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Cognitive Constructivism or Social Constructionism: Information Seeking Behaviour of Purulia Chhau Artists

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Abstract

Chhau dance is a globally recognised traditional Indian dance originating in the eastern part of India. This dance style is generally practiced in the Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha. However, it is widely acclaimed globally and gaining popularity among the masses not only in India but also abroad. It is a martial art-based dance that combines elements of dance, drama, and storytelling from the great Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Moreover, it is known for its vibrant and colourful masks, intricate footwork, and dynamic movements. Although information seeking behaviour is a well-researched topic globally, it has not been studied among this group of people. Hence, this study is an attempt to investigate the information seeking behaviour of Chhau dance artists in the information age. Using a semi-structured qualitative interview of 30 participants, the study observed that the information seeking of Chhau artists is a combination of cognitive construct and that of social construct. Further investigation is required to develop a framework under the broader perspective of information seeking behaviour.

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Introduction

Information Seeking Behaviour refers to the way people search for and use information. The term was first coined by Thomas D. Wilson in 1981 (Wilson, 1981, 2000). It is the active process of seeking, acquiring, and utilising information to meet specific objectives. Consequently, several models and frameworks have been developed by scholars globally to have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. With the advent of digital technology, particularly web technology, a significant shift has happened recently in shaping this behaviour. As a result, the models are further adjusted to accommodate this new 'paradigm'. In this context, this paper is an attempt to study the information seeking behaviour of Purulia Chhou artists. Chhou is quite a popular dance generally performed in the eastern part of India. In the analytical framework of Information Seeking Behaviour, this paper is going to ask the following research questions: how do Chhou artists seek their profession-related information? Is there any significant effect on their information seeking behaviour in the recent all-pervasive development in social media and the digital age?

While doing so, the paper is divided into the following sections: The section that follows is the literature review, followed by research objectives, research methods, results, and finally the concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Information Seeking Behaviour signifies the act of actively searching for information to fulfil a specific need or goal. This process involves individuals looking for and utilising information to complete tasks or to acquire knowledge. It is a fundamental aspect of how people interact with information in various contexts, such as work, education, or even daily life. Understanding information seeking behaviour is crucial for information professionals, educators, and researchers to better support information users in finding the relevant information. However, Wilson (2000) had differentiated between information behaviour, information seeking behaviour, information searching behaviour, and information use behaviour (Wilson, 2000).

Models of information seeking behaviour research are essential frameworks that help researchers understand how individuals seek, access, and use information. Several models have been developed by scholars in the field to study information behaviour. For example, the models developed by Wilson, 1981; Krikelas, 1983; Ellis, 1989; Kuhlthau, 1991, and so on act as milestones to better understand how people interact with information in different contexts. Moreover, information behaviour models provide insights into how people use and interact with information. These models are valuable tools for researchers in various fields, including information science, psychology, and communication. They encompass various aspects, such as information seeking, communication, and problem-solving (Wilson, 1999). These models are refined with time, adding various dimensions by different scholars.

The range of inquiry paradigms used in information behaviour research is varied. The major paradigms put strong emphasis on psychological (positivistic) approaches and constructivism (Urquhart, 2011). Lincoln, Lynham & Guba (2011) further categorised this paradigm into positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, and participatory (Lincoln,

Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Constructivism is further subdivided into cognitive constructivism, social constructivism, and constructionism. These divisions help to understand applications within information science (Talja, Tuominen & Savolainen, 2005). Among all these, constructivism or the cognitive viewpoint is the dominant model used in most user-centred information science models. However, many cognitive models are also developed incorporating the environmental and social dimensions (Agarwal, 2022).

Cognitive Constructivism

The origin of 'constructivism' theory can be traced back to the 18th century. Giambattista Vico proposed the idea of 'constructivism.' The theory anticipated that humans can understand only what they have themselves constructed. The theory was further developed by Jean Piaget and John Dewey, who are considered as the founding fathers of cognitive constructivism (Kumar & Gupta, 2009). It is a learning theory and approach that emphasizes the role of mental state. Hence, it is a 'cognitive process' in knowledge acquisition and learning. It encompasses related epistemological and psychological theories about the nature of knowledge and how it is formed through learners' cognitive processes (Hruby & Roegiers, 2012). Piaget's theory of cognitive development hypothesizes that individuals can actively construct knowledge through the information they gather by the active and deep interactions with the environment (Bodomo, 2005).

