"IT'S NOT HOW I USE IT, BUT WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT IT": THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN THE ONLINE INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOR

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Introduction

The way people use information technologies to fulfil their needs and promote their interests has been a central subject of study in the social sciences (Case & Given, 2016). Although users' perceptions seem to be a crucial starting point, this factor is very often ignored. The current study employs a qualitative approach, using 44 semi-structured interviews with internet users, in order to compare the perceptions of adolescents, young adults and adults towards the information seeking process and their information seeking behavior. The theoretical contribution of this study is in re-conceptualizing the role of experience with information technologies as part of the existing models of information seeking behavior.

Literature Review

Information seeking behavior is a sub-field of information behavior that refers to the practice of obtaining information in different ways (Case & Given, 2016). When it comes to experience with information technology, most scholars refer to actual uses (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008), the confidence in technology use (Caruso & Kvavik, 2005), and skills or digital literacy (Eshet-Alkalai & Chajut, 2009). Recent studies questioned this definition, arguing that the experience with information technologies is not only about the actual uses, but also how users experience it (Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2015). Among the very few direct references to experience in the context of information seeking, Johnson and Meischke (1993) examined users experience and beliefs toward information itself rather than information technologies. In

this paper, we add users' perceptions toward technologies as well, and examine both their experiences and beliefs regarding information technologies.

Previous studies have stressed the importance of age, along other socio-demographic factors in explaining the information seeking behavior. Yet age in those studies served as a cohort to examine differences in users' cognitive development, digital literacy, or search skills (Bilal & Beheshti, 2014; Kuhlthau, 2004). Very little consideration has been given to the fact that the different experience that each age group has with information technologies can explain much of the information seeking behavior differences.

Method

In total 44 participants were recruited: 16 adolescents ranging from 13 to 18 (M=16.42), 14 youth ranging from 21 to 27 (M=23.4), and 14 adults ranging from 40 to 55 (M=47). The interviews investigated three broad themes: (1) Participants' experience with different technologies and their attitudes towards them; (2) participants' perceptions of information, information seeking, and knowledge; and (3) participants' experience of seeking and searching for information. The interviews included performing short tasks of seeking and searching information, during which participants described their thoughts and dilemmas as well as their emotions and feelings.

Results

What is Information?

Adolescents perceived information based on its instrumental value. Information was anything that could help them achieve something else (e.g., a goal or completing a task). They often mentioned performing an intentional task, or identifying a need (problem) and looking for information about it (solution).

Adults perceived information as something more general. Apart from goal-oriented tasks, they mentioned information as a form of entertainment. They also referred to situations where information was intentionally received. Young adults displayed mixed results regarding the concept of information.

Negative emotions

Adults mentioned positive emotions as a driving force to continue their information seeking process, and negative as a reason to terminate it. Adolescents, on the other hand, often reported that negative emotions rather encouraged their information seeking behavior. Young adults displayed again mixed views.

Passive and incidental information seeking behavior

When reviewing their information sources, adolescents mentioned those that keep on "popping up information" such as instant message services and social networks notifications. Adolescents frequently mentioned how important passive and incidental information seeking sources are in their lives, and how much they rely on them.

Similarly, young adults mentioned a variety of sources on which they feel dependent. Although, adults mentioned using passive and incidental information sources, they insisted that they are in control, and that they play an active role in timing the information seeking process.

Selection of information

Adults identified a specific set of tools for each task. Adults were often fixed on specific tools for each task. They were not interested in trying new information sources as long as they have positive experience with the existing ones.

In contrast, adolescents were almost unaware of how they choose their information sources, and had troubles describing exactly what they do. A common phrase which appeared in many interviews was "It is there and I just use it". Another reoccurring pattern among adolescents that significantly differed from that of the adults was their use of interchanging tools, and in most cases a combination of tools, for each goal. Young adults reported once again on mixed practices.

Information evaluation

In terms of criteria for information evaluation, adults adopted a narrow approach, emphasizing credibility and authoritativeness. Adults relied on traditional evaluation criteria based on their experience with other media.

While adolescents also mentioned credibility and authoritativeness, their perspective was broader and more sophisticated, demonstrating advanced technological experience. When heuristics on credibility or authoritativeness were not in place, they raised various other criteria, such as the identity of the source, the architecture of the website or mobile app, the perceived amount of information that it contains, the frequency of updates, and the location in search results. Young adults expressed similar perceptions to adolescents.

Discussion

Overall, the different patterns emerged from the interviews suggest that the information seeking behavior of adults is much more structured. In a way they are more conservatives in their information strategies. Adolescents reported on much more open and inclusive process. Their choice of available ad-hoc tools allowed them greater flexibility and exposure to unexpected information, but required a more advanced and faster heuristics such as search engine ranking to evaluate the quality of information.

To conclude, based on their shorter experience with information seeking processes adolescents presented a less matured understanding of information, and reported on less structured seeking behavior than adults. This practice was led by intense emotions, often depended on the algorithm, and required more sophisticated ad-hoc evaluation criteria. Adults, on the other hand, reported on a more structured and conservative strategies, which they believed protected them from wasting time, and kept them in much more control over the process. The open strategies of adolescents and the

narrow strategies of adults reflect their different psychological states and experience with technology, and can further affect the type of information that they are exposed to. Experience is therefore a very crucial factor in explaining the different perceptions of information technologies in general and of the information seeking behavior in particular.

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