

Trust and Credibility in Video Game Information Sources

Information Behaviours of Video Gamers

by

Joshua Shum, 1005378529

INF2332H F LEC0101

Professor Caidi

June 13, 2019

University of Toronto

Final Project & Presentation

In this paper, I examined the topic of trust and credibility of information, in the context of information behaviours exhibited during the game-selection process of video gamers. Using Wilson's concept of cognitive authority, Rieh's discussion of information quality evaluation in Web-searching, and McKenzie's notion of the influence of authoritative knowledge in cognitive authority decisions, this project aims to identify and make generalizations regarding similar or different information behaviours exhibited by video gamers in this particular context.

In recent years, handheld devices have become increasingly popular across all age demographics, with playing video games for leisure accordingly rising in popularity as well. However, unlike traditional sports and outdoor recreational activities, there are a large variety of video games to choose from, with factors such as genre, price, single player or multiplayer, online or offline, and more. Yet despite many information sources available that offer reviews of specific video game titles in different forms — such as text, audio, and video — it can be challenging for individuals to find a video game to purchase or play that suits their preference.

In my previous study, "How Gamers Find Their Games," I studied a research population ($n=3$) of leisure video gamers in their early twenties in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), finding that information or recommendations from trustworthy or credible sources — commonly, offline friends or family — often supersede or takes precedence over all other factors. As such, I decided to further examine this notion in the context of the decision-making process in selecting what games to play or purchase, and designed a study with the same research with the following research questions:

- 1) What contributes to making an information source trustworthy or credible for gamers?
- 2) What relationship exists between an information source's overall trustworthiness and its trustworthiness in the context of video games?
- 3) What criteria do video gamers use in the evaluation or judgment of information quality?
- 4) How does an individual's expectation of a game compared to their actual experience affect the information source's trustworthiness or credibility?

- 5) If an individual's actual experience of a game differs from information received about it, how does this affect the trustworthiness or credibility of the information source in the context of video games? In general?

This study draws on and relates to the earlier research on the information practices of leisure activities or hobbyists, such as *Case and Given (2016)*, *Hartel (2014)*, *Stebbins (1992)*, *Kari and Hartel (2007)*. Furthermore, the findings of this study have implications on video game developers, publishers, marketers, and distributors of the video game industry, in that it offers a better understanding of consumer information behaviours, which can be used to design marketing strategies or campaigns.

Video Games and Information Science

Video games are generally considered either as leisure pursuits, or the focus of amateur and professional e-sports organizations aiming to compete for monetary or titular rewards. However, there is some nuance in this classification, as there are subtle differences between individual levels of engagement with voluntary activities. Firstly, to identify similarities and differences between video games and information research regarding other leisure activities in this area, Case and Given offers a collection of information research on hobbyists and their various leisure activities — such as gourmet cooking, sports games, virtual games, backpacking, music, investing, travelling, and others (330-333).

Case and Given also makes note of Hartel's 2014 publication, where she proposes the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) model — influenced by Stebbins' 1992 book, *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*. This model classifies serious leisure into three general categories: hobbyist, amateur, and volunteer (948). However, it is worth noting that the SLP framework does not resonate well with video gaming and other information age pursuits such as social media and fandoms. As such, a more in-depth analysis of Stebbins is necessary to make an argument for the categorization of video games as either “hobbyist” or “amateur”.

Stebbins asserts that modern amateurs can be generally defined “as part of a professional-amateur-public (P-A-P) system of functionally interdependent relationships, [with a] serious, committed orientation toward the activity in question. And it seems evident that amateurs are linked to professionals or publics or both” (Stebbins 1980; 414). On the other hand, Stebbins

makes note that a “crucial difference between hobbyists and amateurs is that the hobbyists are not part of any PAP system” (Stebbins 1992; 10). As such, I would make the nuanced argument that video gamers of this particular research population should be categorized as hobbyists — individuals who play video games professionally (or in development leagues or amateur teams) would thus be categorized as amateurs. In other words, the classification of video gamers depends on the particular context — the mode or mindset in which they game. As such, analyzing the findings of this — and my previous study — using Kari and Hartel’s proposed context-centric research model outlined in “Information and Higher Things in Life” — which examines a context with various information processes surrounding it — is appropriate.

