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Singing in the rain: the role of umbrella concepts in library and information science

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper considers the function and use of *umbrella concepts* within the library and information science (LIS) discipline.

Method. This paper uses the example of information avoidance to examine how umbrella concepts shape LIS theoretical work, including how they impact the theorisation of an emerging discipline.

Analysis. We use on Hirsch and Levin's (1999) umbrella concept lifecycle to examine how umbrella concepts develop and, potentially, how they disappear.

Results. We suggest that while umbrella concepts provide a useful way to unite disparate or emerging strands of research, they can also constrain the development of a field when the label becomes a convenience rather than an invitation to continue the theoretical work needed to progress scholarly constructs.

Conclusion. We finish by considering how this examination of umbrella concepts plays into continued debates about the theoretical structure of LIS (or lack of it) as well as offering suggestions for future research priorities in this area.

Introduction

The umbrella concept, which is used to bring together or *'encompass and account for a set of diverse phenomena'* (Hirsch and Levin, 1999, p. 200), will be familiar to library and information science (LIS) researchers. Often used interchangeably with umbrella construct and umbrella term, the umbrella concept has been used to integrate new ideas into LIS as well as to unite disparate areas of study. Nonetheless, while *umbrella concept* is a common term in LIS research, we argue that there is a lack of awareness about what constitutes an umbrella concept and how it is brought into being. There has additionally been little consideration of the impact of the term within LIS, including how its use shapes theorisation. This short paper forms an initial attempt to interrogate the use of this term within LIS and to explore its connotations for ongoing research in this area. We will use the example of information avoidance to explore the value that umbrella concepts have to our field as well as to start a discussion about what the use of this framing device implies.

Use of umbrella concepts within LIS

Theories and concepts of major phenomena are defined as *'assumptions, definitions, and propositions which explain a group of observed facts or phenomena in a field or discipline'* (Busha and Harter, 1980, p. 13). These theoretical constructions represent mental images expressed as subjective thoughts around things encountered in daily life and form the foundation of the conceptual framework of the subject under investigation (Ikoja-Odongo, 2002, p. 86). Some of these constructions are defined as complex concepts that *'can be broken into basic concepts, so defined most or all of the time, with a degree of shared understanding suitable for the purposes of information science'* (Szostack, 2011, p. 2248). In its beginnings, LIS researchers relied on theories from other disciplines to interpret their findings. The formulation of umbrella concepts is part of the shift towards establishing conceptual frameworks that have been uniquely tailored to the needs of the field, or rigorously tested, refined and adapted for application within information science (Kuhlthau, 2005). While the elaboration of theory may have been limited by the applied dimensions of LIS (Sonnenwald, 2016, p. 2), conceptual work is key for the development of new understandings about information phenomena as well as more relevant practice and policy.

One of the first LIS papers to employ the term umbrella concept was Savolainen (2007a, p. 109), who positioned information behaviour and information practice as two rival umbrella concepts that, in drawing upon different discourses, suggest *'different approaches to metatheoretical and methodological issues.'* However, although Savolainen (2007a, p. 111) labelled the discourses that inform information behaviour and information practice as *'fragmentary and fuzzy'* and acknowledged that an umbrella concept unites disparate ideas, he did not go on to justify the use of the term. Along the same lines, his suggestion that boundaries between umbrella concepts may be *'elusive'* or less rigid than presumed (Savolainen, 2007a, p. 119) and that terms might become *'too broad'* (Savolainen, 2007a, p. 116) indicate that umbrella concepts occupy a useful theoretical role within LIS. Notwithstanding, his work remains firmly focused on the treatment of information interactions rather than their structuring devices. More recently, LIS authors have started to question the separation of information behaviour and practice into two separate umbrella terms, citing *'persisting vagueness'* (Dalmer and Huvila, 2020, p. 96) about differences as well as confusion about the relationships between sub-concepts (Agarwal, 2022).

