

“The Lady,” the story and the machine: Information seeking behaviour in the McDonald’s restaurant ordering process

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic investigations into the McDonald’s indoor ordering experience, this paper presents findings from a preliminary examination of information seeking behaviour within one single North American restaurant. The investigation draws upon theories of information infrastructure, and both digital and sensory ethnography. Through data collected from 3 hours of unobtrusive observations and 3 semi-structured interviews, it first focuses on the master narrative of McDonald’s, and how its branding and history informs information behaviour and bias within the restaurant. It’s second focus is remediation, online and offline dynamics and media ideologies that impact decision making about the mediums used for information communication in the ordering process.

INTRODUCTION

Retail ethnography is on the rise, as corporations wish to create branded end to end experiences for users of their products and services. McDonald’s, a corporation and restaurant chain with a long history around the world, leverages both its brand loyalty and universality in tandem with its evolution, to create retail environments, conducive to enjoyable and convenient modern customer experiences. To narrow in on this specific retail space, this study seeks to understand information seeking behaviours in the ordering process at a single Canadian McDonald’s location with digital ordering kiosks. It explores the master narrative of McDonald’s; the information acquired by consumers before they even step foot in the restaurant, and it focuses in on the negotiation between “the lady” and “the machines” inside. It asks the question: how do consumers of the technology forward McDonald’s of today, seek ordering information when they walk in the restaurant to order or pick up food?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This topic relates to the notion of media ideologies, highlighted by Ilana Gershon, drawing on Michael

Silverstein’s concept of linguistic ideology, in the way that it interprets age as a factor in shaping information behaviour in the ordering process at McDonald’s. The topic also touches upon the concept of remediation, coined by Bolter and Grusin, in the way that it incorporates spatial and temporal context into its analysis of information behaviors, in the negotiation between human and machine. The concept of online/offline dynamics and ‘decomputerisation’, highlighted by Pia Varis is touched upon too, which, in this context, fuses with the concept of remediation. The distinction between online and offline behaviour in McDonald’s merges, and the lines are blurred, as the study uses one single restaurant location as a general ethnographic melting pot of information behaviour. On this note, the topic taps into the practice of microethnography too, in the way that it is concerned with how interaction is socially and culturally organized in a particular situational setting. Lastly, the paper pulls in ideas from Leigh Star’s concept of information infrastructure and the field of sensory ethnography, as it explores the way Sarah Pink so eloquently explains, “we move through the world, react to it, turn it to our needs, and engage with it to solve problems.” She and I argue, that the “meaning that the world has for us is revealed” in the way we interact with it. In the case of this study, we find meaning in the most unexpected of places-- behind the tacky, giant, ubiquitous yellow arches that scatter our cities, suburbs and even our small towns. Investigating information behaviour in one single McDonald’s restaurant helps to reveal insights that start to peel away the layers from the gimmicks and the happy meals, and allows us to understand more, how the restaurant’s customers move through its space and why.

RESEARCH METHODS

The McDonald’s location studied was in Concord, Ontario at the intersection of Highway 7 and Centre St. on the dates of Saturday November 3rd between 9:00AM-1:00PM and Sunday November 18th between 9:30AM-11:30AM.

Customers were studied through invisible or unobtrusive observation as the restaurant location, bustling and busy with the morning rush, organically permitted this type of access. Field notes (jottings), diagrams and photographs were used as recording devices during observation. Semi-structured interviews with three customers were conducted inside the restaurant on November 3rd between 10:00-1:00 after each customer purchased items and ate their respective items. Each semi-structured interview began with each subject drawing two information horizon maps-- one for process of ordering and one for the rating of important informational sources during their ordering process. The first subject was 21 years old, male. The second subject was 32 years old, male. The third subject was 62 years old, male. All had visited and ordered from McDonald's several times before.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Historical information: the master narrative of McDonald's

Historical information and the "master narrative" of McDonald's as a whole is brought into present day orders in individual and isolated restaurants. The first example of this arose in an interview with Sergius, age 62, who had just purchased a Big Mac at the front counter.

