

Artists' information seeking behaviour

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Abstract:

This paper is based on a pilot study of local artists based at the Artist Open House Fremantle (AOHF), Western Australia. The study was conducted to test the interview questions that were developed for a Masters research degree, which is investigating the information seeking behaviour of higher degree by research students in art and design courses in Perth, Western Australia.

A work of art is a reflection of the artist who creates it. Artistic skills and talent form fundamental components of the unique research perspective possessed by the artists and are important considerations to be included when attempts are made to understand artists' information seeking behaviour. Studies on artists' information needs are relatively limited, but what distinguishes this group of information users from other professions is the nature of resources and information services required by this community.

This paper focuses how the artists meet their information needs for art and design resources; incorporating the findings from the pilot interview sessions. It also discusses the existing library and information science research literature that has explored creative artists' information needs, and how this group of information users gather information to be utilised in the production of their creative works.

Keywords:

Information behaviour, information seeking behaviour, information need, art as a practice, visual artist

Introduction

Information behaviour is a huge field which includes research about many different groups and environments. Information behaviour is a broad term that encompasses information needs, information use, and information seeking behaviour. Studies on artists' information needs are relatively limited, but what distinguishes this group of information users from others is the nature of resources and information services they require. As Gluibizzi (2010, p. 135) pointed out, "these resources and the information is almost entirely visual in the artist's mind".

This paper is based on the findings of a pilot study involving interviews with four artists who are based in Perth, Western Australia. Two of the participants are involved in the Artist Open House Fremantle (AOHF) initiative and two are artists working towards a higher degree by research. All four artists have had past experience in exhibiting their artwork at local and/or interstate art exhibitions. The pilot study was conducted to test interview questions that have been developed for a Master's research degree. The broader study is focussing on the information seeking behaviour of higher degree by research students in art and design courses from three universities in Perth. The study is informed by Cobbledick's (1996) framework for the information-seeking behaviour of artists.

The data gathered for this pilot study was through semi-structured interviews with the four artists. The interview sessions were recorded, transcribed and analysed, with the main findings summarised in this paper. As the study is still in its infancy stage, the results presented here highlight only preliminary findings and focus on how these four participants meet their information needs for art and design resources.

Background to the study

AOHF Inc. is a not-for-profit organisation that was established to encourage engagement between the community and local artists. Annual events include the showcasing of artists work, exhibited either inside the artists' private homes or studios located in the port city of Fremantle, Western Australia. The aim of this initiative is to facilitate greater visibility for artists by involving the public through various community activities such as artist talks, workshops, and special interest group meetings. These events help the artists to find an audience for their art.

According to Throsby and Petetskaya (2017), artists enable us to experience our stories in a different perspective. They play an invaluable role in a nation's culture, identity, and the workforce. The evidence of information needs by visual artists is expressed in their creative work that provides the rich means for academicians, curators, librarians and the public to digest. This group of information users are relatively small in number, compared to the world of scientists for example, but they are equally important in terms of their contribution to a society's cultural and creative identity.

This study explored the artists' information seeking behaviour when undertaking an art and design creative process. Previous studies have raised important questions about the unique information seeking behaviours of visual artists, but to date the research is limited. The qualitative data gathered in this pilot study seeks to contribute in a small way to this research about information needs for technical, visual, inspirational and current awareness development.

Overview of literature

Information behaviour predominantly revolves around how human beings seek, manage, and use information in daily life. In reviewing the past literature on information seeking behaviour, it is clear that this is a vast and complex subject area. For this paper, information is defined as all the “facts, conclusions, ideas and creative works of the human intellect and imagination that have been communicated, formally or informally, in any form” (Reitz, 2004, p. 355). According to Wilson (2000), regardless of the terminology used, the underlying data may or may not be information; and for information to be meaningful and useful, it must be available at the time of need for the user to understand the information.

