

Information Fencesitting:

Information behavior of people undecided about having children,
as seen through subreddit 'r/fencesitter'

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Introduction to Fencesitters

About four years ago, I had something of a quarter-life crisis. After more than two decades of assuming my life would follow certain steps: school, work, marriage, children (at that point, I was up to three out of the four), I began to wonder what my life would look like without children of my own. Though I was happily married, I was suddenly unsettled by how I'd always assumed we'd have children, and I found myself needing stronger reasons to make such a life-changing decision.

The more I pondered it, though, the more puzzled I became. How had I gone from kids as a given, to completely uncertain about whether to have them at all? I needed more information, ideally from people facing a similar conundrum, as my husband was as ambivalent as I was. The problem was, I wasn't sure where to turn. At this time, I lived in a conservative, family-oriented part of the southern U.S., and had been raised in an area with similar values. All around me, people were having children, leaving me to regularly field questions from family, friends, co-workers, and even strangers about when I'd be next. Occasionally, when I tried joking 'never,' I'd get horrified looks. Due to this environment, I couldn't ask people in my own social network for information on how to decide whether to have children.

So, I turned to the internet with my information need. Though I don't remember how I found it, I eventually landed on a subreddit called "r/fencesitter" (Reddit, n.d.), which claims to be "a safe place for those who aren't sure whether they want to have kids, or not."

Over the years I've spent browsing, seeking, and gathering information on this subreddit, trying to reach a decision, I've observed fascinating information behavior, both my own and that of others. Thus, in this paper, I'll be exploring the information behavior of the social group "fencesitters," people unsure of whether to have children, or not—as seen through the lens of the dedicated subreddit, r/fencesitter.

Frameworks for Fencesitting: Information Poverty, Sense-Making, and ISP

In constructing a theoretical framework for the information behavior of fencesitters, I consulted the work of Chatman on information poverty (1996), Kuhlthau on information search process (1991), and Dervin on sense-making (1992).

Before fencesitter information behavior can be thoroughly explored, Chatman's theory of information poverty (1996) is worth discussing. Though information poverty is often tied to economic poverty, it can be applied to other spheres (Chatman, 1996). Based on Chatman's first proposition that the information poor view themselves to be "devoid of any sources that might help them," and third proposition that "information poverty is determined by self-protective behaviors which are used in response to social norms" (1996, p. 197), fencesitters often perceive themselves to be information poor. People frequently begin their first posts on the forum with disclaimers such as, "I don't know who else to talk to" or "I can't discuss this with my family."

Unsurprisingly, internet forums are a valuable outlet for the information poor (Hasler, Ruthven, & Buchanan, 2014). In their research, which builds on Chatman's 1996 work, Hasler et al. (2014) state that after health conditions, relationships and pregnancy are the second and third most discussed topics on online forums, precisely the intersection at which fencesitters are situated. According to Hasler et al. (2014), people share information in online forums about uncomfortable topics such as unwanted pregnancies, or uncertainty about having children, because it would be socially taboo to talk about or seek information on these topics openly—demonstrating information poverty (Hasler et al., 2014). On the fencesitter subreddit, people routinely bring up socially unacceptable or awkward situations, attempting to climb out of their information poverty by seeking information from a relatively information-rich group, r/fencesitter. For instance, tokophobia, or

panic-inducing fear of childbirth, is routinely discussed, something not often covered in public discourse. Wishing to give information for the benefit of those still on the fence, people also post confessions wishing they hadn't had children, a feeling often completely suppressed in public.

Eventually, however, fencesitters move beyond their information poverty into information seeking, a process that blends elements of information search process (ISP) and sense-making in hopes of becoming information-rich enough to make a decision. Usually, fencesitters have encountered a gap in their experience (Dervin, 1992), in which they've become aware they don't know whether they want to have a child. Some fencesitters are like me, in that they spent much of their life thinking they would have kids, even actively desiring to, and then, their minds change and they now have an information gap. Conversely, some fencesitters didn't want children, but now find themselves considering the possibility. Either way, they've reached what Dervin would term a gap (1992), or what Kuhlthau would deem the first stage of the information search process, initiation (1991).

To some extent, this is where Dervin's sense-making falls apart for fencesitters, or at least it does for me. To stay true to Dervin's model, as a fencesitter I would essentially need to build two sense-making bridges to seek information for two possible outcomes: life with children, and without them. As fencesitters stare down two outcomes that oppose one another, they've reached a fork in the road on their sense-making bridges, a scenario Dervin doesn't address. Dervin's sense-making also seems to leave out emotion. She speaks of strategy, definitions, and tactical movements (1992, p. 68-69), which might not be applicable to the emotional turmoil fencesitters experience while seeking information, not to mention the social anxiety of researching an information-poor topic.

Thus, Kuhlthau's ISP seems to encapsulate the best path forward for fencesitters, particularly as it accounts for feelings at every stage. In the first stage, initiation, users may feel uncertain as they seek background information (Kuhlthau, 1991), and this uncertainty may be more acute due to information poverty (Chatman, 1996; Hasler et al., 2014). The second stage, selection, is likely where most people unsure about having children encounter r/fencesitter. For many, this is a true information encounter, in that it's likely spontaneous. As Kuhlthau predicts, fencesitters usually feel optimism at this point, due to finding like-minded people and helpful information.

