"I've only been here for two days, how do you…?": WhatsApp group as a social and collaborative information seeking platform for Muslim expatriate women in Qatar

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Abstract. Drawing on the unified framework of Social and Collaborative Information Seeking (SCIS) and situated in the context of everyday life information seeking (ELIS), this study explores the information seeking behaviour of expatriate Muslim women as they move into and acclimate to life in the Middle East. Using the communication and information exchanges amongst an existing, user-initiated WhatsApp group whose sole purpose is to support women moving into the capital city of Qatar, this research examines the unique information needs expressed through group chat as well as the dynamic roles members play alternating between information seekers, providers, collaborators, and supporters. Computational analysis, qualitative coding, and questionnaire data help us understand how the group functions as a tool for women as they seek information and make sense of their new environment with the help and support of virtual strangers.

Keywords: Social and Collaborative Information Seeking (SCIS), information behavior, WhatsApp.

1   Introduction

This study investigates the use of the smartphone mobile application WhatsApp for information seeking and sharing by expatriate, non-national Muslim women in the Arabian (often termed Persian) Gulf city of Doha, Qatar. Transitioning to a new environment presents numerous challenges and many women arriving in this modern and diverse city actively seek information through social media tools to meet specific needs. The use of WhatsApp as an information seeking tool is itself for some women an adaptation to life in the Middle East where there are an estimated 140 million smartphone users and "direct messaging is the most pervasive form of digital communication in the region with 93 percent of people reporting that they send messages this way" [1]. Whatsapp is the dominant messaging application for all generations [2]. In addition to everyday life questions and answers, these platforms offer opportunities for social engagement and active support, often prompting users to

shift roles and even increase their investment of effort to become an integral part of developing a collaborative network with common goals. The social and collaborative aspects of information seeking are well known although not as thoroughly studied as other aspects of the information seeking process [3]. Social information seeking (SIS) often takes place online through participatory social networks and is characterized by the means and motivations of participants in seeking and sharing information. Collaborative information seeking (CIS) is an "information seeking process that takes place among a small group of participants who are working on a collaborative project that is intentional, interactive, and mutually beneficial" [4]. This research aims to explore the intersection and nature of social and collaborative information seeking (SCIS) within a particular group as members seek, share, and make sense of information in order to "address problems that are too difficult or even impossible for one person to solve" [3, p. 140].

The authors have been presented a unique opportunity to collect data from the daily social and collaborative information seeking practices of 256 women living in Doha who use a WhatsApp group for the explicit (and sole) purpose of seeking and sharing information about all aspects of setting up, living in, and leaving Doha. This group of women provides an example of information seeking, not by natives of the country but for the most part from women like themselves who have migrated to the country for work or the work of a family member (parent or spouse). Through this study we hope to understand how a diverse group of expatriate women living in Doha utilize the capabilities offered by technology, in this case the smartphone application, WhatsApp, to seek and share information. WhatsApp enables group communication and collaboration on a relatively large scale.

The group of 256 women calls itself a sisterhood of English-speaking (but generally multilingual) individuals primarily from the UK, US, Canada, Australia, India, and Pakistan with a minority of members hailing from a multitude of other countries, from Somalia, the Sudan, Syria, Indonesia, and Oman to South Africa, Portugal and Egypt. A newcomer to Qatar is presented with intense information needs due to the multi-faceted, lingual, and cultural nature of daily life. For example in order to get a drivers' license one must present certain documentation in Arabic, however obtaining internet service can be done in English. Qatar is a country of 2.7 million people [5] clustered largely around the capital city of Doha. An estimated eighty-eight percent of the population are expatriates with native Qataris composing just twelve percent of the population [6]. The transient nature of the workforce in the Gulf due to stringent citizenship and immigration law means that there is a constant flux of people entering and leaving the country for employment or study. "Expatriates, foreign workers, and non-national workers…share similar experiences when exposed to new cultures and environments, such as culture shock, language difficulties and adjusting to host-country locales" [7, p. 3959]. Such transitions often lack support in terms of information and formal orientation [8]. However informal support may be accessible through internet and social media channels; smartphones in

particular have become part of everyday life allowing unmediated access to information resources [9]. Smartphone and social media use is high in the region with eight in 10 internet users active on Facebook and WhatsApp platforms [2].

Research Questions

RQ1: How do women use this social and collaborative group to fulfill their information and social needs? What is the nature of information requests posed by participants?

RQ2: What roles do women play in the group (e.g. information provider, cheerleader, challenger)? Do roles shift among members within the group?

RQ3: Is there evidence of social and collaborative information seeking?

2   Methods

A highly active WhatsApp group, the Doha Sisterhood, was selected based upon the expressed purpose of the forum, which is to support expatriate women as they acclimate to their new life in Doha. With the permission of the WhatsApp group administrators, we harvested the chat records (including texts, links, photos, and videos) posted to the group for four months, September – December, 2017. Using both computational analysis and manual qualitative coding we have begun to identify and categorize search tasks as they occur naturally through participants' inquiries.

3   Contributions

This study is situated at the intersection of collaborative info seeking (CIS) and social information seeking (SIS). It allows us to observe how individuals look for specific information about living in Doha via mobile technology as well as how multiple individuals collaborate to provide answers to questions that can sometimes be challenging and multi-layered. The ways in which one's country of origin may impact the level of access or ease one experiences in living in Doha also means that some answers provided on the group chat may not be appropriate for all members. However, information seeking may be an important factor in adjusting to an unfamiliar environment in lieu of a designated support system [8]. There is limited research on the experience of cultural adaptation, relationship building, and information seeking behavior of the growing number of Western female expatriates living in the Middle East [10]. Our research offers unique contributions to the research agenda of Social and Collaborative Information Seeking (SCIS) through the use of data harvested from a pre-existing social media group as well its focus on

everyday life information seeking. Previous studies typically rely on questionnaire and interview data [11,12] as well as purpose-built intervention and evaluation groups [13] to characterize the experiences of WhatsApp group chat users. We examine participant communication and information exchange in a natural and real-world setting affording a glimpse into the everyday life information seeking behavior of women as they acclimate to a new environment by connecting on a virtual platform. Recent political events in the region, with Qatar being the victim of an economic and political blockade by neighboring Gulf countries has increased the information needs of the women on the WhatsApp group as they work to gain mastery of life in light of the pressures that the blockade has placed on everyday life (especially travel and resource location).

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