

Selecting Fiction – An Evaluation

Ludovica Price
School of Informatics
City University London

INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to make a thorough analysis and evaluation of the research paper, ‘Selecting fiction as a part of everyday life information seeking’ (Ooi and Liew, 2011). In doing so, it broadly uses the ‘three-pass’ approach proposed by Keshav (2007), in order to better appraise the material, its proposals, research methods, findings and conclusions. As part of the evaluation three other recent papers on a related subject will be referred to, by Begum (2011), Howard (2011), and Elswelier, Wilson and Kirkegaard Lunn (2011). The aim of this is to draw a comparison to other recent findings in the field, and thus to assess the validity of Ooi and Liew’s findings.

A full evaluation will be made of the study’s findings, its research methods, citations, appropriateness, and clarity. Its recommendations and usefulness to the field will also be discussed, as well as any bias and/or ethical issues.

This will be done using Keshav’s paper and recommendations as a guide, using particularly the ‘five C’s’ – Category, Context, Correctness, Contributions and Clarity.

DISCUSSION

Background

The paper ‘Selecting fiction as a part of everyday life information seeking’ was published in the *Journal of Documentation*, a respected peer-reviewed journal with a “long and distinguished history”, which focuses on the information sciences (Emerald, 2011). The *Journal of Documentation* publishes research reports which “have wide significance”, and this is an aspect which will be discussed when evaluating this paper. From the reputable publishing journal, it would be immediately apparent that the paper in question is a trustworthy and reliable source.

Its authors, Kamy Ooi and Chern Li Liew, are both affiliated with the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, through its School of Information Management and Commerce Library. Both

have relevant academic credentials in the field information science, and both have published previously¹.

Category

The paper clearly states in the abstract that it is a research paper. As such, it is careful to situate itself within previous relevant research, particularly the “body of research known as ‘everyday life information seeking’” or ELIS, which looks at information seeking from the point of view of meeting “the needs of daily life, in areas such as health, consumption and leisure” (Ooi and Liew, 2011, p.750).

Clarity

At all points Ooi and Liew’s paper is very succinct and well-written. The language is appropriate to a journal article and is easy to read. It states its aims clearly from the outset (p.749), and gives an unambiguous account of the processes undertaken throughout the research. Before discussing the research, the structure of paper is laid out point by point (p.751), and is adhered to throughout the article. From a cursory first pass of the material, it is clear at all points what the aims of the study are, how the research was conducted, and what the findings were. The authors succeeded well in putting their point across in a concise manner.

Context

The literature review

As stated, Ooi and Liew use Savolainen’s concept of ELIS (1995) to guide their research. Similar recent papers, particularly those of Howard (2011) and Elswiler, Wilson and Kirkegaard Lunn (2011) also place an emphasis on the theory of ELIS. However, Ooi and Liew particularly use Williamson’s paper, ‘Ecological Theory of Human Information Behaviour’, as a framework. This works on the premise that “at least in the field of everyday life information, information is often incidentally acquired rather than purposefully sought” (Williamson, 2005, p.128). This theory is particularly pertinent to Ooi and Liew’s study, not only in a conceptual sense, but also because of its geographical background set in Australasia (Williamson’s study taking place in Australia, and Ooi and Liew’s in Wellington, New Zealand). Ooi and Liew constantly refer back to Williamson’s work at all points in their paper, comparing their findings to Williamson’s own.

¹ Other publications by these authors can be found at Google Scholar <<http://scholar.google.co.uk>>.

The aims of the study are clearly stated – a) to discover what prompts readers to choose a particular piece of fiction from their local library and; b) what sources shaped their choice. The authors clearly link these aims to their choice of framework, and explain sufficiently why Williamson’s framework is appropriate to their aims.

In setting up their study, Ooi and Liew clearly identify gaps in previous research that they are interested in filling. They stress the preconception that information seeking is motivated by the need to fill an ‘information gap’, and that too marked a delineation has been drawn between information and entertainment. They quote Case (2007) as noting that the two are intrinsically linked and that much of what we experience in everyday life consists of a melding of the two. This is very much the case with fiction reading, which is a form of entertainment guided by both purposeful searching and serendipitous discovery. Elswailer et al (2011) agree, saying: “little is currently understood regarding if and how the characteristics of information behaviour change from work to non-work situations” (p.1).