Social Constructionism

'Social constructionism' is comparatively a new term in the social sciences. The key tenet of social constructionism proposes that our knowledge of the world, including our understanding, is a product of the human mind (Burr, 2015). Knowledge is seen by social constructionists as constructed rather than created (Andrews, 2012). Social Constructionism or the social construction of reality is a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication that examines the development of jointly constructed understanding of the world. Moreover, it is a perspective that believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Galbin, 2014). The constructionist or social approaches are used in more naturalistic and interpretive ways of studying information behaviour (Agarwal, 2022).

There are well-established frameworks of constructivism or the cognitive viewpoint in learning and information seeking. However, the information seeking behaviour of artists in the Indian context is rare. With this brief literature review and analytical framework, this study is going to investigate the information seeking behaviour of Chhau artists using a questionnaire survey from a selected group of artists.

Chhau Dance

Chhau Dance from Purulia, West Bengal, India, is a type of martial arts dance that is practised in the eastern parts of India. This ritualistic dance is performed ceremonially during the last days of the Bengali year (Reck, 1972). Recently, with the increasing commercialisation, it is a year-round event. It is generally performed on the annual worship of the popular Sun-God. In this dance, every performance starts with the invocation of 'Lord Ganesha' (Arden, 1971).

Beside the Purulia Chhau, there are two other types of Chhau dance practised in the eastern part of India. These two types of dances are named after the places where they originated. These are Seraikella Chhau, practised in Saraikela Jharkhand state, and the Mayurbhanj Chhau, practised in Mayurbhanj, Odisha (Mukhopadhyay, 1987). Although there are variations in the styles of performances, these dance styles are connected by their martial movement and patterns (Gan & Mohanty, 2005). Over the years, Chhau dance has gained recognition and popularity both within India and internationally. It is now performed in various festivals, cultural events, and competitions, showcasing the rich artistic traditions of eastern India.

Traditionally, the Chhau dance of Purulia was patronised by the Royal Family of Baghmundi, located in Purulia district. They had organised Chhau competitions as a ritual performance for the Chaitra Parva (spring festival, generally observed in the month of Bengali month 'Chaitra') and 'Shiv Gajan' (a spring festival in the honour of Lord Shiva during the Bengali months of Chaitra and Baisakh). The royals promoted Hindu narratives from the tales of epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The dance style has survived with minimal change and flourished. Sometimes it is supported by various organisations; it is surviving entirely through the support of villagers (Chatterjee, 2019).

The dance style could be traced back to original forms of dance and martial practices. The dance is generally taught to male dancers from relatives of traditional artists or from local people. Its movement includes mock battle techniques, stylised steps of birds and animals. Although some of the performances happen in closed theatres, it is generally performed at night in an open community space. The traditional and folk melodies are played on the reed pipes called "Mohuri" and "Shehnai." The supporting musical group is dominated by the booming beats of several drums. In 2010, the Chhau dance was inscribed in the UNESCO's Representative List of the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.'¹

Chhau is an integral part of the culture of the indigenous communities. It binds together people from different social strata and ethnic backgrounds with diverse social practices, beliefs, professions, and languages. However, with increasing industrialisation, complex socio-economic conditions, and the present web of globalisation are the few factors that add various issues in this dance practice². All these issues are leading to a decrease in community participation and less interest among people (Mahato, Ojha, Mahato & Mahato, 2020).

Although several research works have investigated various aspects of Chhau dance and their various issues, the information seeking behaviour of Chhau artists is an unexplored domain. To fill this void, this study is an attempt to answer the following research questions raised from the gap in literature.

Research Questions

Under the framework of Cognitive Constructivism and Social Constructionism, this research is going to address the following research questions:

- What kind of jobs do Chhau artists do beside the Chhau dance?
- Do they receive any training related to this dance?

