



***Documentary Research Theories: An Analytical Approach to Explaining
Information-Seeking Behavior***

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Abstract:

This article highlights the importance of documentary research as a scientific method that supports knowledge construction and the understanding of information behavior. Using an analytical-inductive approach, the study compares major theoretical models, including those of Wilson, Kuhlthau, and Ellis, alongside Dervin's Sense-Making and Savolainen's ELIS.

The findings show that documentary research generates knowledge through interpretive engagement with documents rather than mere data collection. They also demonstrate that emotional and social factors significantly shape researchers' information-seeking behavior, affirming that information experience is a holistic human process extending beyond the cognitive domain. The study therefore recommends incorporating these non-cognitive dimensions into methodological training.

Keywords:*Documentary research; information-seeking behavior; knowledge construction ; models and theories; analytical–inductive method.*

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Documentary research represents one of the fundamental pillars in the field of library and information science. It is not limited to being a tool for collecting and organizing sources but extends further to serve as a conceptual framework that aids in understanding individuals' information behavior and their interaction with different information systems. With the evolution of both academic and practical environments, a variety of scientific theories have emerged to explain this behavior, each offering a unique perspective on the factors influencing the search process-whether social, cognitive, psychological, or technological.

The significance of these theories goes beyond enriching academic knowledge; They also provide practical insights for information and documentation institutions. They contribute to improving strategies for access and availability, reducing gaps among diverse user groups, and developing search systems that better respond to users' needs. From this perspective, this article aims to present an analytical approach to the major theories explaining documentary research and information-seeking behaviors, by reviewing their theoretical foundations and highlighting their role in building a deeper understanding of information behavior in contemporary contexts.

Problem Statement

Understanding individuals' information behavior in various research environments is considered one of the core concerns in the field of library and information science, as it is directly related to the ability of institutions to meet knowledge needs and facilitate access to information. Over the decades, several scientific theories have been developed to explain this behavior by examining the social, cognitive, psychological, and technological factors that influence the information-seeking process. The central problem that arises, however, is the extent to which these theories collectively provide a comprehensive and integrated explanation of information behavior, and how they can be employed to improve research practices and enhance services within information and documentation institutions. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following main research question: "How effectively do theories of documentary research and information-seeking behavior contribute to a deeper understanding of individuals' information practices, and what constraints limit their application in advancing institutional practices

In light of the adopted problem statement, the following research questions are proposed:

What theoretical frameworks underpin the major theories explaining information-seeking behavior and documentary research?

How do these theories interpret the social, cognitive, and psychological factors that influence the process of information seeking?

What are the main models and stages defined by these theories for understanding information-seeking behaviors?

What points of convergence or divergence can be identified among these theories in approaching information behavior?

How can the outcomes of these theories be applied to develop institutional strategies for improving access to knowledge and reducing information gaps ?

Importance of the study

Addressing the subject of theories explaining documentary research and information-seeking behavior holds great importance, as it touches upon the very essence of research and scholarly practice in contemporary knowledge environments. Understanding individuals' information behavior and the underlying mechanisms provides clearer theoretical frameworks, enabling researchers to develop rigorous studies that consolidate the foundations of library and information science and expand its intellectual horizons. Moreover, revisiting these theories reveals both their limitations and potential, opening the way for rethinking concepts in line with the rapid transformations of society and information technologies.

On the practical level, tackling this topic allows information and documentation institutions to draw upon theoretical insights in order to design more effective policies and services for information provision. It contributes to bridging knowledge gaps across different social groups, supports the development of search systems that meet users' expectations, and provides a scientific foundation for

adopting innovative solutions that enhance the quality of education, research, and decision-making. Thus, engaging with this subject represents a valuable contribution that connects theoretical understanding with practical applications and supports research practices in the context of ongoing digital and knowledge transformations.