The literature on information seeking behaviour by creative disciplines, such as performing artists, shows that research on practicing theatre artists provides a framework for understanding both theatre artists' information seeking behaviour and the role of information seeking and gathering in the creative process (Medaille, 2010). For information seeking behaviour and creativity in the music discipline, Lee and Downie (2004) surveyed a range of users about their real-life music information needs, uses and seeking behaviours. Lavranos, et al. (2015) used Wilson's (1999) model of information behaviour and Webster's (2002) music creative thinking model to investigate the connection between musicians' information seeking behaviour and the creative process in music.

In relation to visual artists' information seeking, a number of studies have explored the role of libraries. For example, Pacey's (1982) research was based on art college students' use of libraries and their materials. The study identified student frequently visits the library to browse the print resources for inspiration. Frank (1999) investigated student artists' use of the library to support their artwork, finding that students valued their browsing experiences as a form of exploring new ideas. In another study by Lo and Chu (2015), a large proportion of users preferred going to libraries to browse monograph resources and used the Internet for a range of social media platform for inspiration and career advice.

Overview of methods

The project used semi-structured interviews to gather data from four visual artists. This qualitative approach is based on Cobbedick's (1996, p. 348) framework for the information-seeking behaviour of artists, in which she examined the information needs and behaviours of working artists through a “systematic structure” of questioning, which can be adapted to a semi-structured interview process.

Cobbedick's (1996, p. 348) framework of information seeking behaviour of artists specifies a number of information needs and sources relating to their behavior. They are:

- (1) the processes that place the finished work of art in a community (for example, shows, commissions, and sales), and the creation of the work of art itself, which was subdivided as follows: (2) technical information needs, (3) visual information needs, and (4) inspirational information needs. ... (5) libraries, (6) books, (7) technology, and (8) keeping up with contemporary developments in the visual arts.

To recruit participants for the pilot study, an information pack was e-mailed out by the AOHF Coordinator to all the artists listed on their e-mail list. Each participant was given an information pack comprising the project information sheet, interview questions, participant's consent form and a formal introduction to the study. Prospective participants for the study were given time to read and consider all the information about the study. They were

encouraged to contact the researcher for more information or to book a time for the interview if they were willing to participate in the study. Once agreed by the participant, an interview session was booked and confirmed. At the end of the recruitment period, a total of four artists responded to the request, however, two later declined to participate in the interview session due to time constraints. An additional recruitment for participants to the pilot study was undertaken through Curtin University's Department of Art, which resulted in another two artists agreeing to participate. Two male and two female artists participated in the study, ranging in ages from their early 30s to early 60s. The participants were a sculptor, a painter, a printmaker and a graphic illustrator. All have completed a formal academic qualification in art-related studies and had participated in art exhibitions to showcase their artwork. The interview sessions were carried out either at the artists' studio or in the library. On the day of the interview, the researcher began the session with a background to the study and what the study aimed to achieve. The interviews were carried out in a casual conversational manner, allowing the participants to speak in their own words. The audio recordings of the interview sessions were transcribed by the researcher. Using Cobbledick's framework, the interview transcripts were analysed to determine how these four artists used and/or sought information for their creative practice.

Summary of findings

While the intended number of participants for this pilot study is relatively small, each participant's input was important to the study. They all shared extensive detail about their practice and artistic backgrounds during the interviews. The data analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in findings that are clustered together in the themes: sources of visual and inspirational information; sources of technical information; current development; libraries; technology; books; and shows, commissions and sales.

Sources of visual and inspirational information

The participants were firstly asked questions about what inspires their creative practice and where they go to find visual sources of information. Based on the interview data, it seemed that the sources of inspirational information vary among the participants.

Mason and Robinson (2011) conclude that research conducted with creative people have found inspiration to be one of the strong reasons why they seek information. Among the sources of inspirational information are personal experiences, visiting art exhibitions, books, and through learning about the property or medium in a work of art. Further, Greer (2015) pointed out that practicing artists need both information and inspiration to create meaningful artwork. Given these findings, it is not surprising that three out of the four artists interviewed said they are constantly looking for new sources of information in order to be inspired. This is exemplified in the case of the sculptor, who, when working with a particular material is motivated to read more about that material, which then inspires further creative work. In this regard, the sculptor commented: "I don't have one particular methodology for getting information, a lot of time it has to do with the source of material that excites... information probably comes through by the things that you look up to after, and generally that is the starting point for me".