Beyond Savolainen, umbrella concepts have been used to refer to related LIS ideas, including big data (Hadi et al., 2018), and information literacy (Lloyd et al., 2013). Yakei (2007, p. 338) suggests digital curation could form an umbrella concept for the related areas of *'digital preservation, data curation, and digital asset and electronic records management,'* but other authors critique this neologism for being too imprecise (Stevens, 2013) or too far removed from professional practice (Dallas, 2016), providing a further indication of how umbrella terms are intricately entwined with the establishment and focusing of subfields of study. Other authors have used umbrella concepts to consider the LIS discipline: Ibekwe et al. (2019) examine how the umbrella concepts of

informatics and informatology failed to displace the narrower fields of library science, documentation and information science. Lor (2014) further expresses concern that umbrella concepts are too far removed from empirical research to benefit the field. However, while these papers indicate that umbrella concepts have value, including by facilitating ongoing reflection on the evolution of LIS, specific details of what this value may be are underexplored.

The example of information avoidance

The loose use of the umbrella concept within LIS is exemplified through a consideration of information avoidance (IA). Over the last few years, our research group has explored IA, a broad concept that is often discussed in LIS and other disciplines, yet which is subject to varying terminology and assumptions. Before we started this project, we assumed that we thought about IA in a similar way to other scholars. However, our deep dive into the concept showed us that researchers employ many terms and ideas to refer to what we understand as IA or aspects of it (Hicks et al., 2025). In effect, we had assumed that information avoidance formed an umbrella concept, yet, as we explain below, our research demonstrated that this was not the case. Like Savolainen (2007a, p. 110), our focus on IA acknowledged the need to raise a familiar concept as a *'legitimate object ... of inquiry [that] should not be accepted without posing questions about [it] origins and legitimacy'*. Somewhat ironically, neither our group nor Savolainen turned this inquiry to the overarching umbrella concept construct. This oversight forms the basis of this short paper.

The lifecycle of an umbrella concept

We started our examination of umbrella concepts by turning to Hirsch and Levin (1999), two scholars who explored the construct within their discipline of organisational studies. They propose that umbrella concepts have both cognitive and political benefits, including allowing for the organisation of concepts into more ordered systems of knowledge; keeping a discipline connected and relevant to the practitioner world; and allowing researchers to make their research more visible and legitimised by linking it to an already institutionalised overarching concept. Hirsch and Levin (1999, p. 206) also propose that some fields are more likely to create umbrella concepts than others, arguing that the *'more a field lacks theoretical consensus, the more it will rely on umbrella constructs to tie together different research elements'*. They develop these ideas further by tracing umbrella concepts through four lifecycle stages: *emerging excitement*, in which the umbrella concept comes together; the *validity challenge*, in which the umbrella concept is seen as too broad, disparate or difficult to measure; *tidying up with typologies*, in which scholars aim to organise research into more useful ways of thinking; and *outcomes*, in which either the challenges to the umbrella concept are overridden and this may arise due to better theorising, the concept becomes a permanent point of discussion, or the concept undergoes construct collapse because it cannot be made coherent (Hirsch and Levin, 1999). Offering a useful framework through which to begin to draw out theoretical development within a discipline, this lifecycle also recognises the impact of stakeholders within applied fields of study.

Information avoidance as umbrella case study

The possibilities afforded by Hirsch and Levin's (1999) lifecycle model sparked our interest and we considered that IA could provide a useful example through which we could begin to explore umbrella concepts in LIS. Drawing upon a recent critical conceptual review of IA (Hicks et al., 2025), we judged that IA entered the first phase of the lifecycle model, *emerging excitement*, in the 1980s and 1990s when LIS scholars (e.g., Krikelas, 1983; Kuhlthau, 1991; Chatman, 1999) queried the absence of avoidance from the field's defining models and conceptualisations. This early work then led to an increasing number of empirical studies in the early 2000s (e.g., Savolainen, 2007b; Barbour et al., 2012), which eventually pushed IA into the second stage of the lifecycle, *validity challenge*. In this phase, authors questioned the naming of IA (Manheim, 2014) while further bringing new terms under the umbrella, including minimising (Vaillo et al, 2018), delegating