My previous study on information behaviour of video gamers was designed with *Sonnenwald et al.’s concept of information horizons* as a framework, and analyzed using *Hektor’s information activities*,¹ *Erdelez’s information encountering*,² and *Fisher’s information grounds*.³ I found that information monitoring, exchanging, and browsing are the primary information activities associated with the decision-making process of video gamers in this research sample. Furthermore, the findings indicated that participants highly valued social networking aspects of multiplayer games — usually playing multiplayer games more often than single player games. However, it should be noted that this population did not actively seek for information about video games, instead often serendipitously encountering it through everyday leisure activities (such as browsing the Internet, review sites, chatting with friends, watching YouTube) or through discussion of video games on online information grounds such as Discord communities, or “servers”.⁴ In other words, participants relied heavily on information received through video gaming related network and sources, rather than through self-conducted research.

Accordingly, participants asserted that this information or recommendation from such sources — commonly, offline friends or family — would often supersede or takes precedence over all other factors. Indeed, all referred specifically to the notion of “trust” attributed to these information sources over others — although the sources differed per participant, all trusted

¹ “eight information activities, shown on the outer circle: search & retrieve, browse, monitor, unfold, exchange, dress, instruct and publish” (Figure 1 in Hartel et al. 2016)

² “a memorable experience of unexpected discovery of useful or interesting information” (Fisher et al. 179)

³ “environment[s] temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose . . . that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information” (Pettigrew 1999; qtd. in Fisher et al. 185)

⁴ Discord is an application with features such as instant messaging, screen and video sharing, and VoIP communications. Commonly, servers consist of individuals with a shared interest — in this case, video games.

sources shared an intimate or personal connection with the participant. As such, this project further examines this notion of trust and credibility in the context of the decision-making process in selecting what games to play or purchase, within a theoretical framework of *Wilson (1983)*'s concept of cognitive authority, *Rieh (2002)*'s discussion of information-seeking behaviours in regards to information quality and cognitive authority criteria, and *McKenzie (2003)*'s discussion on the influence of authoritative knowledge on decisions of cognitive authority.

Cognitive Authority

Patrick Wilson describes cognitive authority to be the authority that an individual offers to another person (or group) in a particular context, or sphere of interest. That is to say, cognitive authority only exists as a relationship between two or more people, and that it exists as a matter of degree — “one can have a little of it or a lot” (14).⁵ Wilson notes that this concept differs from administrative authority, “that of the person who is in a position to tell others what to do” (14), in that rather than an authoritative and commanding power, those with cognitive authority influences thinking — an “influence on one’s thoughts that one would consciously recognize as proper” (15).

Information Quality Judgments and Cognitive Authority

This notion of cognitive authority can be related to judgments of credibility, competence, trustworthiness, and quality. On the topic of quality, Soo Young Rieh designed a study that examines the information-seeking behaviours of scholars with respect to the role of evaluation criteria of information quality — defined as “the extent to which users think that *the information is useful, good, current, and accurate*” (146) — in the determination of cognitive authority. In this study, Rieh asked 16 scholars — consisting of seven faculty and nine doctoral students from a diverse range of disciplines — from Rutgers University to perform four tasks involving Web searching, instructing them “to ‘think-aloud’ about what they were doing, and why” (149). In the findings of this research, Rieh found that users of this research sample made extensive efforts to make judgments of information quality and authority. Through this, Rieh proposes a model detailing the relationship between online information quality judgment and cognitive authority

⁵ Magnitude!

which can be applied to this study's context, as video gamers often refer to online sources or Web-searching to find information or reviews about certain games (Figure 2; 158).

Authoritative Knowledge

Pam McKenzie posits that Wilson's concept of cognitive authority "treats authority as a stable assessment" (261) relative to a particular context, and in doing so, places an emphasis on decisions made by the individual. However, McKenzie suggests that this does not account for how cognitive authority is affected by prevailing forms of authoritative knowledge in such contexts — those that are "held as legitimate and official by participants" (264). Accordingly, McKenzie offers Brigitte Jordan's concept of authoritative knowledge, which "is the knowledge that [participants] within a community is considered legitimate, consequential, official, worthy of discussion, and appropriate for justifying particular actions" (Jordan, qtd. in McKenzie 264) — the knowledge of which participants make decisions. To illustrate this, McKenzie analyzed interviews with pregnant women (namely, women with twins) in regards to their judgment of authoritative knowledge with respect to medical advice or information received.

In addition to Wilson's theory of cognitive authority, this concept is valuable in its discussion of information-seeking behaviours of video gamers in specific contexts, and in its recognition of the broader community's influence in determining which information sources are trustworthy or meaningful. Thus, questionnaire responses will be analyzed to infer whether or not some sources are considered "universally" or "commonly" accepted as legitimate and official by the wider community, rather than as a result of individual cognitive authority decisions.