Research Objectives

To analyze the theoretical contributions of the main models and theories explaining information-seeking behavior, in order to understand how individuals interact with knowledge sources in both traditional and digital environments.

To identify the areas of convergence and divergence among the theories interpreting documentary research and information-seeking behavior, focusing on their epistemological foundations and practical applications within the field of Library and Information Science.

To assess the applicability of these theories in the contemporary digital context, particularly in light of technological transformations and artificial intelligence, with the aim of proposing new research directions that enhance information-seeking strategies within documentary and information institutions.

Research methodology

This study adopted the analytical-inductive method as the most appropriate methodological framework for understanding the nature of documentary research and its relationship to information-seeking behavior. The analysis relied on a comparative and inferential approach aimed. The study also focused on extracting the key dimensions of the documentary research process, including its stages, motivations, and influencing contexts, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of its role in knowledge construction.

1.Documentary research and the interpretive theories of information-seeking behavior

1.1. The Concept of Documentary Research

Guba and Lincoln (Bowen, 2009: 27–40) define it as “the use of written materials that were not prepared specifically in response to a researcher’s request,” distinguishing documentary research from direct data collection methods such as interviews or questionnaires.

(Silverman, 2011) describes documentary research as “a qualitative approach aimed at interpreting the meanings embedded in both formal and informal texts,” thereby extending the method beyond descriptive analysis to interpretive and epistemological dimensions.

In a similar vein, (Krippendorff, 2022) within the context of content analysis, asserts that documents represent “a cultural and cognitive repository that allows the tracing of communication patterns and meanings over time.”

(Mogalakwe, 2006:221-230) defines it as “a method of data collection based on the analysis of public and private records and archives in order to build hypotheses and understand social phenomena without direct involvement.” (Bowen, 2009: 27–40) explains that documentary research is “a systematic process of collecting, reviewing, and interpreting documents to extract qualitative or quantitative data,” stressing that documents can serve as alternative or complementary data sources to field research.

According to Caulley (1981), it is “a method that uses written texts and sources as the primary material for scientific analysis in the social and human sciences,” while Ahmed (2010) views it as “an effective tool for documenting and analyzing previous knowledge to formulate new insights or test existing hypotheses.”

These definitions reveal the evolution of documentary research from being a mere technique for information gathering to becoming an analytical and interpretive methodology that treats the document as a cognitive and contextual entity. While Scott emphasized the social dimension of the document, Guba and Lincoln highlighted its temporal neutrality, whereas Silverman and Bowen stressed the methodological rigor of critical document analysis. Krippendorff and Mogalakwe, on the other hand, expanded the perspective to link the document with cultural, historical, and interpretive analysis. From this perspective, documentary research becomes a tool for producing knowledge rather than simply

consuming it, enabling an understanding of the dynamics of thought and society through the analysis of documents produced by institutions and individuals.

1.2. The Importance of Documentary Research

Documentary research represents one of the most profound and comprehensive methods for studying social and cognitive phenomena. It is based on the analysis of documents as social and cultural products that reflect patterns of thought, institutional practices, and dominant discourses within a given society. Documents are not merely containers of information but living texts that embody structures of power and meaning shaped by historical and social contexts. From this perspective, documentary research serves as a mechanism for reconstruction knowledge, enabling critical and interpretive readings of written sources. As (Scott, 1990) notes, documents provide researchers with “mediate access to the social world of their creators,” granting them unique empirical value for understanding realities that cannot be directly observed.

The importance of documentary research extends beyond description to become an effective tool for analyzing and verifying social and institutional phenomena, especially in the context of digital transformation. This method allows researchers to examine historical, official, and unofficial data in a manner that enhances objectivity and methodological rigor in academic inquiry. (Mogalakwe, 2006:221-230) emphasizes that documentary research offers a credible and scientific means of conducting research “even with old data,” provided that such data are analyzed through critical and systematic frameworks. Consequently, documentary research is gaining increasing significance in fields such as library and information science, archival studies, and the social sciences, as it bridges the gap between textual analysis and knowledge production, ensuring accuracy, transparency, and interpretive depth.

