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The Role of Affect in the Information Seeking of Productive Scholars

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A B S T R A C T

Carol Kuhlthau's (2004) work shows that affect is a vital part of information seeking for high school students and undergraduates. This article explores the influence of affect on research university faculty. Like beginning information users, advanced information users are influenced by their confidence, ambition, and interest in their work. This study employed phenomenological interviews to explore how scholars' willingness to tackle new areas of research, submit manuscripts to prestigious publications, approach colleagues for collaboration, and conduct literature searches with tenacity is impacted by their emotions and dispositions.

Introduction

As Kuhlthau (2004) worked to bring attention to emotional influences on the information seeking of beginning scholars, this study seeks to bring attention to emotional influences on the information seeking of productive faculty scholars. This study addresses the information seeking of scholars in a broad sense, including how scholars seek scholarly work to read and cite as well how they seek other information for their work, such as information about prospective journals to publish in, what research topics will create the most impact, and how to keep up with new methodological strategies. Academic libraries, department heads, and scholarly publishers will be able to serve scholars better if they are more aware of their information seeking habits. Studying productive information seeking for faculty members also informs our knowledge of it for graduate students. While the information seeking habits of faculty members is often investigated in terms of their access preferences (Gardner & Inger, 2016), format preferences (Housewright, Schonfeld, & Wulfson, 2013), opinion of the library (Antonijevic & Cahoy, 2014), evaluation criteria (Nicholas et al., 2014), and information consumption levels (King, Choemprayong, Tenopir, & Wu, 2009), the emotional process accompanying information seeking for faculty members is not usually investigated. Kuhlthau (2004) refers to the feelings experienced during information seeking as “affect.” This term will be used throughout this paper.

Kuhlthau's (2004) perspective on information seeking has been the basis of many studies of grade school and undergraduate students, such as those of Wu, Dang, He, and Bi (2017), Beheshti, Cole, Abuhimed, and Lamoureux (2015), and Kim (2015). It has also been the foundation for limited work on more advanced scholars. Al-Suqri (2011) investigated whether the Information Search Process could be applied to social

science scholars in a Middle Eastern University. Since information seeking is engaged in more extensively by more advanced scholars, it is important to extend our knowledge of information seeking anxiety to those scholars. Though advanced scholars are sophisticated information users, scholars who work in institutions with very high research expectations may be under the greatest pressure during information seeking.

Scholars of faculty work, such as Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017), Parkman (2016), and Knights and Clarke (2014) often acknowledge and investigate the stress and self-doubt that often accompany such work. Stupnisky, Pekrun, and Lichtenfeld (2016) found that pre-tenure faculty reported feeling more anxiety, guilt, and helplessness with regard to research than with regard to teaching. The current study seeks to explore the impact of these feelings on information seeking behaviors.

This study draws on information behavior concepts to explore how faculty information seeking is influenced by faculty dispositions and emotional states. Information theorist, Reijo Savolainen (1995), designed a model of everyday life information seeking to describe the social and cultural factors that shape information seeking behavior. Savolainen argued that people have consistent dispositions toward making choices between information sources. He named the dispositions people have toward making order of things “mastery of life.” He outlined four attitudes toward mastery of life: 1) Optimistic-cognitive – Problems are seen as cognitive issues and individuals anticipate positive outcomes from information seeking, so they are systematic about it, 2) Pessimistic-cognitive – Problems are viewed as cognitive issues, but individuals are less optimistic about success and therefore less ambitious, 3) Defensive-affective – Individuals are optimistic about being able to solve problems, but sometimes avoid risky situations or situations in which they will be required to seek information. They are

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sometimes unrealistically hopeful, and 4) Pessimistic-affective – Individuals are not confident in problem solving because they feel failure is unavoidable and do not want to waste effort. According to Savolainen, an individual's values and attitudes, social capital, cultural capital, and material capital help shape their “way of life.” Situational factors such as time and health also help shape their “way of life” at any one time. In the current study, scholars' confidence level and orientation toward problem solving is examined as it relates to their tenacity for information seeking.

An investigation of information seeking is not complete without consideration of information avoidance. [Elfreda Chatman \(1996\)](#) argued that avoiding help is a way of not becoming burdensome, indebted, or responsible for reciprocating any help that might be provided. Chatman also discusses the idea that help seeking may be avoided if it is not seen as a social norm. An individual may not ask for help from someone who can provide it because they do not see it as an appropriate request based on their social relationship with the other person. Though Chatman's research was conducted with information-impooverished populations, her observations about information avoidance apply to information rich populations as well. Scholars, who are highly educated information users, may feel pressure to appear to be experts, and may be therefore be embarrassed to ask for help.

