sharing information this way. That being said, the concept of “Exchange” also relates to the information behaviour of “Dress” (Hektor 2001). Hartel et al (2016) describe this information behaviour as “a type of information output, when thoughts and ideas are given physical expression” (p. 7). Parents showed a preference for oral channels over written ones. There was a prevalent disregard for parenting books, magazines, or blogs because they were not efficient or personal. Instead, all parents preferred gaining information from interpersonal relationships. One parent stated that she has attended parenting seminars given by a professional, and that the professional had even written books, but she did not read them. She preferred seminars as they were efficient and catered well to her needs. Thus, the source for both the book and the seminar were the same (the author), it was the dressing of information (written versus verbal presentation) that was different.

Similarly, a parent depicted that she would never physically go to her child’s friends for information. However, that same parent stated that she looks at the child’s friends’ social media accounts to see if she can gain any information about the child’s whereabouts and what kind of people they are surrounding themselves with. This can be deemed another example of Hektor’s information behaviour of “dressing” (2001). As the source again is the same (the child’s friend), yet the output of information is different.

Lastly, it was Hektor’s section on “Giving” information activities, with specific behaviours of “Instruct” and “Publish,” that did not organically come up in the interviews (Hektor 2001). Instruction was probed with the question “what advice would you give a mother with an adolescent child who was concerned about the lack of communication that occurs within this timeframe?” All mothers answered this question by mentioning two main sentiments. The first was maternal instinct and trusting your gut. If you sense something is wrong with your child, then inquire. The second was instructions on resources and methods for obtaining desired information. All three mothers mentioned that parents of their child’s friends were vital and trustworthy sources of information. They also mentioned that creating an “open” atmosphere will make that communication easier. This not only included making the child feel comfortable to approach the parent when they made mistakes (all parents mentioned social drinking as a plausible situation) but vouching for mothers themselves as a reputable information source. “Publishing,” or posting information for public access (Hartel et al., 2016, p. 8), was not observed in this research. It would require the parents to publicly share their knowledge and they had not

mentioned doing that.

Conclusion

The initial research question for this project was, “what are the information seeking behaviours of parents with adolescent children?”

It was inspired by my own experience of my mother’s in depth and accurate knowledge about her daily life and struggles in high school.

In completing the semi-structured interviews along with Information Horizon Maps, I was able to discover a commonality among the interviewed parents. Firstly, this indescribable intuition that the mothers deemed “maternal intuition”. More importantly, it was listed as the most powerful source in all situational questions. My final question of the interview was “what advice would you give moms of adolescents who are scared about the lack of communication between them and their children?” “Trusting your gut,” was the unanimous response.

Figure 5: Information Horizon Map from Interview 3

The main themes that came out of the interviews are an internal sense referred to as maternal instinct, social media use, and a preference for oral channels as resources of the information seeking process. LIS professionals can expand on this research to determine contextual factors that may influence the information seeking process. For example, studies of

parents seeking health related information seem to differ, with a preference for online resources (Khoo et al., 2008). Future research can also focus on inherent knowledge (maternal instinct) and its crossover into other information seeking situations. In this digital age, exploring social media as an informational resource and its perceived trustworthiness may also be beneficial. In researching different contextual factors, and preferences for information dressing, we can better provide reference services to this community and meet user needs.

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