

Everyday Life Music Information-Seeking Behaviour of Young Adults

Audrey Laplante

McGill University
Graduate School of Library and Information Studies
audrey.laplante@mcgill.ca

J. Stephen Downie

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Graduate School of Library and Information Science
jdownie@uiuc.edu

Abstract

This poster presents the preliminary results of an ongoing qualitative study on the everyday-life music information-seeking behaviour of young adults. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed following a grounded theory approach. The analysis showed a strong penchant for informal channels (e.g., friends, relative) and, conversely, a distrust of experts. It also emerged that music seeking was mostly motivated by curiosity rather than by actual information needs, which in turn explains why browsing is such a popular strategy.

Keywords: user studies, music information behaviour

1. Introduction

This poster presents the preliminary results of a grounded theory [1] qualitative study on the everyday-life music information-seeking behaviour of young adults (18-29 years old) of the French-speaking Montreal Metropolitan community. The aim of the study is to contribute to a better understanding of real-life music needs by questioning people about the strategies they currently employ to discover new music. Unlike Lee and Downie [2] who carried out a large scale survey that allowed them to identify *what* people do to find music, the objective of this study is to understand *how* and *why* they use various music seeking strategies. This study is in line with the HUMIRS project [3] whose aim is to provide a rich understanding of real-world music queries.

2. Data Collection and Method

The data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews. The interviewing approach was chosen because it allows us to capture things that cannot be observed directly such as the perceptions, feelings and motives participants have in relation to their music information behaviour. A guide, based on a revised version of Wilson's 1996 conceptual model of information behaviour [4], was developed to give structure of the interviews and allow comparison between participants. It is composed of

questions on music information behaviour in the context of everyday life, which means that work- or school-related experiences are not considered.

This study is designed to run from March 2006 to July 2006 with the expectation of 20 interviews being conducted. This is a reasonable sample size for a qualitative research which typically "produce[s] a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases" [5] than does quantitative research. The maximum variation sampling strategy as defined in [6] was used to optimize the diversity in the sample. The participants were recruited by distributing flyers in the hallway of the Grande Bibliothèque, a large public library located in downtown Montréal.

The present paper represents the preliminary findings derived from 242 minutes (38,150 words) of the interviews that have been transcribed and then analyzed with N6 by QSR, a software package designed specifically for the encoding and analyses of qualitative textual data.

3. Emergent Themes and Implications

The grounded theory [1] approach was adopted to analyze the data. According to this inductive approach, the researcher analyzes the data without any preconceptions, attempting to generate theory *from* the data. To achieve that, the constant comparative method [7] was used. Names have been altered to protect confidentiality.

3.1 Informal Channels/Distrust of Experts

In all but one case, participants reported that informal channels such as friends, colleagues or relatives were important sources of information. The main reason mentioned for this was two fold: 1) those people know their tastes so they can provide personalized and relevant recommendations; and, 2) as they know the tastes of those people, it is possible for them to tell if they can trust their recommendations or not. Hence, comparing a formal source to his friends, Antoine says: "[On *allmusic*,] they don't write for you, knowing your tastes. It is intended for everyone. Hence, it is a considerably less reliable source." Similar critiques were addressed to library or record store staff, although the possibility to see and discuss with the person seemed to help assess the reliability of this person as a source of music information. Eric mentioned that if a staff member "looks like" someone who could be a fan of the type of music he is looking for, he might ask for

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advice, whereas Juliette sometimes has a little chat with a staff member to “test” his/her level of knowledge and see if it is worth asking for advice.

This finding corresponds to what [2] found, which is that most people prefer to turn to friends or relatives than to formal sources when seeking everyday music information. However, all participants also acknowledged that their acquaintances are limited sources of information and that formal sources are sometimes indispensable, for instance when they are looking for music none of their friends/family is interested in or are more knowledgeable than they are about. In those cases, Internet is the most popular source, more specifically music-related websites such as *allmusic*, the music section of *MySpace.com*, artists and labels official websites.

Implications: Considering the popularity of persons with close ties as sources of music information and what participants had to say about the advantages and limits of such persons as sources, MIR systems that enhance social-network/peer-to-peer recommendation exchanges in conjunction with access to outside web resources are best positioned to find broad-based acceptance and usage.

3.2 Music Information Seeking as a Non-Goal Oriented Activity/Browsing over Searching

Interestingly, when asked to recall a recent situation in which they had searched for music with a specific goal in mind, most participants could not recall any and those who could said that the situation they had described was not typical for them. The reason they all gave was that searching for music is something they do regularly (on a daily or weekly basis), just because it is an activity they enjoy doing. For example, Juliette confessed that she feels “excited” when going to her favorite second-hand record store. Indeed, it is mostly the pleasure they take in the activity itself that motivates them to seek for music rather than an actual information need. This is similar to what Toms found in a study on electronic newspaper readers: “There was no ‘need,’ no anomalous state of knowledge and no knowledge gap evident. This was simply an information gathering experience without expectations or predicted outcome.” [8] As a logical consequence, all participants reported spending “a lot of” or “too much” time searching for music. Most admitted that they are sometimes so absorbed when they browse for music that they have problem stopping. François compared it to playing “video games” and Antoine confessed that he was spending so much time on that at some point that he was afraid he would never finish his master degree.

Related to that, browsing, which facilitates serendipitous discoveries and thus seems best suited for non-goal oriented information seeking, was a very common and well-liked strategy among the participants. It can take several forms depending on the medium used. In public libraries or record stores, it consists of browsing the stacks, sometimes systematically, sometimes in a chaotic

way, looking at CD covers –which appears to be an important factor in music selection–and hoping to discover a completely unknown artist that will become a favourite. The appeal of the unexpected discovery is so strong for Eric that from time to time he simply closes his eyes and picks any (or “almost any”) CD at hand.

On the Web, browsing is done through hyperlinks, which allow one to navigate from one artist/album to another in different ways. Hence the popularity of music sites, such as *allmusic*, who link each artist with similar artists, artists that have influenced this artist, artists with whom this artist has worked with, etc. Most participants reported that they had discovered one or several of their favourite artists this way.

Implications: The capacity of a MIR system to capture and maintain the attention of its users is an important factor in its success. Encouraging serendipitous discoveries, for instance by offering a *variety* of browsing facilities, could be one way to achieve this. Knowing that the mere pleasure of discovery or information gathering is a primary motivation for users, suggests that future research efforts might pay bigger dividends by putting less effort into building “perfect search” algorithms and more effort into developing “discovery” or “novelty-biased” MIR systems.

4. Acknowledgments

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