- If they need any information, where are they getting it from?
- Do they use a mobile phone? And how is a smartphone useful for their profession?
- Do they read newspapers, and what types of information do they search for in a newspaper?
- Do they watch television, and what type of information do they search for on television?
- Is the Internet helpful for their profession? And what types of information do they search for on the Internet?
- How do they seek information from social media, and how is it useful for them?

Methodology

The researchers visited the Chhau dancers and interviewed several participants. Based on the availability of the interviewees, a total of 30 participants were interviewed during December 2022 to March 2023. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed and distributed among the participants. The questionnaire was framed in English. However, a few participants were not well-versed with the language; hence, the questions were asked in the Bengali language. The responses were further transcribed into English. Consent was obtained from the participants. However, the names of the participants are removed to maintain anonymity.

Research Limitations

Due to cost and time factors, the sample size was limited. Moreover, there are three types of Chhau dances performed in the eastern part of India, besides the Purulia Chhau dance. Based on the availability of artists, this study is limited to a selected sample (only 30 interviews) of Purulia Chhau artists. A more inclusive sample containing the artists from other schools of dancers might give a better and holistic picture of the dancers and their information seeking behaviour in the digital age.

Results

Sample Description

The following sections describe the basic information of the participants.

Gender

Out of 30 participants, 27 (90%) are male, and only 3 (10%) are female. Thus, in this sample, there is a majority of male Chhau dance artists. It is observed that the majority of Chhau dance artists are male. As Chhau dance is hard and stressful, female artists generally do not opt for this dance, either professionally or as an amateur artist.

Age Group

The age groups of the participants are as follows: 3 participants are below 20 years; 7 participants are between the ages of 21-30 years; 6 participants are between 31-40 years; 7 participants are between 41-50 years; 5 participants are between 51-60 years, and finally, 2 participants are above 60 years.

Educational Qualification

In the study sample, 6 participants have a primary level of schooling, 9 have secondary levels of schooling, 8 have higher secondary level education, 4 are graduates, and finally, 3 participants have postgraduate qualifications.

Generally, formal education is not mandatory for pursuing a career in Chhau dance. Chhau dancers are often evaluated based on their artistic skills, training, and expertise rather than on formal academic degrees. Many Chhau dancers begin their training at a young age under the guidance of experienced gurus (teachers) or within traditional dance gharanas (schools). They learn the intricate techniques, skills, expressions, and repertoire of Chhau dance through a rigorous system of oral transmission and practical training.

Some professional Chhau dancers may have pursued formal education in dance or performing arts beside their training in Chhau. They may have obtained degrees or diplomas from recognized institutions or universities that offer programs in dance. For example, they might receive training in formal schools, such as Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) or Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees with a specialization in Indian classical dance forms.

Additionally, there are institutions and academies in India that focus specifically on training in Chhau dance. For example, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, and so on are the institutions that provide structured courses and certifications. These courses may include theoretical and practical components related to Chhau dance, its history, and cultural significance. While formal education can provide a broader understanding of dance, mastery of Chhau dance primarily comes from years of dedicated training, practical experience, and immersion in the dance form and its traditional styles of teaching. The artistic skills, creativity, and expressiveness of Chhau dance artists are honed through years of practice and continuous learning from experienced mentors within the Chhau tradition.

Responses of Chhau Artists on Different Questions

As it is mentioned earlier, Chhau dance can be performed by both professional and amateur dancers. Professional Chhau dancers are highly skilled and have undergone extensive training. They often dedicate their lives to mastering the techniques, nuances, and repertoire of the dance. Professional Chhau dancers may have received formal training from renowned gurus (teachers) or have been part of established Chhau dance troupes. They are well-versed in the specific style of Chhau. Artists could be specialized in different styles; such as Seraikella Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau, or Purulia Chhau. Professional Chhau dancers often perform on professional stages, in festivals, and cultural events. They may also participate in competitions and represent their dance style at national and international platforms.

On the other hand, amateur Chhau dancers are individuals who have an interest in Chhau dance and may have received

some basic training or learned the dance informally. They may perform Chhau as a hobby or as part of local cultural events and community celebrations. Amateur Chhau dancers may not have the same level of technical proficiency or depth of knowledge as professional dancers. However, they enjoy and appreciate the art form.