Methodology

- 5 participants were recruited through a mixture of convenience sampling and stratified sampling (3 from previous study, and 2 additional participants were recruited via a "call for participants" message on a Discord server for video gaming)
- Participants were assigned ID numbers (U1-U5) for anonymity
- As participants' perceived trustworthiness of an information source must be measured in some tangible way, they will be asked via a questionnaire to describe real-life examples where

they received information or recommendations about any game from an information source, and asked to rate **and** explain how this information affected their decision-making

- Both short-answers and 5-point satisfaction-type Likert-scale measurements were used
- Likert-scale responses were assigned a number (-2, -1, 0, 1, 2), where -2 corresponds with a perceived lower or decreased level of significance or trustworthiness attributed to the information source, and 2 corresponds with a perceived increased level of significance or trustworthiness attributed to the source.
- The magnitudinal indicator “level of value/significance” was qualitative in nature, and does not have a comparative scale of measurement. However, short answers elicited further details, which was used to create an according scale or model of measurement.

Findings

Participants are quite affording of trust when it comes to trying out low (time and price) commitment games. When participants do not have time to personally seek, or directly gather information about video games, they instead rely on information sources that they perceive as trustworthy and relatable. While quality evaluation criteria differs per individual, all participants asserted that trust of information sources varies depending on an information source’s general trustworthiness and reputation as perceived by the individual (cognitive authority), the quality of information forthcoming (cognitive authority), and its overall reputation as perceived by the community (cognitive authority leading to authoritative knowledge).

In general, the information behaviour of participants follows Rieh’s model of judgment of information quality and cognitive authority. Participants would first seek secondary, concurring information about a game to validate the initial information source’s recommendation (often by checking if reviews about a game were consistent across several well-known, reputable sites with authoritative knowledge/cognitive authority). This initial, or “predictive” judgment (expectations) is frequently followed by a judgement interaction while engaging with the game (experience), and an evaluative judgment of the information source afterward (reflection). This evaluative judgment is then used in future information processes, where the source is considered with this previous “track record” in mind.

It is also noteworthy that participants were more tolerant and trustworthy of information sources that they had a more intimate connection with (e.g. friends, family, or an online discussion board which the participant frequently participates in and knows other members), even when it came to conflicting experiences or information. In contrast, the cognitive authority of unfamiliar (often online) information sources that offered conflicting information would greatly (or entirely) diminish after just one incident. Furthermore, repeated incidents of conflicting experiences led to one participant to avoid all further interactions with that source.

Most participants made a differentiation between magnitudes of trust levels depending on perceived notions of familiarity with the information source

For friends, participants had a tendency to be cautiously trustworthy at first — as such, differences in expectations versus experience resulted in only minor decreases in trust. On the other hand, for other information sources, similar differences resulted in more significant decreases in trust. Duplications of similar situations resulted in even steeper significant decreases in trust. Furthermore, in the case that the gameplay was better than expected, this led to a slight increase in trust towards the information source.

Trust in social ties and relationships can be transactional

There is sometimes an assumption of mutual benefit, which led to participants cautiously extending trust to information sources.

“If they had something to gain from me playing it . . . [its probably worthwhile]” (U2)

For both online and social sources, overall reputation (as perceived by others and by self) were strong factors in determining its trustworthiness

In some cases, an information source’s level of authoritative knowledge or cognitive authority in video gaming — as perceived by the video gaming community — directly influenced a participants’ perception of trustworthiness.

“The fact that we shared interests [and] that this was a game that [a YouTuber] had actually played (and not just heard about) . . . made it quite trustworthy” (U1)

“It was very trustworthy since its conclusion agreed with the general consensus of well-known review sites” (U3)

“I find metacritic to be much more trustworthy since it applies the equivalent of machine learning [algorithms] to get more consistent results — since [both sites] agreed, I had a stronger signal that it was a good game” (U3)

However, there was also some evidence that a participant's perception of a source's trustworthiness cannot be generalized, but is instead *contextual*.

“Aside from the aforementioned game suggestion and our similar taste in video games, he and I also shared similar tastes and jokes. The [main] criteria I use to evaluate a source's overall trustworthiness/credibility . . . [is] based on whether I'd trust the source with other things (if it were a person), or how well known the source is (if it were a website, youtuber, publication, etc. In both cases, the source's previous track record would also play a role in whether I'd trust them” (U1)

In the case that a participant received information about a game that disagreed with personal experience of with information from another source:

For online information sources, participants suggested that trust levels would decrease significantly:

“It felt like the reviewer nit-picked on minor aspects of the game” (U3)

“I trusted them [way] less with even things outside of games after this incident.” (U1)

“I [later] found this source in question saying negative things about a game I quite liked and I have since stopped interacting with this source entirely. I do not even incidentally interact with them now. If I see them on my feed I simply ignore it and move on.” (U1)

Indeed, duplicated or repeated incidences would lead to *extreme* distrust, and information avoidance. In contrast, trust level in social information sources decreased slightly or not at all under the same circumstances — even after duplicated or repeated incidences.

