



## Constructionists' approaches to information literacy: exploring Savolainen's everyday life information seeking in information literacy research

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This paper explores current issues in information literacy specifically as it relates to Savolainen's literary work on Everyday Life Information Seeking. It aims to examine how information literacy research has evolved and how Savolainen's work derived from a social constructionists' approach contribute to current information literacy thinking and practice. The methodology used is conceptual analysis. Based on the outcome of the literature review and analysis of the research questions of the paper, the importance of the concepts of information literacy and Everyday Life Information Seeking are emphasised in ways that contribute to previous research and aspects relating to under-studied areas of information literacy research.

**Keywords:** Approach to information; information seeking; information literacy

### Introduction

The concept of Information Literacy (IL) is premised on Paul Zurkowski's<sup>1</sup> proclamation of its value in the field of library science and the context of US educational reforms as a problem-solving tool through access to quality information sources. The key definition of the concept by the Association of College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy Competency Standards (ACRL) for Higher Education<sup>2</sup> set out its main concern with the individual's knowledge, skills, and attitudes relating to information use through a series of learning processes. Current research in IL has further been influenced by the development of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education<sup>3</sup>.

By the volume of its research landscape produced in the LIS field for over two decades, IL is seen to have maintained a long-standing interest in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) hence, conceptions of the term for implementing IL programmes have mainly been framed by behaviourists and constructivists approaches which characterise it either as a series of steps to be followed or a set of personal attributes<sup>4</sup> Even though these approaches have contributed to measuring the efficacy of IL programmes<sup>5</sup> on learning outcomes and establishing benchmarks for skills development in HEIs,<sup>6</sup> their inability to

recognise the influence of IL in other socio-cultural contexts has been criticised<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, the rapidly changing context of HEIs coupled with the corresponding explosion in the landscape of digital information resources has emphasised that IL is no longer an issue for librarians or educators only. Changing notions of the concept in recent years are indicating the inclination by researchers to move to other contexts beyond educational settings and the tendency to focus on seeking, locating, receiving and evaluating information sources only<sup>8</sup>. With transformations in the current information environment, new areas of analyses in IL are expanding opportunities for an investigation into aspects of IL that are vital for:

- a) Citizenship and the ability to engage critically in the use of information<sup>9</sup> sources for participatory democracy<sup>10</sup>.
- b) Economic growth that motivates the development of new and existing enterprises through the intensive use of information sources in ways that create job opportunities<sup>11</sup>.
- c) Personal growth and development of abilities and skills that are effective for everyday life challenges<sup>12</sup>.
- d) Socially enacted practices of people by which daily activities are undertaken<sup>13</sup>.
- e) Health information literacy<sup>14</sup>.

f) Sports and other related physical activities<sup>15</sup>.

All of which emphasises IL as practices that characterise an understanding of the social contexts in which information is sought and used. Expectations from this development are that research in these areas would foster greater collaboration and partnership between LIS researchers and practitioners and encourage a better understanding of the contextual nature of IL.

Consequently, current perceptions of IL seek to recognise the socio-cultural dimension of information seeking and use as emerging within collective practices that enhance mutual IL experiences<sup>7</sup>. This perspective emanates from social constructionism which emphasises social processes and how individuals seek to interpret or construct meaning against social, historical and political processes that influence the particular discourse in which they engage in<sup>17</sup>. Constructionists' approaches to IL are thus gaining more prominence and becoming valuable in fostering an understanding of the nature and purpose of IL in diverse socio-cultural contexts of everyday life. Studies, as explored by various researchers in this regard, are seen to provide the potential for a more holistic view of human information behaviour in IL practices<sup>4</sup>. This study is a conceptual analysis exploring current issues in IL, specifically as it relates to Savolainen's literary work on Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS). The main objective is to examine how IL research has evolved and how Savolainen's work derived from a social constructionists' perspective contribute to current IL thinking and practice.

### Research questions

1. What is the relevance of Savolainen's work on ELIS to contemporary IL thinking?
2. How can constructionists' approaches as advocated in Savolainen's ELIS further enhance research in IL?