Most of the artists interviewed also find inspiration through community events such as attending art exhibitions, artists' talks, or local arts and community fairs. For example, the printmaker said: "I find inspirations by just going to the exhibitions to see other's artworks and I enjoy looking at the printed catalogues. For example, art catalogues and exhibitions catalogues, personally these are a good source of information for me". Others connected with

a wide range of sources for inspiration. The illustrator is inspired by reading artists' biographies and scholarly journal articles from the library; saying: "I use the library services and I read books. I use the online library to read the academic papers. I get motivated... what others are doing and compare it against my own work."

Sources of technical information that matter to artists

The artists were asked about their sources of technical information in the process of creating their artwork. This can include information about the media, standard practices and methods used by the artists. Only two artists discussed resources that they used to gain technical knowledge. In the case of the printmaker, the artist referred to the printing machine manuals that are important to ensure the proper operation of the machine and to maintain the quality of the printed artwork. As digital print technology advances, lithography printing is becoming a unique skillset for this artist, demanding not just the creative aspect of the production but also the technical understanding of the machine processes. As such, keeping up-to-date with the technical aspects of this genre is crucial to the printmaker.

The sculptor had used books to gain technical information from a personal library. This artist noted that it is easier to research through printed books than reading it in electronic form. The certainty of having information easily at hand is preferred to online sources that can be removed or change location depending upon website hosts. For example, when learning how to make a gesso, (a calcium based glue and heat elements that work together to act as agent for preparing surfaces for painting or to shape a sculpture) the sculptor referred to information from a book in his personal collection. While print materials are important source of information, all the artists interviewed mentioned that a Google search is a good source for technical information.

On Current Developments

The artists often keep up-to-date with current developments and indicated that the Internet is a good source to maintain awareness of their particular creative practice. For example, the sculptor occasionally uses the Internet to check on the new developments internationally, commenting: "My work is influenced by the European artists, and I would Google them occasionally. I would look up online to see what the latest web feeds on the artists and I would read their information on Wikipedia, or view their images on Google". This artist also subscribes to specialised printed art magazines to follow current developments in the art world.

According to the printmaker, Facebook is an important source for the latest developments in lithography printing. For this artist, the regular updates by various organisations in the print making industries on Facebook provides information about new techniques, research and development works of other artists. Attending international conferences is another way that the printmaker keeps up-to-date with current developments in the industry. Social media platforms are also a means for gaining current information and trends in the art world for the painter. Another source of information of this kind is networking with others in the field.

On Libraries

Library facilities featured in the artists' information seeking behaviour. While all the interviewees have access to a public library and the state library collections, the two artists currently pursuing higher degree studies also have further access to academic library

resources. All described their experience of using libraries in terms of the importance of librarians and the resources that are made available. A number of them reported good and memorable experiences with the library services they had utilised. The sculptor, for example commented:

“I remembered that the art school I have attended has a very good library. I get to borrow books from the library, so I was always taking a lot of art books from that library. As a younger artist... I used to spend a lot of time at the State Library in Perth looking through art books and we used to hide some of the favourite books behind other books..., so that they will be there the next night, and we could go back to them”.

The painter also visited the library, but mainly to use the Internet, or to print something out. Their approach to library collections had changed over time, illustrated in: “I just think obviously books and digital books are so inexpensive now, and if I am really interested in something I will just buy and get it sent to me digitally.”

Both the sculptor and illustrator commented on their approach to using libraries, such as life-long practices of searching using key phrases, physically finding the books from the bookshelves, and doing checkouts at the loan desks. The printmaker described browsing for both online and print resources via the library, as: “I also download a lot of the peer reviewed articles online. For me I do use both printed and online library resources, both are equally important to me”.

On Technology

Most of the artists interviewed expressed strong feelings about adopting technology as a way forward to accessing online information, while valuing printed resources. While technology now provides extensive access to information, a number of the artists interviewed still preferred reading from a print copy, noting the challenge of reading the vast amount of information available online.

