



# Social Spaces and Information Encountering: Grocery Shopping Behavior and the Implications for Information Systems Design

Kristen Dietiker, Ray Baldwin, Wanna Net, and Jennifer Rohan,  
MLIS students, University of Washington

## ABSTRACT

The information behavior of grocery shoppers is a subject that is ripe for examination. There are clear parallels between grocery shoppers and information seekers because grocery shoppers seek information for various purposes, including product selection and pricing. However, because grocery shoppers operate in an information-rich environment, they also engage in other behaviors that are recognizable to information scientists, including browsing, ignoring, and encountering. By examining grocery shoppers at Pike Place Market, this study reveals how social environments can affect information encountering and what this implies for the design of Information Systems.

## HYPOTHESIS

It is likely that information encountering will be more frequently observable in environments that are perceived as more socially oriented than practically oriented. Also, it is likely that along a continuum from a practical “information grounds” (as defined by Fisher, 2005) to a social “information grounds”, typical grocery stores are located at the practical end and Pike Place Market on the social end. Finally, because of its social environment, Pike Place Market shoppers will experience more information encountering incidents and will retain more information for later use than shoppers at typical grocery stores.

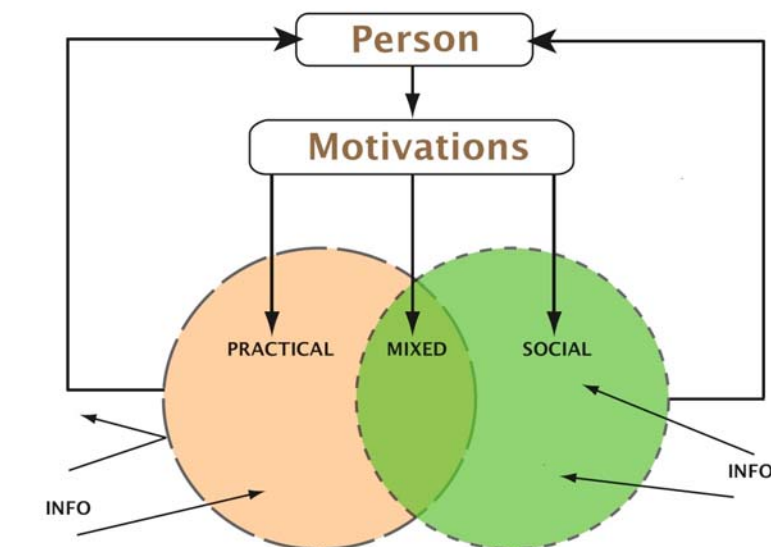
## OBSERVATIONS

In order to compare the practical environment of a typical grocery store to the social environment of Pike Place Market, ten separate observations were carried out. These observations provided a framework for designing the in-depth interviews to be conducted afterwards. Researchers made an effort to record the conversations they overheard as well as their contexts. Observers recorded notes by writing on what appeared to be shopping lists. However, the use of pen and paper imposed limits on the observers’ capability to record all observable behavior. Therefore, capturing the entirety of fewer conversations was deemed more important than capturing many partial conversations. Additionally, only conversations and other human-to-human interaction were recorded.

## INTERVIEWS

A sample of twelve interviewees was determined on the basis of accessibility to the researchers. Time and budgetary constraints precluded a cross-sectional demographic analysis and statistically derived sample group. Interviewees were asked to respond to a series of twenty structured questions, including two demographic questions relating to gender and age. Additionally, three concluding questions asked interviewees to compare the environments of their typical grocery stores with Pike Place Market in their own words.

## SOCIAL-PRACTICAL ENCOUNTERING MODEL



A social environment may change the way people feel about the information that is present all around them and make them more receptive to encountering and retaining useful information.

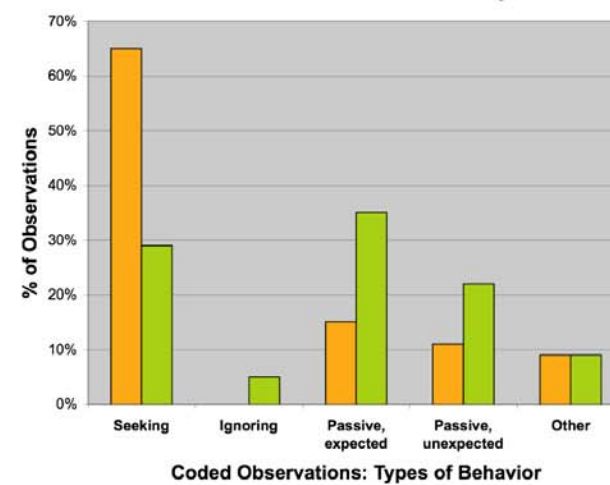
## IMPLICATIONS

Is it wise to build information retrieval systems without taking into account the full range of information behaviors? Must seeking be the only behavior considered during the development of new systems?