(Addison, 2017) and hedging (Hicks and Lloyd, 2022). We judged that this broadening of interest pushed IA into the third stage of the lifecycle, *tidying up with typologies*, in which researchers started to organise work in this field (e.g., Klaus, 2021). It was at this point that our research group became involved. However, rather than merely contributing to this tidying process, our critical conceptual review aimed to move IA towards the final *outcomes* stage in the lifecycle model.

Taking a step back, we realised that we needed to think more deeply about the relationship between the umbrella concept and our conceptualisation of IA. Reviewer comments for our critical conceptual review (Hicks et al., 2025) indicate that there is still some typology tidying to be done. However, our theorisation illustrated the value in moving away from an ever-increasing expansion of the umbrella to create a more theoretically dense construct. Reflection on our decision to reconsider the umbrella concept also helped us to think about the implications of our work within LIS. Noting that the umbrella concept expands the conceptualisation of the field, including by facilitating reflection, comparison and the introduction of new ideas, we also recognised that it forms a flexible rhetorical move, creating a discursive opportunity to ‘*lump*’ certain things together, minimising differences while ‘*splitting*’ them from other things and maximising the differences between what is inside and outside the umbrella (Zerubavel, 1996). For example, whereas Savolainen (2007a) employs the umbrella concept to distinguish information behaviour from information practices, Huvila and Gorichanaz (2024) use the same term to consolidate multiple areas of research, emphasising the commonalities and minimising the very distinctions Savolainen (2007a) seeks to maximise:

We use the term ‘information behavior’ as an umbrella ... while acknowledging that different researchers and subfields prefer other terms and frameworks, including information practices, information experience, and health information seeking, to name a few. In this review, we embrace all these approaches as part of a shared vision rather than attempt to separate them. (Huvila and Gorichanaz, 2024, p.216)

Gathering conceptual items together and distinguishing them from other things is an act of both classification and boundary-setting. As a discipline, we are deeply attuned to the ways that classifications have consequences (Bowker and Star, 1999); we know that uniting things prevents us from seeing the differences within and the similarities across categories. We also know that the bigger the conceptual category, the more flexible but less specific it is, with categories that become too big functioning as a label rather than a useful theoretical device. In our research, however, LIS scholars tend to group ideas as umbrella concepts, fixing them in place relative to one another with little examination of what the umbrella is for. In short, we use the term umbrella concept as an umbrella concept, a flexible and convenient category that we rarely engage with.

Conclusions

As authors, we have thought about what this might say about our discipline. The many critiques of LIS as atheoretical or poorly theorised suggest a desire for a precise, mature, finished discipline where there is both a theoretical consensus and a peaceful coexistence of its many origins. Our disciplinary model period, when numerous models of information seeking sought to systematise messy processes for translation into information retrieval systems, further indicates that we also like certainty and neat classifications. However, we suggest that using the umbrella concept, which echoes the iterative conceptualisation of relationships that is reminiscent of grounded theory, lets us deny, overcome or set aside the ambiguity that is inherent to our discipline. Instead, we encourage colleagues to reflect on what we mean when we employ umbrella concept terminology as well as why we use it. For example, what does the distinction between Savolainen (2007a) and Huvila and Gorichanaz (2024) signal about information practice as an umbrella concept? Does this represent a validity challenge or is it evidence that the discipline desires to tidy up typologies? We also encourage our colleagues to use the umbrella concept to think about the ambiguity and

emergence that characterise people's interactions with information, as we have done with information avoidance. This, we argue, can help us to embrace the dynamism of our discipline and acknowledge it as growth.

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