

Running head: *POPULAR CULTURE INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOR*

*To All the Boys I've Loved Before:*

An Analysis of Popular Culture Information Seeking Behavior

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Part One: Describing My Information Behavior

Every summer, I buy a book from the independent bookstore at my family vacation spot in Ohio. This year's selection was Jenny Han's young adult novel *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (*TALTBILB*). A movie based on the book was premiering soon and I wanted to read the book. Fast forward to late August when I watched and adored the sweet and cozy teenage romantic comedy film *TALTBILB* on Netflix, but without having made time to read the book first. After rewatching the film repeatedly over a weekend, I needed more of this story and started the book. As soon as I quickly finished it, I clicked over to Amazon.com to purchase the next two in the series *immediately*. Much to my dismay, *P.S. I Still Love You* and *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* were backordered and would not be delivered for nearly two weeks.

As a backup, I checked Barnes and Noble's website, called Books a Million, and scoured the shelves of three Half Price Book stores in Oklahoma City on Labor Day Weekend trying to find those next two books. I wanted to continue inhabiting the story of Lara Jean Song Covey and Peter Kavinsky, the protagonists of this trilogy. Alas, the books were backordered everywhere, the library holds list was far too long, and I had to resort to other ways of satisfying my information need of more of this story or similar stories. My information need morphed into something else while I waited for the books to appear: I instead sought other methods and ways of chasing that same feeling, whether in books, movies, articles, music, or images.

I could have avoided this entire scenario if I had just bought the Kindle version of these books. I own a Kindle Paperwhite and countless other devices onto which I could have

downloaded the digital copy of these books. However, I wanted that printed paper reading experience for these books. I deliberately ignored the choice of least possible effort. On some level, part of the enjoyment of this popular culture moment was discovering the ephemera and miscellanea affiliated with *TALTBILB*, which I might have missed had I just downloaded the books instead of having to wait to read them.

In the interstitial waiting period of more than two weeks between ordering the books and receiving them, I dove into the waters of the internet: I searched hashtags, looked at the “Readers Also Enjoyed” section on multiple books listed on Goodreads, and found links shared by both friends and strangers on the internet. I talked about the film and book with friends, recommending it to whoever would listen. In my search travels, I made many discoveries. I learned that Netflix created a playlist on Spotify specifically for music featured in the movie; when I realized that key songs weren’t on the list, I created my own playlist for my own enjoyment. When searching the shelves at Half Price Books for the books, I found a copy of the YA novel *I Believe in a Thing Called Love* by Maurene Goo. I quickly read it as it shared much of the DNA of *TALTBILB*: a Korean-American protagonist, teenage romantic comedy, and minor drama. I enjoyed this book so much that I posted on Instagram about how it filled the *TALTBILB* shaped hole in my reading heart. I tried a movie featuring the same lead actor as *TALTBILB* and vehemently did not enjoy it: despite Netflix’s attempts to market them similarly, this other film did not satisfy that cozy romance information need.

When I want to know, learn about, or experience something, I throw my whole self in the deep end that is the pool of knowledge about that subject. My enjoyment of popular culture in its many forms is no exception. In the face of a difficult and complicated world, engaging with

interesting, pleasant, yet still thought-provoking entertainment brings joy and satisfies important information needs.

### Part Two: Framing My Information Behavior

As I considered what personal information seeking incident I should analyze, my recent experience with the popular culture phenomenon of *TALTBILB* rose to the top of my list. While an entertainment-based incident may not be a traditional choice, I have found in my public library work that the search for information for the purpose of enjoyment is a common information need. While my popular culture tastes will certainly not match up with every patron, the analysis of my own entertainment information seeking behavior can give me insight into how to best support patrons looking for their own entertainment interests. Further, exploring entertainment as an information need can help me understand information behavior concepts.

As I read through the descriptions of the different frameworks, I took note of a number that caught my interest for analysis. Each iteration seemed like it could apply to my information seeking behavior situation and I wondered how I would be able to choose where to focus. That is, I wondered until I read through the descriptions of Reijo Savolainen's Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) framework and Bates' berrypicking framework. ELIS and its focus on how people seek out information for their regular lives seemed a perfect fit for discussing popular culture and entertainment needs. The berrypicking framework with its best practices for internet interface searches was ideal for an information search that took place primarily on the internet.

