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“Hide, stay still and listen carefully”: Birdwatchers’ information seeking and sharing on YouTube

Abstract

This paper presents early findings of an ongoing investigation about information seeking and sharing patterns among birdwatched on YouTube. The research aims to find out how they seek and share hobby-related information and to what extent publicly available multimedia resources on YouTube can satisfy their information needs. The researcher analysed 1988 comments from a sample of the most visited birdwatching videos to identify the patterns based on the user-generated contents to address the questions. The findings show birdwatching is a very information-rich context, and birdwatchers are involved in various information activities to pursue their hobbies.

1. Introduction

Birdwatching or birding is a popular hobby globally and a type of *serious leisure* (Stebbins, 1982). It is also considered a form of citizen science, as birdwatchers contribute to the ornithology projects. From a research perspective, birdwatching is a multidisciplinary topic. Scholars in *leisure studies* have done some studies on this hobby (Lee et al., 2015) and developed a body of knowledge about it. However, LIS scholars have overlooked this group. As a result of this, our existing knowledge about information activities among the birdwatching communities is still limited. Nonetheless, birdwatching is a very information-rich context, and the volume of published information (e.g. books, websites, magazines, and podcasts) on this hobby is monumental. Moreover, the diversity of publicly available information on birding skills is enormous. A simple Google search about birdwatching produces millions of results. Even so, there is little research on *human information behaviour* (HIB) in this context. The current study aims to find out how birdwatchers seek and share hobby-related information and to what extent publicly available multimedia resources on YouTube can satisfy their information needs.

2. Literature review

Birdwatching tourism is one of the fastest-growing sections of ecotourism (Kronenberg, 2016). This trend is also reflected in an increasing number of studies the economic, social and environmental impacts of birdwatching (Kronenberg, 2014; Steven et al., 2015; Sali et al., 2008; McFarlane, 1996). In terms of terminology, birdwatching is an outdoor hobby and a form of serious leisure. Birdwatching in its advanced levels has all the six criteria of serious leisure: perseverance and commitment, potentiality to turn into a career, significant personal effort, durable personal and social benefits, unique ethos within a social world, and personal and social identity (Stebbins, 1982).

In addition to Stebbins’ theory of serious leisure, some scholars have used Bryan's theory of recreation specialisation (1977) to study birdwatchers’ activities. According to the recreation specialisation theory, participants can be considered on a scale ranging from casual to committed participants. There are typical participation styles in terms of affective attachment and

commitment, frequency of participation, level of skill, and equipment preferences and expenditures (Lee et al., 2015; Waight and Bath, 2014). Both theories attempt to explain the complex nature of hobbies and other kinds of leisure activities central to participants' identities and lifestyles. However, each theory has its focal point and slightly different terminology. The review also shows there are a few studies about birdwatching in the social science realm that provide useful insights into the informational aspects of this hobby. For example, Law and Lynch (1988) explored textual materials - including lists and field manuals - used in amateur birdwatching. They discovered that birdwatching is an information-rich hobby, and birdwatcher's lists are not just columns of names. What they produce is a collection of reliable and evidence-based reports of authentic field observations.

3. Research method

This study is based on a sample of user-generated content (UGC), a common approach in several areas such as marketing, tourism, and hospitality (Lu and Stepchenkova, Svetlana, 2015). This study's dataset includes 1988 comments collected from a sample of the most-watched YouTube videos about bird watching techniques, especially for novice birders. For the videos with less than 300 comments, the researcher reviewed all the comments, and for the videos with more than 300 comment, he reviewed just the first top 300 comments. Based on this formula, the comments' selected sample includes 1988 comments collected from ten popular videos. In the next stage, the researcher mapped comments with the classification scheme developed for YouTube video comments suggested by Madden et al. (2013).

4. Findings

Birdwatchers have a wide array of information needs ranging from the best brand of binoculars to birds' names and the nearest location to see them. All the clues to find and identify birds, such as the best time to watch them, birds' behaviour, the habitual time of their activities and how to record their songs, are a few examples among a long list of information needs.

The results also show the comments can be mapped onto the classification scheme developed by Madden et al. (2013). The scheme provides a useful tool to organise the comments into ten categories: information, advice, impression, opinion, responses, expression of personal feelings, general conversations, site processes, video content description, and non-response comments. The early findings reveal YouTube videos are helpful as a starting point for anyone interested in this hobby. Nonetheless, the most reliable sources are available in guidebooks and specialised magazines. As a result, YouTube does not provide enough information for successful participation in this hobby. However, it can deliver a good platform for learning basic skills, connecting with other birdwatchers and networking.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Birdwatching is an information-rich context, and there is a wide range of information sources that birdwatchers need to search and consult to pursue their hobby. Research on this area increases our knowledge about this hobby and will provide some practical implications. Research on serious leisure and recreation specialisation has a considerable potential to inform different aspects of the leisure sector, such as hospitality and service delivery (Scott, 2012). The results of this study will be useful for various stakeholders. For example, the birdwatching communities can use the results to enhance their information activities in terms of adopting more efficient tools and platform to share and produce information.

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