### Methodology

The paper is a conceptual analysis of the literary work of Reijo Savolainen in ELIS concerning the concepts of IL and ELIS. The key concepts as defined in the paper are: IL defined as:

"The set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and

participating ethically in communities of learning"<sup>3</sup> (p. 3).

Savolainen defines everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) in the context of way of life as:

"The acquisition of various informational (both cognitive and expressive) elements which people employ to orient themselves in daily life or to solve problems not directly associated with the performance of occupational tasks"<sup>17</sup> (p. 266–267).

Based on the research questions and literature review, the article demonstrates the relevance of Savolainen's work on ELIS to contemporary IL thinking. The chosen methodology is considered appropriate as it contributes to a better theoretical understanding of the concepts with implications for future developments in IL research<sup>18</sup>.

### Information literacy and information-seeking behaviour

Research on all aspects of information need stem from concerns surrounding how people use information in various situations. Information need, in turn, arises from an awareness of the absence of something useful that necessitates seeking or identifying a solution that might contribute to a better understanding and meaning of the situation<sup>19</sup>. In information science, the context of information seeking behaviour is that which is concerned with determining users' information needs, searching behaviour and ultimate utilisation of information resources<sup>20</sup>. In this regard, the literature of IL and information-seeking behaviour is in many ways aligned to the development of models and theories, the purpose of which is to help identify and describe users' information-seeking activity, the causes and consequences of such activity, or the relationships among the stages in their information-seeking behaviour<sup>21</sup>. Of interest to the thesis of this paper is examining the relationship between IL and information-seeking behaviour as important concepts to the development of Savolainen's model of ELIS.

### Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS)

Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) constitute models of information seeking behaviour that seek to understand the processes that surround information seeking and how people access and use various information sources to meet information needs in everyday life situations such as health, consumption, transportation, recreation, crime and

safety, financial matters and other aspects of life not related to formal employment or work practices<sup>22</sup>. Among the major ELIS models include the Sense-Making approach<sup>23</sup>, the Small World Theory<sup>24</sup>, ELIS in the context of way of life<sup>17</sup>, the Model of Information Practices<sup>25</sup>, Information Search Process (ISP)<sup>26</sup>, and so on. These models are premised on the work of Tom Wilson<sup>27</sup> which proposed that there are various ways in which people frequently discover information in their everyday life which may not involve active or purposeful information seeking but could be as serendipitous as encountering an unexpected source, browsing a magazine or watching television in order to meet an information need.

Interest by LIS researchers in using these models has been informed by the need to investigate various forms of information behaviour that do not involve active or purposeful information seeking on the part of the individual<sup>25</sup>. Studies in ELIS have explored diverse groups of people such as teenagers<sup>28</sup>, clergymen<sup>29</sup>, public library users<sup>30</sup> and in the context of leisure<sup>31</sup> such as hobbies<sup>32</sup> and sports<sup>33</sup>. In IL research specifically, ELIS models are considered an evolving area of research within the domain of information-seeking behaviour. They are useful for developing and enhancing user information-seeking skills in diverse socio-cultural contexts<sup>12</sup>.

### **ELIS in the context of the “way of life”**

ELIS in the context of the “way of life” as propounded by Reijo Savolainen is a social scientific concept which provides a broad context by which the social and psychological factors affecting an individual's everyday information seeking can be investigated<sup>17</sup>. The theoretical nexus for Savolainen's concept of ELIS is based on the sociological idea of “Habitus” developed by Pierre Bourdieu<sup>34</sup>. Habitus is an internalised socially and culturally determined way of thinking, perception and evaluation by which an individual can organise their lives. It is considered a relatively stable system of dispositions by which individuals integrate their experiences and evaluate the importance of different choices.