The four artists all have an individual website to promote their creative works. Personal websites were seen as important tools for the public to access and read more about the artist, their practices, obtaining their contact information and for the public to find catalogues of their work. For example, the painter highlighted: “Instagram is where people just stumble across me..., I am on Instagram all the time, it is just an incredible platform, and people can message me instantly for my artwork.” The sculptor, on the other hand, does not use social media platforms for this purpose and discussed his previous reluctance in utilising available technology for his work:

“I was just reading in the paper about how the big media company can obtain so much information on you, and I am a little uncomfortable with that. I think my generation is very private and come from that generation of people ... It was not until 2015 that I ... sort of really became part of this information technology era. Since 2015, I think I am bit like everybody else I use Google search.”

Google searching was also mentioned by the printmaker, who revealed:

“I use Google Scholar and Google search for almost anything. With the technology, I get to watch online lectures, participate in the YouTube discussion, and documentaries. I am on Instagram; it is really good social media platform for inspiration. A good way

of see artists and their works. But when it comes to technical or experimental information, I prefer to look it up in the libraries.”

On Books

As noted by Carr-Harris et al. (2011), the book is still an important resource for artists for the quality of the print materials and the in-depth information in those sources. It is clear from the discussion above, that all the interviewees recognised the importance of printed books. For the painter, an avid reader, the pleasure of holding a book is still something they enjoy. For the sculptor, most information came from books and magazines: “I think I still have that books influence in me and I still rely on certain magazines like Elle Decor from Italy, which is always been a fascination for me so I take certain cues for my work form”. For the printmaker, most of the technical references and reading on lithography are only in the form of hard bounded copies. And for idea generation and artwork development, the printmaker tends to look for graphical materials in the library or on Instagram. The illustrator reads a lot of printed books, but tries to avoid printing when browsing online materials. This artist noted: “At times spending too long on the monitor screen can be straining to the eyes. I do much prefer to read on paper, and underline them, but I kind of resist it for environmental reasons”.

On Shows, Commissions and Sales Information

Finally, as a component of Cobbledick’s framework, the artists were asked if they had any experience in displaying their artworks in an art gallery or if they have participated in art competitions. The question aimed to gather data about sources of information that the artists would look for when they choose to exhibit their artworks in a public place. This information is important to the artists as the process is the final step whereby artists reveal their artwork to the public audience. All the artists had been involved in exhibitions in public galleries, with two of the artists continuing to exhibit their artworks on a regular basis, with the sculptor commenting: “the purpose of my practice is to show my work publicly”. This artist talked about the information that was sought when planning an exhibition, such as the gallery layout, lighting, wall colour, and the management of exhibitions. These is essential information for the artists and is illustrated by the graphic illustrator who spoke about the lessons learned when he first started exhibiting:

“So, I am new to exhibiting my artwork, there is so much to find out with having your artwork on public display. So my lesson for the next is one should be more organised and seek further information about the location, the management of the public exhibition, and work closely with the curator for more information on the exhibition.”

This indicated that the experience of exhibiting their work in a public space allows the artists to learn more about what information they need to find out and where they can seek the information required when they do exhibit their work.

Conclusion

While the findings from the pilot study are preliminary at this stage, the results highlighted some trends and common information seeking behaviour among the artists, regardless of their age, gender, and academic background. This is evident in the use of technology in their information seeking behaviour as they search for information. The way most of these artists seek information and knowledge is through a Google search, although some use social media platforms to maintain awareness of current developments in their creative practice. There appears to be recognition of the importance and a fondness for

libraries, but this is tempered by the vast amount of information available online. At the same time, some sources of printed information appear to remain as key resources, such as the printmaker's need for technical information.

These preliminary findings help direct the researcher to focus on some aspects of the artists' information seeking behaviour that can be explored in more detail and depth in the broader Master's research project. The findings may also provide some ideas to other researchers who are interested in exploring the topic on information seeking behaviour of creative artists.

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