Savolainen (1995) builds on the work of Dervin's sense-making framework and its focus on "situations, gaps, and uses" (p. 261) in the information seeking process. For Savolainen's

ELIS, the focus is on the concepts of both way of life and mastery of life. Way of life deals with the structure, order, and preference of someone's life and information seeking. Many factors, including one's social class, economic status, interests, hobbies, and time constraints are involved with one's way of life. Mastery of life is one's ability to manage that way of life and, as Savolainen puts it, "take active care of [one's way of life]" (p. 264). It is within this framework of everyday life that a search for popular culture information and entertainment can be considered.

My current life situation, as a single adult with no children, affords me the means and time to explore my hobbies of choice, like discovering books and music. Also, this interest supports my professional experience in that a knowledge of what is popular in entertainment informs my work and helps me connect with many patrons and help them in their own information seeking processes. This exploration of my own leisure-time habits lines up with Savolainen discussion (1995, p. 263) of the "operationalization of way of life" in that one's "structure of time budget, models of consumption of goods and services, and nature of hobbies" are essential to understanding one's ability to find such leisure information.

For the mastery of life concept, Savolainen explores a typology of how different people explore information as they curate the information they need for everyday life. He considers two different continuums, of optimism versus pessimism and cognitive versus affective, and uses those to construct what he calls "ideal types of mastery of life." After reviewing his types (1995, p. 265-266), I consider my behavior to all under the optimistic-cognitive mastery of life. It is the only of the four types that is considered truly optimistic, which is a key component of my information seeking process: I always believe I can find an answer to an information problem.

The cognitive side of this typology reveals itself in a systematic approach to making sure no informational stone is unturned and no resource is left unsearched.

One of my favorite components of the ELIS model is Savolainen's statement that "the subject area of nonwork information seeking is ambiguous" (1995, p. 266). My process of finding information about popular culture and specifically material related to *TALTBILB* is decidedly ambiguous. I am not looking for one specific answer or piece of material: I am looking for any and all related material, regardless of the format or content. Further, while popular culture searches do inform my work, there is something special about locating information that is primarily for my own enjoyment for my mastery of life.

Bates' berrypicking framework meshes nicely with the ELIS model. While my analysis of my own behavior through the lens of ELIS focused on some of the reasons and content of my search, berrypicking reflects the methodology of my search as conducted online. Bates (1989) summarizes her berrypicking model with the following characterizations:

"Typical search queries are not static, but rather evolve; searchers commonly gather information in bits and pieces instead of in one grand best retrieved set; searchers use a wide variety of search techniques which extend beyond those commonly associated with bibliographic databases; searchers use a wide variety of sources other than bibliographic databases" (p. 421). My discovery of this description solidified my decision to use this model for analysis. Each of these key pieces of her framework occurred in the way I searched for information about *TALTBILB*.

My search query evolved after I hit the stumbling blocks of being unable to purchase the books I wanted. The miscellanea of articles, images, books, and music that I discovered in my search were not deposited into one specific folder of information, but rather existed in their own

disparate forms with some saved while others were only glimpsed and not thought of again. My search techniques, such as clicking through hashtags, finding links to interesting articles on Twitter, and discovering book recommendations on Goodreads are not typical methods. Finally, my sources for information were vast and varied, including but not limited to Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, Goodreads, and Giphy. My search process for more content about and like *TALTBILB* was classic berrypicking search behavior.

The importance of tagging and its use on many web interfaces cannot be underestimated in my search. In fact, I suggest that Bates' berrypicking framework predicts the rise of tagging as an important searching infrastructure. In her discussion of how to best design an interface that supports berrypicking information seeking behavior, Bates says, "Hypertext approaches appear tailor-made for berrypicking searching. Being able to jump instantly to full bibliographic citations from references in the text, for example, is a technique that hypertext handles well" (1989, p. 421). Searchable hashtags related to *TALTBILB* enabled me to jump from one content piece to another, such as fan-edited videos of scenes from the film, illustrations of characters, and memes of selected quotes from the book and film.

An anomaly in my information seeking behavior occurred with my insistence on waiting for printed copies of the two sequels of *TALTBILB*. If I had been following Zipf's Law (Brown, 2018, p. 1) and had only been concerned with reading the two books, I should have immediately downloaded the digital copies. Yet, while I often enjoy the convenience of a digital book, my commitment to the the printed experience for these particular books is an example of something important to my own mastery of life. Further, I also wanted to discover information beyond these two books, such as other books, interesting articles or beautiful music. Because I chose to wait

for backordered printed copies, I could participate in a broader community and pursue different kinds of information and experiences, even if some of those experiences were also digital in nature.