Thus, ELIS in the context of the way of life as described by Savolainen<sup>17</sup> refers to the “order of things” based on the choices that individuals make. “Things” refer to the various activities in the daily life of people which could be not only work-related but also repetitive tasks, such as household care and hobbies. In contrast “order” refers to preferences

given to these work-related and non-work-related activities. The model suggests that “order of things” (that is, the way of life) refers to the most natural or normal way by which an individual organises his/her daily life. While “keeping things in order” (that is, mastery of life) refers to any problem-solving in the effort to restore one's order of things in an individual's life. Because values, conceptions, phase of life, affect the way of life and mastery of life, these two terms determine each other<sup>35</sup>; however, they do not determine how a person ultimately seeks information in various situations<sup>36</sup>.

As shown in Fig. 1, the way of life is seen to provide a general pattern or preference for choosing various sources and channels, and it includes a structure of time budget (working vs leisure time), models of consumption of goods and services and nature of hobbies. Mastery of life, on the other hand, describes preparedness to approach everyday problems in ways that align with personal values, it is associated with pragmatic problem-solving especially in cases where the order of things has been shaken or threatened. It includes optimistic – cognitive mastery of life, pessimistic-cognitive mastery of life, defensive-affective mastery of life and pessimistic-affective mastery of life. In each of these contexts, seeking relevant information is critical as it closes the gap between how things are and how things should be<sup>17</sup>.

### **Literature review**

A common focus in the literature of information behaviour is a study on how professionals seek and use the information to perform job tasks and achieve work-related goals. However, increasing interest in the use and application of ELIS models have led to constructionists' approaches to researching information-seeking behaviour in diverse contexts. Studies using the ELIS model in the context of way of life by Savolainen<sup>17</sup> have sought to examine varied situations of information seeking particularly outside of problems or specific work tasks, including those that take place in leisure and pleasurable contexts and, in this way, have served to identify gaps in the literature of everyday information-seeking behaviour. The literature reviewed in this section examines a few of Savolainen's studies in ELIS in diverse settings that demonstrate the applicability of the model as determined by individual and societal factors.

In practical application, Savolainen's ELIS model was employed on environmental activists<sup>20</sup>. Using a

conceptual framework of information source horizon and information pathways, the study investigated how people define their source preferences in the context of seeking problem-specific information for non-work purposes. Findings indicated that human sources and the Internet were preferred most strongly in seeking for problem-based information. The study highlighted

the use of information source horizons and the preferred information-seeking behaviour of individuals, showing patterns as to the extent people go to in searching for information and the preferences in their search strategies.

In another study on homebuyers<sup>37</sup>, Savolainen sought to elaborate on how source preference criteria