Ooi and Liew note that while previous studies had looked into fiction readers’ actions *inside* a public library, many readers know what they want *before* they reach the library. Thus, their study takes them out of the public institution and into the everyday life of the fiction reader, and the ELIS theory is an appropriate framework to work with.

For their literature review, Ooi and Liew demonstrate a wide range of reading pertinent to the subject. They cite both quantitative and qualitative studies conducted in the field, finding that quantitative research had fallen short in explaining why fiction readers choose books by browsing (p.751), and that qualitative studies were far more useful in ascertaining the motivations behind readers’ actions. As such, Ooi and Liew delve deeper into the findings of qualitative studies, as these are more relevant to the aims of their own research. They are particularly interested in Ross’ 1985-2000 study, which discovered an ‘affective dimension’ (or the influence of a person’s mood) to book selection (p.752). Ooi and Liew are especially interested in exploring this concept in their study. However, they note that Ross neglected to examine in detail the role of sources (such as family and friends) in book selection, and the influence of the internet. This is a gap which Ooi and Liew state they wish to fill.

The research design

Ooi and Liew choose a qualitative approach to their research, citing its relevance to their aims, Williamson’s supporting framework, and the findings of previous such studies. This is in keeping with other similar, recent work by Begum (2011), Howard (2011) and Elswailer, Wilson and Kirkegarde Lunn (2011). Since Ooi and Liew’s study looks into the perspectives of adult fiction readers, they opt to

collect their data via semi-structured interviews. Again they cite previous studies in asserting that a rapport between interviewer and interviewee is essential, and thus justify their choice of conducting face-to-face interviews. Moreover, they seek an holistic understanding of participants' experiences, further justifying their choice.

Participants and participant recruitment

Ooi and Liew employed four different methods of participant recruitment: – 1) advertisements via the New Zealand Book Council noticeboard; 2) referrals from public libraries; 3) snowball sampling and; 4) word of mouth. The incentive of a free book token was used to pique potential subjects' interest. The authors are careful to state that they use Gorman and Clayton's (2005) recommendation not to recruit anyone they know personally. In the end, 12 participants were recruited; half of these were referrals by friends and colleagues, three referrals from public libraries, and the remainder by snowball sampling (via other recruits). No participants were recruited via their first method. Only book club members were chosen to participate, and Ooi and Liew are careful to justify their choice, as book club members are avid fiction readers and feel comfortable talking about books.

The authors are open and thorough in their details of the participants and the recruitment process. However, some issues with the study sample must be raised in order to better appreciate the study's findings and conclusions:

1) The study sample is very small - only 12 - but this number is suitable for the data collection method (i.e. semi-structured interviews). In contrast Howard's sample was 68 teenage fiction-readers; Williamson's own sample was 202 participants (2005, p.129), yet even then Williamson recommended more in-depth research.

2) The age range is broad (34-85 years), but people in their late teens, 20's and early 30's are ignored. This would inevitably create some bias, particularly as the internet's influence on fiction choice is to be studied, and most of the internet's users are in the age range of those outside of the study's sample (Wakefield, 2010).

3) Location is limited to a very small area (Wellington, New Zealand), so its wider application (i.e. to other communities) is debatable. Nevertheless the participants are consistent in terms of location, so as not to skew results.

4) There is not an even number of men and women, but perhaps that is indicative of book group membership? This is not clarified.

Data analysis

The paper grounds its analysis in Cresswell's 2003 qualitative content analysis. The analysis is described briefly, particularly focusing on its semi-emic approach, allowing their content categories to be shaped by the responses of their participants. This fits in with the authors' 'holistic' approach to their study.