Both the professional and amateur Chhau dancers contribute to the preservation and promotion of this traditional dance form. They play an important role in passing on the cultural heritage of Chhau to future generations and keeping the art form alive.

Question 1: Are you professional or amateur Chhau artists?

Chhau dance artists could be both professional as well as amateur. In this study sample, most of the artists are engaged in Chhau dance professionally. However, there are also amateur Chhau artists as well. In this study sample, out of 30 participants, 18 (60%) are professional, and 12 (40%) are amateur Chhau dance artists.

Question 2: What do you do beside Chhau dance?

Chhau dance artists are not only engaged in performing Chhau dance but also involved in other professions. Besides being Chhau artists, they are involved in different other professions. For example, in this study, 4 artists are in Government service; 8 are engaged in farming; 4 artists are makers of Chhau masks and costumes; 6 artists are involved in small business; 3 young artists are still students, and finally, 5 artists are involved in other professions.

Question 3: Have you received any kind of training related to Chhau dance?

Chhau artists learn Chhau dance from different sources. Sometimes they receive training from centres arranged by the government (hence, after government training centres), or sometimes from other institutions. However, in most cases, they learn from society or their family members who are already engaged with the dance. The Chhau artists were asked whether they have received any kind of training related to Chhau dance and from where? Only 6 (20%) participants responded that they have received training from different institutions. The rest 24 (80%) participants have not received any formal training from any institutions.

Question 4: From where did you get the training?

As a follow-up question to the earlier question, it was observed that 2 respondents got training from government training centres. The rest 4 people trained from other institutions. Most of the artists have not received any formal training but they learned the art from their family or people from the neighbourhood. So, it is observed that learning this dance is more of a social construction.

Question 5: If you need any information related to your profession, where do you go?

In response to the question about where they go if they need any information related to their profession, the Chhau artists visit different sources. The Chhau dance artists responded that 11 participants visit information centres; 5 respondents go

to the local resource person; 8 respondents search the Internet, and 6 respondents use social media to get their required information.

Question 6: What kind of information do you search from the newspaper?

The participants of the study were asked whether they read newspapers or not. Only 22 participants out of 30 read newspapers. Furthermore, the participants were asked what kind of information they search for in newspapers. Among the 30 interviewees, 6 (20%) artists search for information on Chhau dance, 8 (about 27%) artists search for information on Folk Culture, and others search for information on various other issues.

Question 7: Is mobile phone useful in your profession?

The Chhau dance artists were asked whether the mobile phone is useful in their profession. The responses to this question are as follows: 23 respondents (77%) gave a positive response, and 7 participants (23%) replied with a negative response. The artists use mobile phones for searching the Internet, watching YouTube, and using social media.

Question 8: Do you watch television?

The Chhau dance artists were asked whether they watch television. Among the total participants, 20 (67%) Chhau dance artists watch television, and the other 10 (33%) Chhau dance artists do not watch television. So, about one-third of the respondents do not watch television. This is perhaps due to the unavailability of television or because they do not think it is relevant to their daily informational or recreational needs.

Question 9: What kind of information do you search from the television?

Chhau dance artists were asked what kind of information they search for on television channels. Information seeking from television channels by the participants varies. About 8 (27%) participants search for information on Chhau dance, 7 (23%) participants search for information on Folk Culture, and 15 (50%) participants either do not watch television or search for information on various other issues. So, about fifty percent of respondents do not find relevant or are not interested in finding information on television.

Question 10: Do you use Internet?

The Internet is a vast repository of information on various subjects. Besides information, today, it is a rich source of entertainment, communication, and so on. The Chhau dance artists were asked whether they use the Internet or not. The number of artists who use the Internet is 21 (70%), and 9 (30%) respondents do not use the Internet.

Question 11: Do you think the Internet can help you?

The Chhau dance artists were asked whether the Internet is helpful for their Chhau dance or not. Twenty-one respondents (70%) think the Internet is helpful, and 7 (30%) respondents do not think the Internet is helpful in their

profession.

Question 12: What kind of information do you search from the Internet?