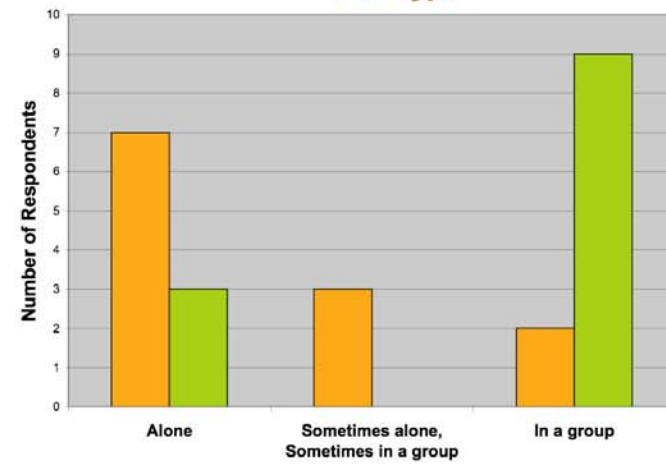
In the design of information systems, neglecting encountering behavior can mean missed opportunities to improve the user experience.

By pursuing opportunities to accommodate a full spectrum of information behavior, information professionals not only improve user-centered systems, but can potentially create the kind of information experience that users prefer.

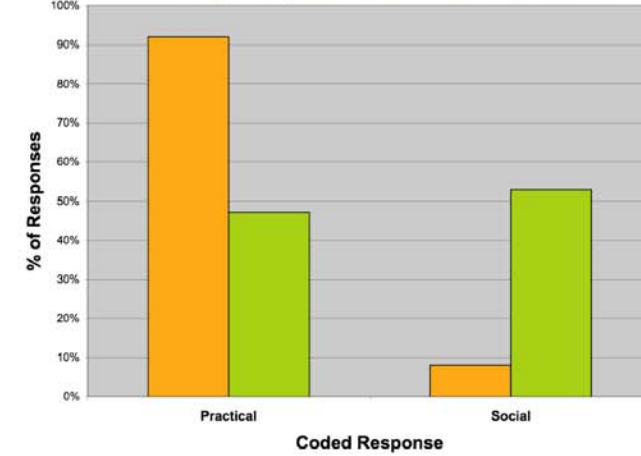
Information Behavior Comparison



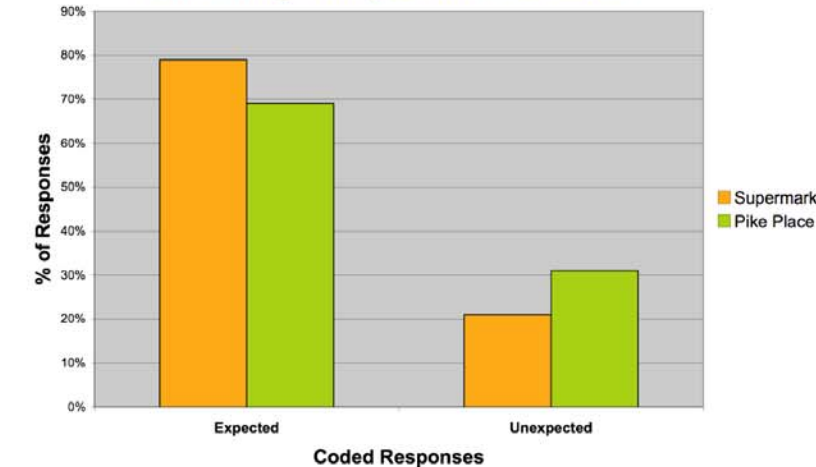
Visit Type



"Why did you decide to shop there?"



"What things did you find out about?"



## FINDINGS

- 57% of Pike Place observed incidents involved encountering behaviors, compared to 26% of supermarket incidents
- 65% of supermarket shoppers engaged in active information seeking, compared to 29% of Pike Place shoppers
- Pike Place shoppers were observed avoiding information in 5% of the incidents, while supermarket shoppers never did
- 37% of supermarket interview responses described impulse buying, while 50% of Pike Place interview responses did
- 93% of Pike Place shoppers “used the information they acquired” during their shopping trip immediately or later

*Encouraging encountering behavior, either as part of a social environment or by making another gateway to information resources, can only improve the accessibility and usability of information retrieval systems.*