Correctness

Ooi and Liew go back to their references in order to support and lend context to their findings. They find that their data supported Williamson's framework, since outside influences such as family, friends and the media directed fiction readers' book choices to a very large extent. However, they found that readers were selective in *who* or *what* they allowed to guide their choices – if the source was deemed trustworthy, readers were more likely to use that source. For example, if they knew a friend to have different tastes to their own, they would not listen to their recommendations. Likewise, readers would heed the recommendations of TV presenters they respected and trusted (p.762).

However, the study did not support Ross' 'affective dimension', as it found that mood impacted little on a readers book selection (p.757). This is in contrast to Elweiler et al's study, which bore out Ross' findings, which "recorded examples of participants wishing to enhance or change their mood" (2011, p.10).

The study also discovered that the internet generally did not play a large role in book selection, and the elderly participants were reluctant to use it at all. It also found that readers generally did not seek out librarian recommendations, and that most were unaware of the various initiatives their public libraries had implemented in order to recommend books (particularly those implemented via the internet) (p.763). It was generally found that readers' sources were people they trusted, authors and genres they liked, movies they enjoyed, and serendipitous discoveries. Elweiler et al also supported the importance of serendipity in their study on casual-leisure information behaviour (p.8).

Whilst all this supported previous findings in the ELIS model, there are some issues with the study that will be commented upon below.

The sample

As noted above, the sample was small – only 12 people. Oppenheim recommends 30-40, but acknowledges that cost and time factors can make this difficult (1992, p.68). Pickard sites Lincoln and Guba in stating that a dozen interviewees is probably enough for a snowball sample before the point of

informational redundancy is reached (2007, p.65-66). Ooi and Liew acknowledge this as affecting their ability to research the socio-economic factors of Williamson's model; however, they do not address whether the small sample size would affect other aspects of the model.

Gender was also an issue. Four males comprised the sample; the rest were females. In comparison, Elswiler et al's TV study comprised 19 males and 19 females (2011, p.8). It is possible that this discrepancy reflects book club membership. However, this is not stated.

Of greater significance is the age range of participants (24-85 years). This is a wide range; however, considering that the role of the internet in book selection that the authors intended to investigate, it is perhaps not wholly adequate. Whilst the proportion of 'silver surfers' is certainly increasing (at least in the UK), the digital divide between young and old is still vast (Wakefield, 2010). Therefore far more pertinent findings relating to the role of the internet would have been forthcoming, had younger participants been added to the sample.

Lastly, there is the possibility of bias due to the method of recruitment. The 'randomness' of the sample must be questioned as the large majority of subjects were recruited through referrals by friends, colleagues and other research participants.

Research design

In investigating the subjects' personal networks, Ooi and Liew defined their 'wider personal networks' as members of the participant's book clubs. Whilst the authors make a clear definition, and the reader is thus able to factor this information into the findings of the paper, it could be argued that this is a very narrow view of a person's 'wider personal network', which could include co-workers, drinking buddies or even people down the gym!

The influence of colleagues on one of the subjects was however touched upon (p.760). It seemed that this was a useful finding that was merely skimmed over. Most of the general population are not book club members and thus are surely more influenced by their everyday acquaintances in what they read. Nevertheless, the focus on book club members was acknowledged by the researchers at the start of the paper, and they do not deviate from this in their research.

Analysis

The method of data analysis is not described in great detail, though it does focus on the fact that coding categories were influenced by the interviews with participants. This is appropriate to the paper's aim of taking an holistic approach. In contrast, a similar study by Howard (2011), though on a larger

scale and with teenagers, describes its analysis (taking a grounded theory approach) in great detail (p.49).

References

Generally the references are suitable, although comparisons to Johnson's 2004 study of a Mongolian community's information seeking behaviour (p.759) were perhaps not quite appropriate to the paper's research. It is likely that there were other, more relevant references to be drawn upon, particularly those conducted in a similar setting, with similar participant backgrounds.

Ethics

The entire study was conducted in an ethical and appropriate manner. Participants were asked permission to be recorded and allowed to choose the venue of the study (p.755). However, when quoting the participants, participant names are used (in one case, a full name) – it is not clearly stated whether permission had been given beforehand.