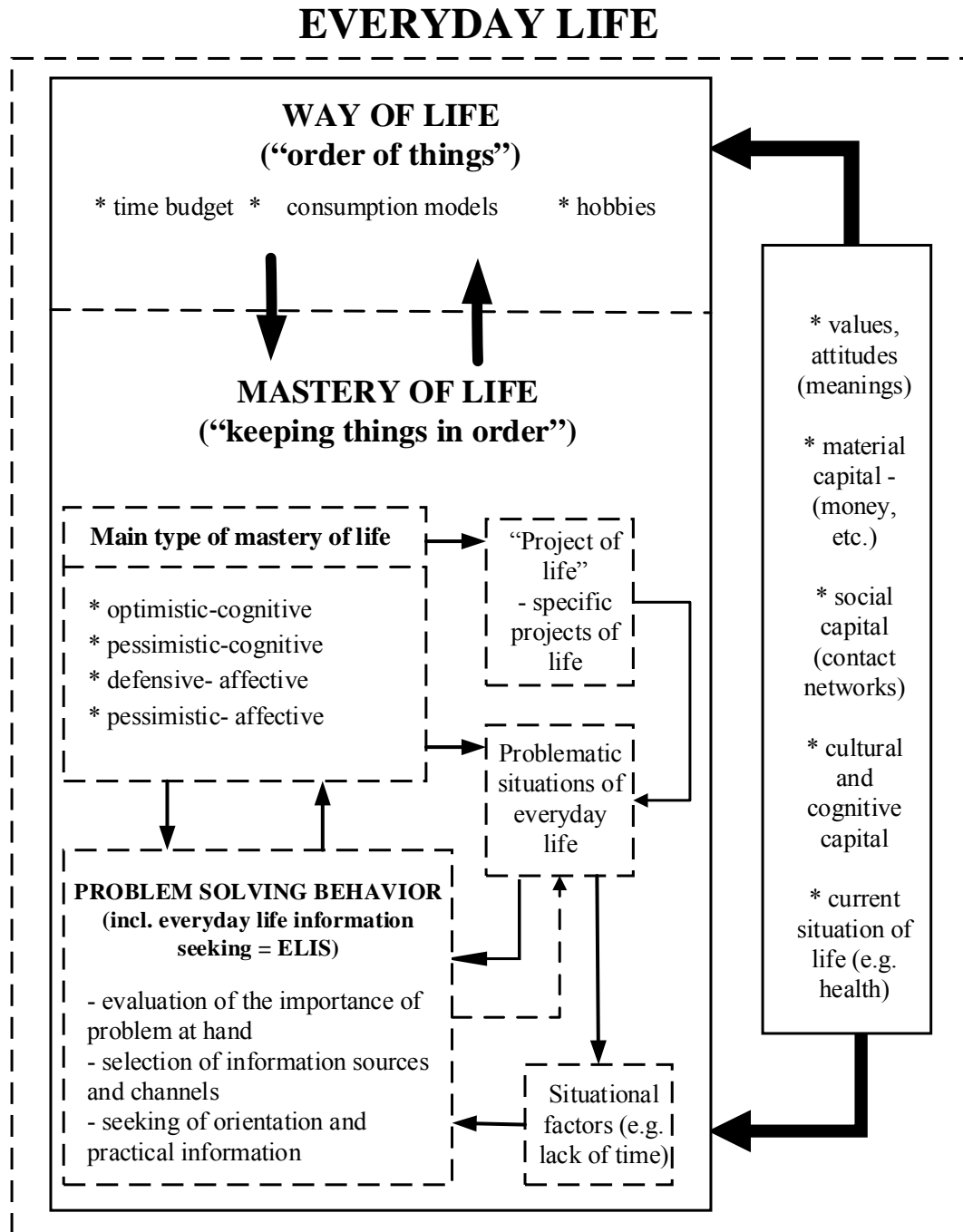


Fig. 1 — Reijo Savolainen (1995) Model: ELIS in the context of “way of life”

are defined in the context of everyday projects. The study examined user preferences of sources when searching in a non-work context for problem-specific information, the aim of which was to determine how information seekers explain their preference criteria in seeking problem specific information based on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of diverse sources. From the outcome, perceived strengths than weaknesses of sources, the content of information, availability and accessibility were found to be among the top criteria for source preference. In contrast, usability was found to be less important. The study thus specified the picture of user defined relevance judgment in the context of everyday life information seeking. Based on the model, it is seen that the source preferences and use patterns individuals select and apply to solve problems or make sense of their everyday world are socially conditioned.

Similarly, Savolainen's study<sup>22</sup> on the role of dietary blogs in everyday information practices indicated that social media platforms could provide useful informational and emotional support to people with diverse everyday problems. The findings further supported the assumption that even though blogs do not primarily offer factual information, such empathic communities enable the seeking and provision of informational support since the main emphasis is on sharing of experiences and opinions by a group of users.

From a review of these studies, it is seen that the concept of Savolainen's ELIS model can be approached from various perspectives and is indicative of how information need is addressed to solve everyday problems by diverse groups of people. These studies also strengthened the assumption that an individual's way of life directs information seeking in a significant way based on the ELIS model<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, such studies as exemplified in varied contexts other than work-related activities, constitute new and innovative research insights that illustrate how Savolainen's<sup>17</sup> ELIS in the context of way of life has become a distinct field of study in investigating the ordinary and normal life activities of people. His emphasis on the idea of social constructionism indicated by the ability to investigate diverse social contexts in the light of daily life occurrences reflects the value of the ELIS model in the information-seeking practices of users.