"It's history. McDonald's. 40 years of history of coming to McDonald's. All of the things on their menu, I know...McDonald's has been around a long time...it has been the go to place. They also suffered in the last decade or so with the junk food image. Their profits have dropped down drastically and they seem to be going back up-- I'm not sure why. Some say they have made their menu more healthy, but I don't know what is really healthier. I follow the stock market and financial news in the newspaper, that's where I get my information. So they've been up and down. They are having hard times and they're trying to adapt. And they probably have the wraps to seem healthier, but I don't think they've made that full circle where I would call it, yet, a healthy food place. The only time it comes up in conversation with me and other people is "oh it's junk food!", "Not McDonald's!"

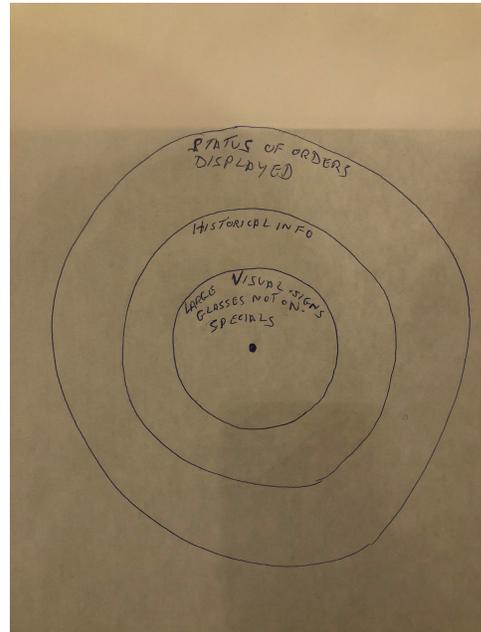


Figure 1. Information Horizon Map in which historical information is ranked as the second most important source of information when ordering in present day

Marko, age 32 expressed in his interview:

"They have a poor history of health, they don't have a good reputation, I associate it with not being good. Health is very important to me and because of that, I don't give this restaurant much attention. I learn this from the news, from documentaries, from society itself, it's common knowledge. I know they have hamburger laws in the states. You can't sue McDonald's for making you obese because you should know better than to eat too much of their product."

What's interesting here is that two individuals, 30 years apart in age, have come to the same master narrative about this 63 year old restaurant chain. As Sergius was born 1 year after the restaurant's inception, he has literally grown up with McDonald's, evolving alongside the multi-million dollar corporation and thus giving him a more comprehensive point of view. Both subjects ordered food with their respective historical information in mind-- Sergius a Big Mac and Marko hashbrowns and an apple pie. Sergius admitted that when he orders at McDonald's he always feels like he is picking between "the lesser of two

evils” when it comes to health. To explain why he ordered his Big Mac Sergius said:

“McDonald’s is just around, they’re just there. You kind of know what you’re going to get, even though it’s junk...but you only go there when you’re in the mood, there’s nothing else and you just feel like junkin’ out.”

Marko, a vegan, admitted to looking up the McDonald’s menu months ago online to understand what he would be permitted to eat, when ordering at the restaurant. Upon looking up this information, it appeared to him that there are only three items on the McDonald’s menu that he can actually eat, which makes his ordering decisions at the restaurant quite one dimensional.

What the excerpts above show, is each subject’s awareness of the information infrastructure of McDonald’s. They both order at the restaurant with a distinct sense of cognitive dissonance-- an uncomfortability with the McDonald’s master narrative, its transparency, its embedeness, the reach and scope of its power-- with the simultaneous feeling of giving in and surrendering.

It is both the restaurant’s pervasiveness, combined with an evolving hegemony in pursuit of a more health conscious society, that has as Star puts it, surfaced “invisible work.” Sergius, admitting that he has read about how health related media attention has contributed negatively to the company’s image and bottom line, is also highlighting exactly how the infrastructure of McDonald’s became visible upon breakdown. And it is in this breakdown, in the grand “PR disasters” that the invisible work surfaces-- the work of marketing directors and designers and CEO’s. It is in the breakdowns that the gaze of the public redirects itself to infrastructure and becomes skeptical of its embeddedness.

David, a millennial (21), expressed in his interview:

“I don’t think this food is the healthiest for you. All the facts that I’ve seen about where their meat comes from and their processes. I see this on social media like Instagram, Twitter, news outlets that post on social media. Some of my friends will talk about it.”