1.3. The difference between the model and the theory in information-seeking behavior

Both the model and the theory are fundamental analytical tools for understanding the phenomenon of information-seeking behavior; However, each serves a distinct epistemological function. A model is a simplified and abstract representation of a complex reality that aims to clarify the stages, steps, or relationships among variables within the information-seeking process. It is generally used to describe how the phenomenon occurs or how it is organized in practice (Wilson, 1999: 249-272) ; (Manish, 2016). Thus, it serves as an applied framework that outlines the procedural pathway of the search process, such as Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process model (Kuhlthau, 1991: 361-371) or Eisenberg and Berkowitz’s Big6 model (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 1992).

In contrast, a theory is a system of interrelated concepts and hypotheses that explains the causes of a phenomenon and guides inquiry into its psychological, social, and cognitive dimensions (Dervin, 1983; Savolainen, 1995). It not only describes what happens but also explains why and how different factors interact to shape information behavior. Prominent examples include Dervin’s Sense-Making Theory, which explains how individuals construct meaning during the information-seeking process, and Savolainen’s Everyday Life Information-Seeking (ELIS) theory, which connects information behavior to an individual’s social and cultural context.

Accordingly, a model is descriptive and procedural in nature, while a theory is interpretive and explanatory. Each complements the other: the model demonstrates how information-seeking occurs, while the theory explains why it occurs in that manner. This complementarity enables researchers to construct deeper analytical frameworks for understanding information behavior and interpreting the processes of knowledge construction within documentary environments.

Table (1): Comparative Table between Models and Theories in Information-Seeking Behavior

Comparison Aspect	Model	Theory
Definition	A simplified and abstract representation of a real phenomenon or process designed to describe or illustrate its stages and interrelationships.	A conceptual and explanatory system aimed at understanding a phenomenon in terms of its causes, mechanisms, and the causal relationships among its components.
Main Function	To describe and simplify the phenomenon by presenting it as an organized set of steps or stages.	To explain the phenomenon and uncover the principles or laws that govern it.
Primary Objective	Answers the question: “ <i>How</i> does information-seeking behavior occur?”	Answers the question: “ <i>Why</i> does information-seeking behavior occur in this way?”
Methodological Orientation	Inductive, descriptive, or procedural-based on observed patterns and empirical modeling.	Deductive or interpretive—based on constructing hypotheses, theoretical concepts, and causal reasoning.
Epistemological Nature	Process-oriented, focusing on the practical and operational stages.	Interpretive-oriented, focusing on psychological, social, and cognitive factors.
Examples in Information-Seeking Research	Wilson’s Model (Wilson, 1999:249-272), Kuhlthau’s Model (Kuhlthau, 1991: 361-371), Big6 Model (Eisenberg, Johnson, & Berkowitz , 2010).	Dervin’s Sense-Making Theory (Dervin, 1983:155-182), Savolainen’s Everyday Life Information-Seeking Theory (Savolainen, 1995: 259-294), Wilson’s Theory of Information Behavior (Wilson, 1999)
Fields of Application	Design of information systems, user training, and improvement of library search processes.	Analysis of motivations, interpretation of individual differences, and understanding of social and cultural contexts in information use.
Strength	Provides a practical and adaptable framework that can be applied in diverse contexts.	Offers deep interpretive insight into the cognitive and social dimensions of information behavior.
Limitation	Sometimes lacks interpretive or explanatory depth.	Can be challenging to operationalize or represent through concrete procedural steps.
Relationship Between Them	The model describes <i>how</i> the phenomenon occurs.	The theory explains <i>why</i> it occurs. Both are complementary and essential for developing a holistic understanding of information behavior.