Methods

This study was part of a larger research project that investigated several aspects of the information seeking of productive scholars in the field of Higher Education. This article uses Higher Education scholars as a case to explore the influence of affect on faculty information seeking. To investigate faculty information seeking, I conducted phenomenological interviews with 14 productive scholars of Higher Education. I used a critical incident technique ([Flanagan, 1954](#)) to help scholars recall their experiences accurately. I asked scholars to recall the research strategies that went into a recently published or presented piece of scholarship to stimulate memories of specific experiences rather than allow them to generalize about their research habits. This method has previously been employed by [Tenopir, King, Edwards, and Wu \(2009\)](#) to elicit authentic memories of information seeking experiences in scholars. My sample included six women and eight men. Two scholars in the sample identified themselves as having been raised outside the United States. One scholar was a clinical professor, two were assistant professors, two were associate professors, one had just earned associate status, and the rest were full professors. My participants include Asians, an African American, a Latina, and Caucasians.

I drew my sample from Higher Education faculty in doctoral degree granting programs. To identify scholars from programs with high research expectations, I limited the sample to scholars from institutions that are part of the Association of American Universities (AAU). My participants came from six universities in the Midwest. My sample included scholars whose H-indices as calculated by Scopus ranged between 3 for younger scholars, up to 14 for prolific full professors. To place these numbers in perspective, Ernest Pascarella, the most highly cited scholar in the field ([Budd & Magnuson, 2010](#)) has a Scopus H-index of 31 and Arthur Chickering, who is also in the top 20 ([Budd & Magnuson, 2010](#)), has a Scopus H-index of 4. Many of my participants have been cited hundreds of times. They have published in respected journals such as *Teacher's College Record*, *Educational Researcher*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Review of Higher Education*, and *Journal of College Student Development*. Several of the scholars who participated have also served on the editorial boards of several of these journals. Several of my participants have authored or edited books that are used in the instruction of graduate students in the field of Higher Education.

Theoretical framework

This study is intended to build upon the work of [Carol Kuhlthau \(2004\)](#). She originated a theory of information behavior called the Information Search Process (ISP). She argued that previous theories of information behavior were focused on the “bibliographic paradigm,” collecting and organizing information, not the user's problems and processes. She sought to incorporate thought processes and emotions into her theory of information behavior. Kuhlthau's Information Search Process consists of six phases: *initiation*, *selection*, *exploration*, *formulation*, *collection*, and *presentation*. *Initiation* is the recognition of an information need. With it comes uncertainty. Once users *select* a topic, their uncertainty diminishes. When users begin the *exploration* stage, they sometimes encounter information that conflicts with their prior knowledge or with other sources, which may increase their anxiety. The *formulation* stage involves evaluation of information encountered. At this stage, users make meaning of what they have found. Conflicting information is resolved through a personal construction of the topic and uncertainty decreases. Once the user has a focused topic, they feel confident to *collect* a set of resources on it. Finally, the user documents and *presents* the information they have gathered to their audience. This stage is accompanied by satisfaction or disappointment with the project. The role of affect in information seeking has previously been studied mostly in beginning information users, but the current study explores the impact of affect on advanced information users.

[Kuhlthau \(2004\)](#) divides the search process into three sections: actions, thoughts, and feelings. As Kuhlthau reasons, understanding the feelings of our patrons can help librarians improve our service to them. Kuhlthau argues that a feeling of uncertainty is necessary to start the process of information seeking. As users move through the search process, their thoughts become more focused, their interest increases, and their actions move from exploration to more focused searching. They begin by feeling confused or frustrated and find clarity and confidence as they identify a sense of direction. Users build confidence when they encounter information that corroborates what they already know. Although Kuhlthau's studies were done primarily among high school and undergraduate students, thoughts and feelings are important factors in shaping the information seeking behaviors of all information users. Though scholars have more familiarity with information seeking than young students, their work can also involve anxiety. The pressure to publish can affect their attitudes during information seeking. The data from my study was coded for Kuhlthau's stages of information searching and the emotions associated with them.

Findings

In [Kuhlthau's \(2004\)](#) model of information searching, the cognitive state of a researcher in any stage of a research project is accompanied by a corresponding emotional state. As I heard from my faculty participants, faculty work can involve many emotional ups and downs. Academic writing is difficult work and it nearly always results in criticism from peer reviewers. One associate professor described the disheartening feeling of being rejected after revising two articles for journals, saying

There was so much effort and so much agony, everything, and then you get rejected. So I was really devastated. And then I stopped working after that rejection, two rejections, I kind of stopped working for, I think, a few months.

While peer review feedback is useful information that can improve a scholar's work, it also comes with emotional consequences that can affect that work. However, I also heard from scholars about supportive peers and mentors who helped them persevere in the face of criticism and rejection. An accepted article, praise from a colleague, or recognition from an association can have a positive emotional impact on a scholar. It is important to have people who will balance critical feedback with positive support.

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