The breakdown and the surfacing of this invisible work, appears to have spanned generations. Sergius himself, in his own lifetime, has seen the restaurant “fix itself in modular increments, not all at once or globally,” as it has opened chains all around the world. He admits that he has encountered McDonald’s restaurants all around the world while on business trips and family vacations. He has witnessed the building of the infrastructure; the invention of the Happy Meal, the Big Mac, the woman with the visor at the counter, and he has also witnessed the dismantling of the smoke and mirrors; the categorization of breakfast, lunch and combos, into a distinct categorization of its own-- the land of junk food.

The New Age: “The Lady” or the machine

Within the restaurant, interaction with ordering information and technology and its perceived effectiveness is contextual-- based on remediation, pre-existing media ideologies and online/offline dynamics. The following excerpt illustrates how context plays a role in David’s (age 21) ordering process:

“I usually use the digital kiosk whenever I walk into Mcdonald’s and the line is long. I only didn’t use it this time because there was absolutely no line, so there was no reason for me to use it. But mostly, I order at the kiosk. I find it much easier to use. I can skip talking to the lady and trying to figure out all this stuff, when I know exactly what I want, I just click the things, and it’s easier. It makes the process quicker I guess. Maybe someone who doesn’t know what they want, they may need to ask the lady questions, but I know what I want. I get the same thing every time. The first time I used it, it was like okay where do I go and how do I make this a combo? But now I know it really well-- it might take me 2 minutes.”

What is interesting here is the remediation at play in David’s order, as described by Gershon Further. Further makes use of the notion of ‘remediation’, referring to the fact that people define each technology in relation to the other technologies available to them and that people make communicative decisions based on what they deem the most ‘appropriate’ medium for the specific task at hand.

On the day of his order, David demonstrated remediation by choosing to order with the human at the front counter instead of ordering at the kiosk, his normal course of action. The fact that there was no line up was a key contextual factor in his decision, evidently weighed higher than his perceived effectiveness of the kiosk for the task at hand. Additionally, David has made clear that the kiosk is specifically effective for individuals ordering combos and for people who know exactly what they want to order and for those who order the same thing often. This kind of negotiation demonstrates that information behaviour in negotiation between “the lady” and “the machine” is not a one-dimensional decision, but rather incorporates layers of context specific to the task at hand.

David’s ordering justification after he ordered also sheds light on a potential pre-existing media ideology. Ilana Gershon, drawing on Silverstein’s notion of ‘language ideology’, defines media ideologies as a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning. Gershon argues that the way people think about the media that they use, actually shapes the way they use it.

David remarked that he felt that ordering at the kiosks was “fun.” He expanded later by saying:

“You skip the interaction at the kiosk. If someone doesn’t want to talk to someone, maybe they’ll use the kiosk. I use it for convenience, it’s quicker, I skip the whole process. I can pay at the front or at the kiosk, but obviously it’s much easier to pay at the kiosk.”

His remarks come with a specific lightheartedness that appear to be remarkably subjective. His use of the word “obviously”, with no justification, presents itself as a glimmer of bias or ideology that feeds into his ordering behaviour. David also outlined that when he visits McDonald’s with his friends, that they all order from the kiosk individually. This sheds light on the fact that his media ideology might in fact be generational.

Continuing with the premise of contextually influenced behaviour in ordering at McDonald’s, the following field note and diagram illustrate how context in the form of offline and online dynamics played a role in two different ordering scenarios. Both orders in these scenarios were

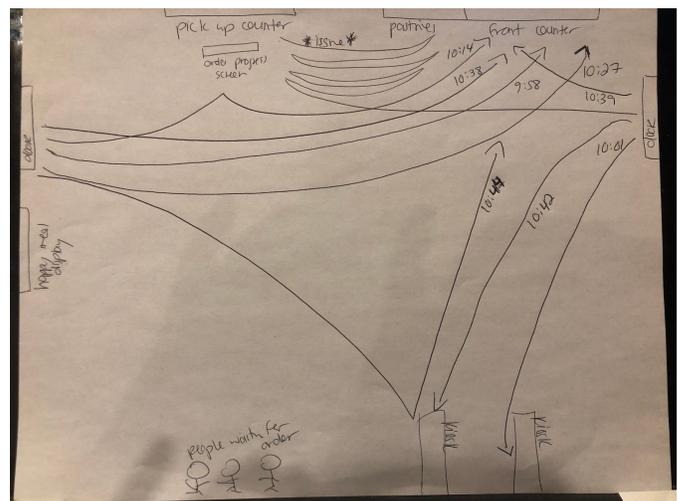
completed using McDonald’s brand new mobile ordering system. The basic premise of this system is, order food on your phone or computer from home or from your car and then pick the food up at the restaurant in person.