I had a number of types of information at my disposal in my quest for information like *TALTBILB*, from articles to images to memes to books. It is this last type, books similar to the feel and experience of *TALTBILB*, where the search proved most tricky. How does one search by feeling or experience on an online interface? While algorithms and machine learning may someday bring us that experience, for now this kind of ambiguous search depends on keyword search and “similar books” recommendations.

One useful tool for this scenario is the website Goodreads where readers can keep track of the books they have read and discover new titles. To find more books like *TALTBILB*, I first looked to the function, “Readers Also Enjoyed,” that appears on the top right of most book listings. This feature shows books that readers of the book whose listing is viewed also liked. Sometimes these recommendations are useful, as they tend to be more of the same genre or type. However, this does not necessarily mean these books have the same general feeling or experience, as that is such a subjective marker. It also does not take into account other factors such as the diversity of characters, setting of the book, or themes. Sometimes this kind of information can be distilled by reading reviews written by friends but friends have not read every book where I want to learn more. Further, Goodreads is owned by Amazon, so one can never be sure how influenced the recommendations are by what Amazon wants to sell or advertise to you.

In an ideal world, Goodreads or a similar recommendation tool would be independent and not owned by Amazon. Being owned by such a giant company gives Goodreads some boundary



issues for book discovery, such as Amazon's data gathering or advertising tactics. Beyond ownership, I would love to be able to search Goodreads by keyword or other social tag. As it stands, searches still happen by title or author. Some tagging exists on the site, but is limited in functionality. Folksonomic tags and groupings could allow for search by feeling, experience, or reaction. Goodreads is a useful tool but does not live up to its full potential.

In the end, the book I enjoyed the most during my wait for the *TALTBILB* sequels was one I discovered serendipitously on the shelves of the southern Oklahoma City Half Price Books. I had heard of the author Maurene Goo before and had seen her books on Goodreads before as possible read-alikes to *TALTBILB*. When perusing the young adult fiction shelves of Half Price Books on the lookout for *P.S. I Still Love You* or *Always and Forever, Lara Jean*, Goo's brightly colored *I Believe in a Thing Called Love* stood out and begged to be purchased. While tools like Goodreads and Instagram offered appealing suggestions that informed my thoughts about what books to choose to read and/or purchase, encountering that physical book in a store led to a purchase and an excellent reading experience.

During this information search, my discoveries of books, articles, music, and images related to *TALTBILB* brought me joy and entertainment. These additional inputs made my eventual reading experience of *P.S. I Still Love You* and *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* even better. I gained background knowledge, found information sources I could return to in the future, and enjoyed the information seeking journey. When I closed the page on *Always and Forever, Lara Jean*, I felt bereft because the story was over. Yet, as my sister reminded me when I bemoaned the end of this series, "You know you can read it again right?" Indeed, I can read the books again, rewatch the film, and discover other great media and entertainment.

Considering my own information-seeking behavior through the frameworks of Savolainen's ELIS and Bates' berrypicking has itself been an enjoyable process. I thought about my decisions and search habits in a new and interesting ways. I discovered articles, schools of thought, and ideas that went beyond the scope of this paper but that informed my thinking about the frameworks and that I am intrigued to learn more about, especially as it relates to better understanding the work of Savolainen and Bates (Bates, 1999; Savolainen & Kari, 2004; Savolainen and Kari, 2006; Kari & Hartel, 2007; Bates, 2018). Applying frameworks to real life processes and practices is the best way to understand these complex ideas. I have only begun to scratch the surface of understanding these models but am now better equipped to continue in my study of this field and to support patrons with their own information needs.

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Appendix: A Small Sampling of Links to Examples of *TALTBILB*-related Ephemera

[NPR Podcast Pop Culture Happy Hour's discussion of \*TALTBILB\*](#)

[\*TALTBILB\* movie Review](#)

[Music from the \*TALTBILB\* movie](#)

[Interview with \*TALTBILB\* author Jenny Han](#)

[Analysis of the fake relationship trope in romantic comedy](#)

[Interview with \*TALTBILB\* movie director](#)

[Netflix's \*TALTBILB\* Spotify playlist](#)

[Instagram Page of \*TALTBILB\* author Jenny Han](#)