Contributions

Ooi and Liew's paper goes some way in supporting the findings of other researchers in the field of ELIS, partly within Williamson's framework. However, its scale is small and thus it is uncertain how far one can go in applying their findings to the population at large. Particularly problematic is their restricting the research sample to participants over 34 years and book club members. While the first group is not a problem in itself, it does put their findings as far as internet sources in question. How applicable these findings can be to younger fiction readers is debatable. The restriction of the sample to book club members is more significant. Book club members comprise only a small part of the population in any case, and therefore selecting only twelve can hardly be representative of the book club membership at large, let alone the community or population at large. The study *does* show how important book clubs are in acting as a source of book selection to its members, but this is perhaps self-evident and not particularly relevant to the wider population.

However, the paper is useful as a springboard to further study, and the authors acknowledge this. It would seem that the role of the internet and modern technologies such as podcasts are something that should be studied further. Elweiler et al support this, recommending research into the influence mobile technologies. Considering how many of Ooi and Liew's participants were 'too busy to browse', this would be a pertinent area of further study.

Also, their findings of public libraries' inadequacies in providing a source of book selection to the public is something which must be rectified. Under-use of library advisory tools was an area Ooi and Liew put forward to be addressed, and is a useful contribution to the library and information science community. In this they are supported by Begum's critical review of the literature, which urges librarians to rethink "traditional formats of advisory" (p. 745).

CONCLUSION

Overall, Ooi and Liew's paper is well-written, well-researched and clear. Good, relevant background reading was included, and a relevant framework applied. The work was well-structured and each section was clearly explained. For the most part, the authors sought to acknowledge the shortcomings of their research, such as the small sample size. At all points the authors follow the guidelines they had set in order to fulfil their aims.

While the study was small, it was relevant to the local community. Whether it can be applied to a wider scale is debatable, but the findings were particularly pertinent to the Wellington public libraries, and useful recommendations were made on that basis. According to the findings, good suggestions were made for further study in the field. It would be interesting to see what the results would be of a similar, though larger-scale, study.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Begum, S., 2011. Readers' advisory and underestimated roles of escapist reading. *Library Review* [e-journal] 60 (9), pp.738-747. Available through: Emerald [Accessed 3 January 2012].
- Elsweiler, D., Wilson, M. L., and Kirkegaard Lunn, B., 2011. Understanding Casual-leisure Information Behaviour. In: Spink, A., and Heinström, J., eds., 2011. *New Directions in Information Behaviour (Library and Information Science, Volume 1)* [online] Available at: <http://www.cs.swan.ac.uk/~csmx/pubs/spinkCIBchp_CR.pdf> [Accessed 3 January 2012].
- Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011. *Journal of Documentation*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/products/journals/journals.htm?id=jd>> [Accessed 3 January 2012].
- Howard, V., 2011. The importance of pleasure reading in the lives of young teens: Self-identification, self-construction and self-awareness. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* [e-

- journal] 43 (1), pp. 46-55. Available through: Sage Publications Online [Accessed 3 January 2012].
- Kane, E., and O'Reilly-De Brun, M., 2001. *Doing Your Own Research*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers.
- Keshav, S., 2007. How to read a paper. *Computer Communication Review* [online] 37 (3), pp.83-84. Available at: <<http://ccr.sigcomm.org/online/files/p83-keshavA.pdf>> [Accessed 4 December 2011].
- Ooi, K, and Liew, C. L., 2011. Selecting fiction as a part of everyday life information seeking. *Journal of Documentation* [e-journal] 67 (5), pp.748-772. Available through: Emerald [Accessed 3 January 2012].
- Oppenheim, A. N., 1992. *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*. 2nd ed. London: Pinter-Cassell.
- Pickard, A. J., 2007. *Research methods in information*. London: Facet Publishing.
- Wakefield, J., 2010. Old meets new in digital divide. *BBC News Technology* [online] (Last updated 04:43 on 15th October 2010). Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-11501622>> [Accessed 5 January 2012].
- Williamson, K., 2005. Ecological Theory of Human Information Behaviour. In: Fisher, E., Erdelez, S., and McKechnie, L., eds. 2005. *Theories of Information Behavior*. Medford, New Jersey: Information Today, Inc.