“I came to accept the fact that my brother has vastly different tastes than me when discussing certain genres, and we had a better understanding of each others' tastes in games” (U4)

APPENDIX

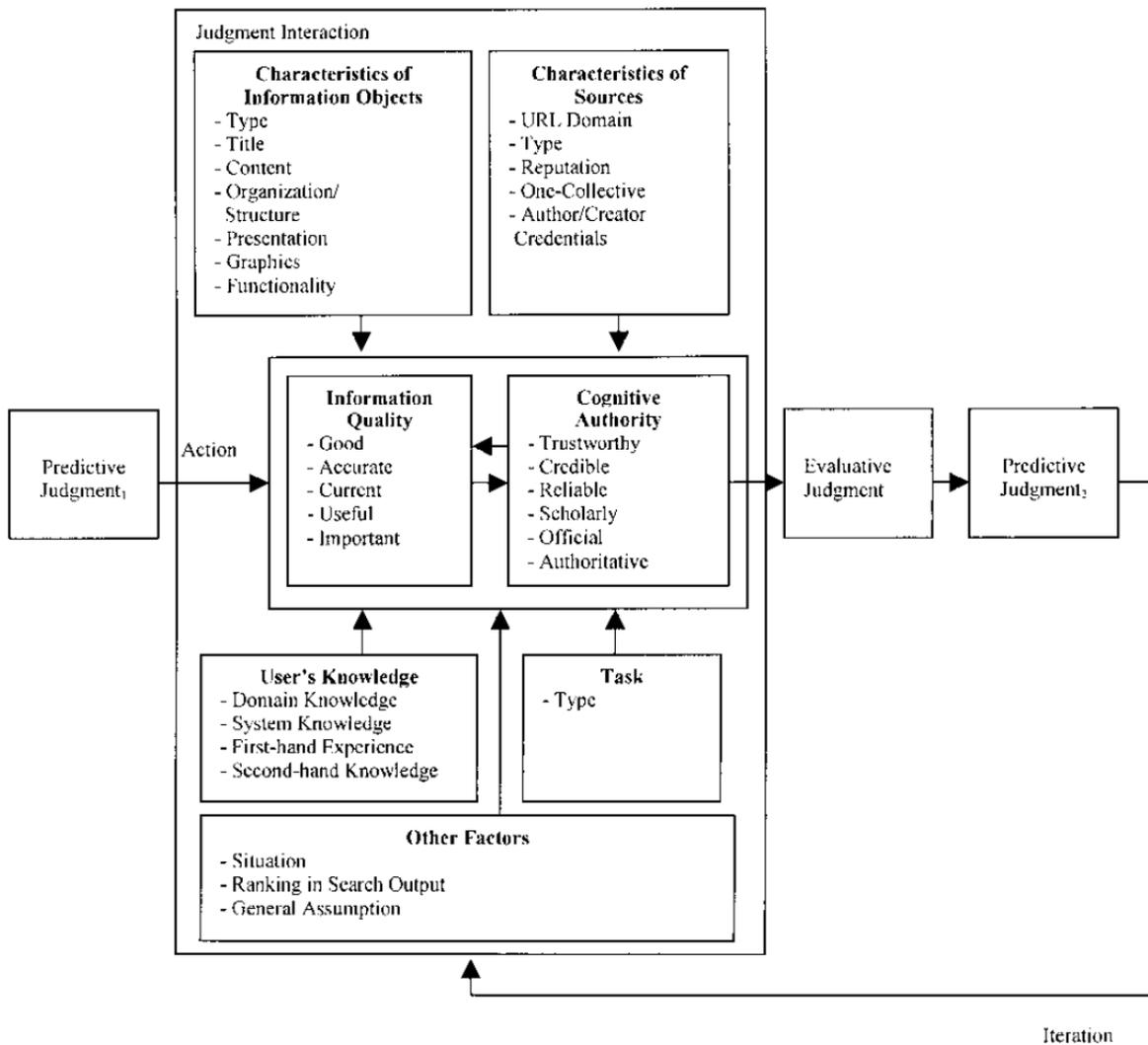


FIG. 2. Revised model of judgment of information quality and cognitive authority.

APPENDIX: From Soo Young Rieh (2002; p. 158)