Source: The comparative table was developed by the researchers based on an analytical synthesis of the works of Wilson (1981, 1999), Ellis (1989), Kuhlthau (1991), Dervin (1983), Savolainen (1995), and Eisenberg & Berkowitz (1992)

In summary, a model serves as a descriptive and organizational tool, whereas a theory functions as an interpretive and explanatory framework. The model focuses on the procedural pathway of information-seeking behavior, illustrating the sequential stages or patterns users follow. The theory emphasizes the motivational, cognitive, and social underpinnings that explain why such behaviors occur.

Integrating both perspectives produces a comprehensive epistemological and procedural framework, enabling researchers to interpret documentary research as a constructive process aimed at generating, reconstructing, and contextualizing knowledge.

1.4. The Interpretive Role of Theories in Understanding Documentary Research

Interpretive theories play a central role in documentary research as they enable the researcher to move beyond description toward a deeper understanding of the phenomena reflected in documents. A document is not a neutral artifact but a social and cognitive construct embedded with meanings and implications shaped by its historical and cultural context. Through the application of interpretive frameworks, researchers can analyze the discourses, symbols, and representations contained within documents, thereby uncovering how social knowledge is constructed through them. As (Scott, 1990) asserts, documents should not be treated as ready-made facts but rather as “conditioned evidence that must be subjected to critical and interpretive examination” to grasp their true meaning and social function.

Interpretive theories-such as Dervin’s Sense-Making Theory (1983) documentary guide researchers in understanding how individuals construct meaning while engaging with documents and informational sources. Documentary research is not limited to the retrieval of information; It involves a constructive cognitive process through which researchers reinterpret and reconstruct meaning within their conceptual frameworks. Thus, interpretive and constructivist theories enrich documentary research by linking research activity to epistemic awareness and by bridging textual analysis with reconstruction meaning. In this sense, theory becomes an essential tool for understanding the dynamic cognitive process underlying every document and for analyzing it within an integrated intellectual framework. Within the constructivist paradigm, interpretive theories provide a crucial foundation for understanding how knowledge is constructed through the analysis of documents. Documentary research, when viewed through an interpretive lens, becomes a dynamic process of meaning-making in which the researcher interacts with texts not merely to extract data but to reconstruct the social and epistemic realities embedded within them. As Dervin (1983) emphasizes, the act of seeking and interpreting information involves bridging knowledge gaps through active sense-making. Likewise, Scott (1990) argues that documents are socially situated artifacts that both reflect and shape human understanding. Therefore, applying interpretive theories in documentary research transforms the process from passive data collection into an active, reflective, and meaning-centered practice, fostering the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher, the document, and its broader social context.

Table (1): A table illustrating the main theories explaining documentary research

Source: The table was developed by the researchers based on an analytical synthesis of the works of Wilson (1981, 1999), Ellis (1989), Kuhlthau (1991), Dervin (1983), Savolainen (1995), and Eisenberg & Berkowitz (1992).