## **IL, Constructionists' approach and Savolainen's ELIS**

IL is a strong component of lifelong learning which, in the context of the current digital information

age<sup>38</sup>, emphasises the need for the continued ability of the individual to learn and be empowered with critical skills that can be applied to diverse contexts in addressing real-life challenges<sup>39</sup>. According to Martzoukou and Abdi<sup>12</sup>, IL practices that take place within an everyday life context is connected to searching for, critically evaluating and using information effectively to solve everyday problems. Such areas include leisure and community activities, citizenship and social responsibilities, public health and critical life situations. In comparison to research in educational and workplace contexts, however, it is noted that research in IL within ELIS in the context of way of life is considered a developing area. The application of Savolainen's ELIS model from a social constructionists' perspective concerning IL is surveyed in this aspect of the paper.

Constructionists' approaches to IL have been explored particularly concerning the socio-cultural contexts; this dimension of IL research is reflective of the growing complexity of the concept and its changing conceptualisations. Constructionists' approaches present a view of IL not mainly as a skill but as information practice that is situated within specific contexts<sup>40</sup>. A notable method in most of Savolainen's studies of the ELIS model is the adoption of the social constructionists' approach to information-seeking behaviour which considers the social context not only as a factor influencing the individual information user's cognitive processes but as the primary focus of theoretical attention. This approach<sup>41</sup> also emphasises the social processes and relationships<sup>42</sup> which underpin users' information behaviour and provides a theoretical lens through which LIS researchers can gain a clearer picture of information seeking. Savolainen's views<sup>20</sup> of information use as practice shifts the emphasis away from individuals and their skills towards people as members of groups and communities. This view helps to provide a distinct perspective on the concept of ELIS, particularly in aspects relating to leisure and pleasurable contexts. Similarly, it helps to illustrate the richness of everyday life situations, which is of particular significance for promoting the diverse nature of IL within everyday communities outside the conventional workplace or educational contexts.

Research explorations in everyday life information seeking in IL serve to connect a person's social interaction and the use of information sources within various groups and the processes involved. Papen

argues<sup>41</sup> that research in everyday life requires greater attention to how knowledge is constructed and assessed by users. This approach helps in fostering collective competency and context-specific skills through learning practices<sup>43</sup>. Extensive studies<sup>44</sup> earlier conducted by Lloyd<sup>45</sup>, have also emphasised the need for research in IL to be directed towards understanding the complex socio-cultural and embodied nature of diverse information environments. This argument is based on the fact that the manifestations of IL are better understood within the context in which it is experienced and helps to shape and influence what is learnt and how it is learnt in that context<sup>6</sup>. Thus, from a social constructionists' perspective, IL in ELIS is seen to be a holistic approach that gives more meaning to an individual's experience of information seeking beyond the mere attainment or development of information skills<sup>12</sup>.

Consequently, in the light of changing conceptualisations of IL, implementations of the current ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education<sup>3</sup> must seek to promote deeper research explorations of the socio-cultural aspects of IL as an over-arching concept that transcends the acquisition of skills to a unified construct that supports and promotes the production and distribution of knowledge in diverse socio-cultural contexts of everyday life<sup>4</sup>.

### Discussion and analyses

From the foregoing, research in Savolainen's<sup>17</sup> ELIS in the context of way of life shows the strong inter-relationship between the concept of IL and the information-seeking practices of people in diverse contexts of everyday life. At this juncture, further exploration of Savolainen's work on ELIS in relation to IL is discussed in the context of the research questions of the paper:

1. What is the relevance of Savolainen's work on ELIS to contemporary IL thinking?

Within the domains of IL and ELIS in the context of way of life, research studies are aimed at addressing the variety of information needs that occur in diverse human information-seeking practices. The idea of ELIS as conceptualised by Savolainen<sup>17</sup> has become an established area of research within the domain of information seeking behaviour<sup>12</sup>. From the review and analyses of some of Savolainen's studies, it is seen that the ELIS model in the context of way of life is opening opportunities to examine IL

experiences in diverse aspects of everyday life including hobbies and leisure activities. Interests in researching such areas are directed at investigating aspects of everyday information seeking that demonstrate IL practices within ordinary life settings which may have implications of practical outcomes on individual and community lives in terms of providing support and empowerment through efficient skills development for lifelong learning.

