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Information-seeking behavior of social science scholars in developing countries: A proposed model

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KEYWORDS

Information needs;
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Developing countries;
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Abstract *Introduction:* Models of information-seeking behavior are based almost entirely on research conducted in Western countries, and were generated at a time when electronic methods of information-seeking were still uncommon. This study develops an integrated model of social science information-seeking behavior based on a synthesis of established models and tests the ability of this integrated model to describe present-day information-seeking among social science scholars in a Middle Eastern university.

Method: The research was based on e-mail interviews, face-to-face interviews and focus groups conducted with social science faculty at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. At the time of data collection in June–July 2007, there were approximately 367 social science faculty at this University, distributed throughout the College of Arts and Social Sciences, the College of Education, the College of Commerce and Economics, and the Law College, including both men and women and representing a range of academic ranks.

Analysis: The data from the e-mail interviews, face-to-face interviews, and focus groups are analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The researcher used a qualitative analysis software program, NVIVO, to facilitate the process of analysis. Initially, the responses are examined and a preliminary set of themes created. Then, the responses are re-examined and coded according to the preliminary themes, with additional themes added as necessary.

Results: It was found that the information-seeking practices of the study sample could be readily matched to the stages of the model, suggesting that, in general terms, information-seeking behavior follows universally applicable stages, and that the model can be applied to current-day information-seeking despite changes in the information environment. The findings also provided support for the inclusion in the model of additional dimensions relating to the format and location of information resources, since these contextual factors were found to have an important influence on the process of information-seeking among the study participants.

Conclusions: It is hoped that this study will make a contribution to the future development of an expanded knowledge base which will underpin library and information science in the 21st century.

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Background

Many researchers have developed theories and models of academic information-seeking based on generic stages of behavior. This work has been invaluable in providing a conceptual and theoretical base for library and information science (LIS) and in informing the content and delivery of information services, especially in the university context. However, there is a pressing need for additional information about academic information-seeking in different contexts in order to assess the continued relevance of existing models of information-seeking behavior and to refine the knowledge base upon which LIS is grounded. Three main information requirements can be identified:

First, the leading models of information-seeking behavior are based almost entirely on research conducted in Western countries, and relatively little is known about their applicability in non-Western academic environments.

Second, most of the models were generated at a time when electronic methods of information-seeking were still relatively uncommon, and there is a requirement for up-to-date research which takes into account the impact of the major technological developments of recent years, such as the Internet.

Third, there is a need for more research which is focused on the information-seeking behaviors of scholars in particular disciplines, since a number of previous studies have provided evidence of significant differences between the information-seeking behavior of scholars in the sciences, humanities and social sciences.

Purpose of the study

This study addresses these information gaps by examining the information-seeking behavior of social science scholars in a Middle Eastern university. The specific objectives of the study were:

- To develop an integrated model of social science information-seeking behavior based on a synthesis of established models of information-seeking behavior and other key research findings;
- To test the ability of this model to describe present-day information-seeking among social science scholars in a Middle Eastern university, and
- To generate other information about the information-seeking experiences of social science scholars in the Middle East, especially any barriers faced and how these might be overcome, in order to help inform the future development of LIS in this region.

Development of integrated model

It was decided to synthesize the key features of existing models of information-seeking behavior along with relevant factors identified from other key research studies in order to develop an integrated model against which the information-seeking behavior of social science scholars in Oman could be examined. The model, shown in Fig. 1, was intended to include the main stages and dimensions which

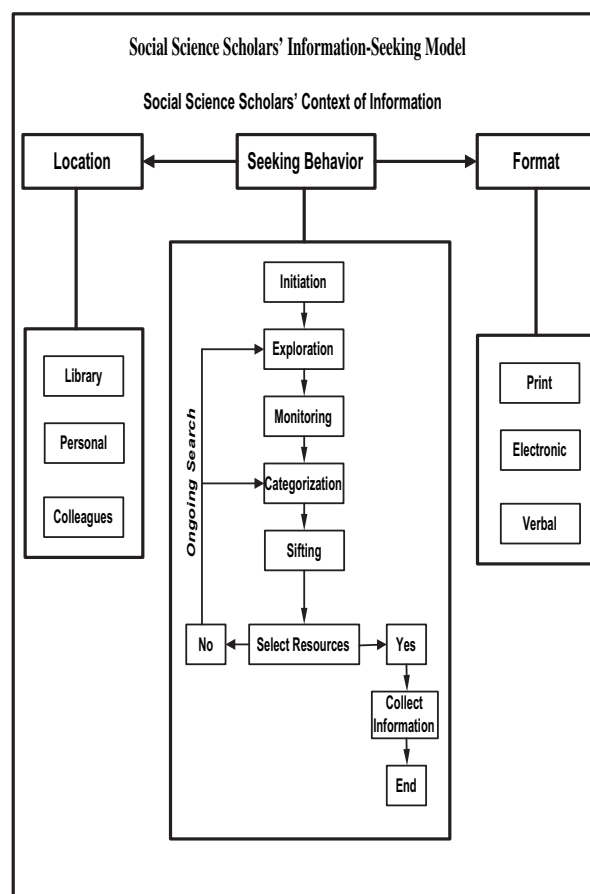


Figure 1 Proposed integrated model of information-seeking behavior.

have been identified in previous research as being important to an understanding of information-seeking behavior among social scientists, particularly in developing countries.

Wilson's 1996 model of information-seeking behavior forms the conceptual basis for the synthesized model. Wilson was one of the first theorists to highlight the need to study information-seeking behavior, rather than just information needs. He also called attention to the role of contextual factors in influencing information-seeking behavior, such as the information-seeker's own characteristics and role, as well as features of the external environment (Wilson, 1999). In following Wilson's 1996 conceptual framework, the model used in this study presupposes that information-seeking is carried out in order to satisfy a perceived need, but has to be adapted in response to contextual factors or barriers such as the nature of the information environment and the available sources.

The specific stages of information-seeking used in the synthesized model are drawn from both Ellis' 1989 information-seeking model and Kuhlthau's 1991 information search processes model. Of all the major models of information-seeking, that was developed by Ellis is believed to be most relevant to information-seeking among social scientists, since it was developed on the basis of research with this academic group. Ellis identified six generic stages

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