Full Name	Theoretical Orientation	General Concept	Dominant Dimension	Methodology Used	Practical Applications	Strengths	Limitations
Wilson's Information Behavior Model	Behavioral-Systemic	Explains how an information need is transformed into active seeking behavior through a series of stages influenced by psychological and social factors.	Behavioral-Social	Contextual and inductive analysis	Design of information retrieval systems; understanding users' information needs in libraries.	Comprehensive; integrates needs, behavior, and use.	Does not sufficiently explain internal cognitive processes.
Ellis's Behavioral Model	Behavioral-Descriptive	Focuses on user activities during information seeking, such as starting, browsing, verifying, filtering, and ending.	Behavioral	Descriptive and analytical	Improving user interfaces and digital library retrieval systems.	Provides a realistic description of users' actual search steps.	Lacks explanation of internal motivations and affective dimensions
Kuhlthau's 2004 Information Search Process (ISP)	Constructivist – Cognitive	Connects six stages of the search process with users' feelings, thoughts, and actions, highlighting the affective and cognitive dimensions.	Constructivist – Affective	Inductive and interpretive	Information literacy education; supporting users during the research process.	Holistic; reflects the human and emotional side of learning	Somewhat complex to apply in practice.
Big6 Model (Eisenberg & Berkowitz)	Constructivist - Procedural	Divides the information search process into six steps, from task definition to final evaluation.	Cognitive-Procedural	Practical and systematic	Training students in information literacy and research skills in school libraries.	Practical and easy to apply.	Limited in addressing social and psychological factors.
Dervin's Sense-Making Theory	Cognitive-Interpretive	Views information seeking as an effort to bridge a knowledge gap faced by the individual in a particular context.	Cognitive-Interpretive	Interpretive and inductive	Studies of user interaction and information experiences.	Explains how individuals reconstruct meaning during information seeking.	Difficult to measure empirically.
Wilson's Theory of Information Behavior	Integrative	Explains psychological and social factors that motivate or hinder information-seeking behavior.	Behavioral-Psychological	Analytical and inductive	Studies on information use in work and organizational contexts.	Integrates internal and external influences.	Requires more modern empirical applications.
Savolainen's Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS)	Social - Cultural	Examines how information-seeking behavior relates to everyday life, values, and social contexts.	Social-Cultural	Inductive and ethnographic	Studies on social use of information and cultural practices.	Highlights the importance of social and cultural context.	Lacks precise empirical validation in some cases.

The comparative table above presents a synthesis of the most influential models and theories of information-seeking behavior, illustrating their diverse behavioral, cognitive, and social orientations. Behavioral models such as Wilson's and Ellis's emphasize the practical steps and observable activities users engage in during the information-seeking process. In contrast, constructivist and cognitive models-such as Kuhlthau's Information Search Process (ISP) and the Big6 model-highlight the mental and affective stages individuals experience as they interpret and construct meaning from information. Meanwhile, interpretive and socio-cultural theories like Dervin's Sense-Making Theory and Savolainen's Everyday Life Information-Seeking (ELIS) expand the analytical perspective by examining how social and cultural contexts shape individuals' information behaviors.

Through this theoretical and methodological diversity, it becomes clear that each model or theory contributes a unique analytical lens for understanding how information needs emerge, how they are pursued, and how knowledge is constructed. This complementarity between behavioral, constructivist, and social approaches offers a comprehensive understanding of information-seeking behavior and supports the development of more effective practices in information retrieval system design, information literacy education, and user interaction analysis within both digital and documentary environments.

II. Methods and Materials:

A set of key models and theories addressing users' interaction with information sources were analyzed, including the models of Wilson (1981, 1999), Kuhlthau (1991), and Ellis (1989), as well as interpretive theories such as Dervin's Sense-Making Theory (1983) and Savolainen's Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) Theory (1995).at identifying similarities and differences between these models and theories, and at deriving the epistemological and methodological implications related to documentary research.

III. Results and discussion :

The results concluded that:

1. The models explaining documentary research describe the steps of information seeking, while the theories interpret its motives and context, making them complementary to each other.
2. The process of information seeking is a pathway for gradually building knowledge through interaction with documents.
3. Emotions and thinking influence the researcher's decisions during the search and shape the overall information experience.
4. The researcher's behavior in collecting information is affected by their social environment and cultural values.
5. Engaging with documents is not limited to gathering information but also involves understanding and generating new knowledge from it.

IV. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the synthesis of models and theories of information-seeking behavior reveals that documentary research extends beyond a mere methodological approach-it is a constructivist process of knowledge building shaped by cognitive, emotional, and social dynamics. The interplay between procedural models and interpretive theories offers a multidimensional understanding of how individuals interact with documentary sources to construct meaning and resolve information problems. Consequently, integrating these perspectives not only enhances the theoretical depth of documentary research but also guides practitioners in designing user-centered information services and educational programs that foster reflective, independent, and informed learners.

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