Scenario 1

A young man and woman walk in the restaurant and wait in the back pick up area. They are both on their cell phones and have not gone to the kiosks or the front counter. At 11:05 the woman at the food counter yells, “Tanya?” and the young woman goes to pick up her bag of food. They young woman starts eating her fries from the bag as the young man still waits for his food. The woman behind the counter yells, “Harry?” and the young man walks to the counter to get his food, smiles with the look of pride and rebellion on his face, and the two of them find a seat at a table and unwrap their food. They do not talk to one another as they eat-- the young woman browses content on her phone and the young man stares blankly into the glass window with the playplace area behind it. There is no interaction at all.

Scenario 2

Figure 2. Diagram depicting an individual who had an issue with the mobile ordering service at McDonald’s. The individual walked through the front door, came to the pick up counter and ping ponged back and forth between the pick up counter and the front counter for 20 minutes trying to sort out his order. Depicted at the top middle part of the diagram.



What these two excerpts show are polar opposite examples of how online-offline dynamics influence information behaviours during the ordering process. In scenario 1, the young man and woman seem to have had a seamless mobile ordering experience. They inputted their order information into their respective cell phones online, waited for their food and then retrieved it “offline” at the in person ordering counter.

In scenario 2, the individual depicted in the diagram was on the phone with his wife at home the entire time he was at the restaurant. It was evident that the wife, online, had inputted the mobile order from home and that he had been delegated to go and physically pick up the food at the restaurant, offline. When he arrived, the order was not ready and the kitchen or front counter had no idea what his wife had ordered. What ensued was a 20 minute debacle of moving from food counter to ordering counter with this individual trying to let the kitchen and the ordering staff know what his wife had ordered from home. This was all in the midst of the morning rush-- a full and busy restaurant with other customers ordering and picking up their food. It seemed, from his phone call and communication with the front counter, that his wife at home had not confirmed the order on her cell phone after she had selected her items, which would have involved the clicking of one more button. Thus the kitchen here in Concord, Ontario, on the morning of study, was left completely in the dark. When this individual entered the restaurant to pick up his food, the online and the offline were most definitely not aligned. The point I found most fascinating, was that he had no idea who to blame. At moments his tone seemed angry with the employees and then angry at his wife on the phone. At the end of the tumultuous experience, as he picked up his 5 bags of food, he said out loud to the employee at the pick up counter:

“It’s not your fault. I just don’t understand what happened.”

What’s interesting is that this comment sums up his behaviour that day. To order, this man had to gather information from his wife at home, from the kitchen staff at McDonald’s and also from the ordering staff. An experience that very well could have been as seamless as scenario 1, resulted in information gathering techniques most likely not anticipated or desired by the invisible designers of McDonald’s. The information infrastructure,

thus, yet again, became visible upon breakdown. The chasm between the offline and online world had expanded and this man was left to pick up the pieces.

CONCLUSION

The information behaviour discovered in this study illustrates that historical information and the “master narrative” of McDonald’s as a whole is brought into present day orders in individual and isolated restaurants. Within the restaurant itself, interaction with ordering information and technology, and its perceived effectiveness is contextual-- based on remediation, pre-existing media ideologies and online/offline dynamics. Information brought from the outside, in and then in turn the inside, out, is the centrepiece of this study. The information behaviours on two mornings, inside one restaurant location, is evidently dependent on a slew of factors not immediately obvious to the invisible observer’s eye. It highlights Bateson’s statement, “What can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships, never a ‘thing.’” We bring our biases into the restaurant, pass them over the counter and, in turn, the counter passes them back over to us. It is this that is the true negotiation that determines informational behaviour at McDonald’s.

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