The relevance of Savolainen's<sup>17</sup> ELIS in the context of way of life to IL is that it is among the few research-based models of information seeking behaviour that is linked to the context of a research process. Its ability to focus on non-active information seeking in ways that reflect the socio-cultural dimension of information practices in diverse contexts indicate a significant shift from the usually more structured academic and professional work settings thereby providing a more general understanding of the broader socio-cultural conditions within which individuals operate in information seeking<sup>46</sup>. Savolainen is regarded as among the first scholars to introduce a strong focus on the everyday life context. His idea of everyday information-seeking behaviour as a theoretical/conceptual framework has set information seeking and use in the context of socio-cultural factors in ways that influence how individuals select and use information sources and channels in ordinary everyday life situations<sup>31</sup>.

2. How can constructionists' approaches as advocated in Savolainen's ELIS further enhance research in IL?

IL in the context of Savolainen's ELIS enables the individual to carefully analyse and reflect on how information is applied to everyday life challenges as well as question the dominant values and beliefs in their own socio-cultural contexts in ways that empower them with the capacity to make informed decisions for daily living<sup>47</sup>. Savolainen's description<sup>17</sup> of the two major components of ELIS - way of life (that is "order of things") and mastery of life (that is "keeping things in order") are seen to be prioritised subjectively and objectively by the individual in decision making in such situations. His idea of information source horizons in which the individual tries to make sense of problematic situations shows how they can determine the preferred source of information in everyday life information seeking for problem-solving. Thus, in ELIS in the context of way

of life, one's body of knowledge is the basis for their information behaviour in daily life situations and the level of interest they have in a particular daily activity dictates how they prioritise everyday information-seeking for decision making<sup>17</sup>.

Consequently, the research context of IL and ELIS in everyday life information seeking has allowed for a shift in focus from the individual as a unit of analysis to the broader socio-cultural context<sup>48</sup>. The social constructionists' approach reflected in Savolainen's<sup>17</sup> ELIS model thus provides a potential theoretical framework for studying the holistic information experiences of the individual in his or her given social context in a way that aligns with and contributes to the wider discourse of IL in diverse contexts. Similarly, it is noted that the current shift in IL research concerns<sup>49</sup> from the educational and workplace contexts to aspects relating to leisure, health and the political dimensions of IL involving active participation by citizens in democratic and electoral processes are strong indications<sup>9</sup> of the growing all-encompassing nature of IL as being linked to everyday life situations<sup>10</sup>. As research in IL and ELIS continue to evolve, it is anticipated that practical implications could provide further insight on how people, particularly the information-poor or disadvantaged, can be supported and empowered to develop effective IL and critical thinking skills for problem-solving in diverse everyday life contexts.

## Conclusion

This paper examined constructionists' approaches to IL with specific reference to Reijo Savolainen's<sup>17</sup> literary work on ELIS. Analyses reveal that social constructionists' approaches to IL research are gaining more influence and expanding the research inquiry base into areas outside of educational and professional contexts. Thus, information seeking practices in ELIS as propounded by Savolainen<sup>17</sup> in relation to the concept of IL is allowing a more holistic and complex view of how humans seek information including phenomena surrounding pleasurable and profound things in life. This approach is affording LIS researchers a more general understanding of the broader socio-cultural conditions<sup>50</sup> in information use and also informing possible future directions of policy changes regarding neglected areas of LIS research<sup>51</sup>. Even though the theoretical approach employed constitutes a limitation to the paper, the general analyses of the issues provide important considerations for the continued exploration

of IL and ELIS through empirically based studies which could also inform future developments in the educational curricula of IL.

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