The purposes of using the Internet by the Chhau dance artists are different. The Chhau dance artists search the Internet to get information on their profession as well as various other issues. The number of respondents and their purposes for using the Internet are as follows: 6 artists use the Internet for getting information on Chhau dance, 8 artists use the Internet for getting information on Folk Culture, 7 artists use the Internet for getting other information, and 9 respondents do not search for anything on the Internet.

Question 13: Do you learn something about Chhau dance from YouTube?

The Chhau dance artists are using the YouTube platform not only for promoting their performance but also for learning about Chhau dance. So, the artists were asked whether they learn something about Chhau dance from YouTube. Only 5 participants (26.66%) have replied that they learn something about Chhau dance from YouTube, but 22 participants (73.33%) have replied that they have not learned something about Chhau dance from YouTube.

Question 14: Do you have a social media presence?

A YouTube channel is the most popular platform for promoting videos among a large group of people. Chhau dance artists sometimes use the YouTube platform for circulating Chhau dance videos. The number and percentage of artists having a YouTube channel are only 5 (17%) artists have a YouTube channel, but 25 (83.33%) artists do not have any YouTube channel.

Question 15: Do you use social media?

Social media is the largest network platform for circulating information. Nowadays, the majority of people are using social networks to reach a large number of people. The Chhau dance artists were asked whether they use social media for different purposes. 18 (60%) Chhau dance artists use social media, and 12 (40.00%) Chhau dance artists do not use social media.

Question 16: How many times do you use social media daily?

The frequency of using social media by the Chhau dance artists is not the same. The number of artists who use social media less than 5 times is 4 (13%); 4 participants use social media 6-10 times (13%); 10 participants use social media more than 10 times (33%), and 12 participants never use social media (40%).

Question 17: What kind of information do you search for on social media?

The purposes of using social media by the Chhau dance artists are different. The Chhau dance artists use social media to get information about their profession and other topics. 7 (23%) artists use social media for getting information about

Chhau dance; 9 (30%) artists use social media for getting information about Folk Culture, and 14 (47%) artists use social media for getting other information.

Question 18: Do you think social media helps you professionally?

The Chhau dance artists were asked whether social media is helpful for their Chhau dance profession. The majority of the respondents (20, 66.66%) think social media is helpful in their profession, and 10 respondents (33.33%) do not think social media is helpful in their profession.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to find the trends of information seeking behaviour of Chhau artists. Chhau is a popular traditional dance generally performed in the eastern part of India. The dance usually tells the stories from Indian mythology and folklore. The dance is generally performed at the Bengali year-ending festivals and other special occasions. It has a distinctive and important art style that has become well recognised both domestically as well as globally due to its uniqueness and cultural significance.¹

Information Seeking Behaviour is a widely researched topic globally. With the advent of the Internet and widely available various information channels, it has given a wide dimension in information seeking behaviour research. Among the various information seeking behaviour models, Wilson's model is the most popular and widely accepted model. Wilson (1997, 2016) in his model emphasises both the social and cognitive perspectives. According to Wilson (2016), "From the beginning, his models have identified a wide range of factors from the psychological to the social that influence the behaviour of individuals in relation to information. However, by the very nature of any theory that seeks to explain human behaviour, a cognitive element must be present, since the recognition of a need for information by a person necessarily involves cognition." (Agarwal, 2022).

The information seeking behaviour of Chhau artists is a mix of both cognitive and social construction. On one hand, they are mainly trained and nurtured through their close friends, family, and gurus, and on the other hand, their style is influenced by social media. As social media is a relatively recent development, it has had a limited impact on Chhau artists in discovering or exchanging information. A more in-depth investigation is required to develop a model or analytical framework to constitute a framework that adds a dimension to any existing typology of information seeking behaviour.

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Footnotes

¹ Chhau Dance is inscribed in 2010 during the “Fifth Session of the Intergovernmental Committee (5.COM) – Nairobi, Kenya, 15 to 19 November 2010” on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The details are available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/chhau-dance-00337>

² Chhau Dance is available at: <https://indianculture.gov.in/unesco/intangible-cultural-heritage/chhau-dance>

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