The inclusion of emotions in information seeking is a sticking point in much of Savolainen's research, as well as in Kalbach's (2006). Savolainen discusses a similar process to Kuhlthau's in his 2014 paper on emotions as motivators in information seeking, though Savolainen seems to uncover more negative emotions in the process than Kuhlthau does, something many fencesitters would likely agree with, as the process of information seeking around an impactful decision can be agonizing. Kalbach updates Kuhlthau's process for internet information seeking, incorporating the element of Google's 'I'm feeling lucky' to describe the anticipation felt when first searching. However, Kalbach's updated process focuses on task-oriented information-seeking, and less on complex decisions, making it less relevant to fencesitters.

Returning to Kuhlthau's ISP, confusion and frustration in information seeking may reoccur in the third phase, exploration, as fencesitters attempt to process their own thoughts, experiences, and feelings, in order to find the information they need on whether or not to have a child. To use Kuhlthau's terminology, fencesitters are trying to become oriented, to reach a stage in which they have gathered enough information to proceed forward (1991, p. 366). While it may be a stage of doubting, it seems to be the most active for information behavior. In this stage, fencesitters might

use a variety of forum resources, such as reading Ask Me Another (AMA) posts, in which people who've made a decision about having kids talk about why and how, or such as consulting various resources recommended by the forum, like other subreddits, books, and even therapy. Fencesitters may also post directly to the forum about their situation, sharing information, seeking information, and ultimately hoping to ignite information flow among other fencesitters to share even more information. Also in this stage, fencesitters may share information about related, but tangential topics to deciding whether to have a kid, such as family trauma, relationship issues, climate/environmental concerns (and oft-cited reason for not having kids), mental health, and medical procedures such as egg freezing and sterilization. However, information may be hidden, though usually not on the subreddit itself. Many fencesitters use masked identities or throwaway accounts to seek information on r/fencesitter—again, mostly due to information poverty factors, of which Chatman discusses deception as a side effect (1996).

When fencesitters begin to enter Kuhlthau's final stages of formulation, collection, and presentation, fencesitters get off the fence, and one of two things usually happens: 1) either they disappear, sometimes to a new subreddit, such as r/beyondthebump (for new parents) or r/childfree, or 2) they become heavy information sharers on r/fencesitter itself, hosting AMAs as mentioned above and offering information and advice to those just starting their information seeking around whether to have a child. As Kuhlthau notes, users can feel either satisfaction or disappointment in the presentation stage, and r/fencesitter has information on both. Interestingly, though, Kuhlthau's research uncovered that only half of users ever reach the focused final stages, and it'd be fascinating to know whether that's true for fencesitters or not. Technically, though,

indecision is a decision when it comes to having children, as most of us will reach a point at which we no longer can do so, at least not biologically.

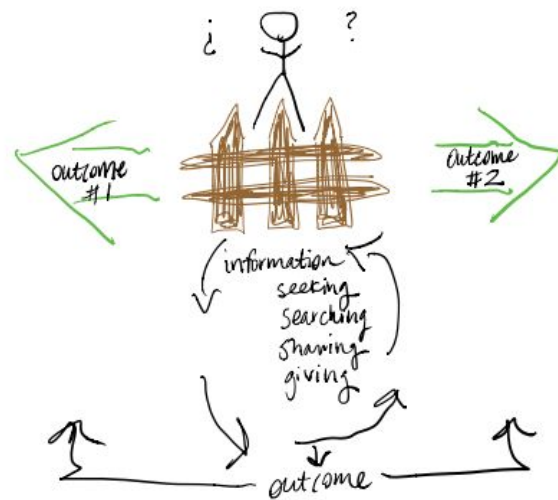
While the three concepts above are central to fencesitters, a few other theories and concepts are of relevance as well. One is the concept of information triangulation (Greyson, 2018), which can be difficult to accomplish in an information-poor environment, but is employed by fencesitters with more supportive networks and by those who choose to seek out professional help in the form of therapists and doctors. As fencesitting becomes less taboo and more information-rich (and evidence suggests it is, as birth rates plummet in the U.S. and other developed nations), information triangulation may become more common, as it helps users assess and make sense of large amounts of information, and involves comparing expert and lay perspectives (Greyson, 2018), which is an information-rich divide that mirrors Chatman's concept of insider/outsider among the information poor (1996).

Savolainen's ELIS theory (2014) can also be applied, though the 'mastery of life' terminology seems insensitive to fencesitters contemplating a rather large roadblock on their way to life mastery. However, three of Savolainen's types of mastery of life could frame three states of fencesitters. Before, when unaware of their information need, fencesitters are defensive-affective, where they may avoid risk-taking behaviors or be unrealistic; during, when processing their information needs, fencesitters are pessimistic-cognitive and unsure of whether they'll ever decide and get off the fence; and, after, when they've satisfied their information need and made a decision, fencesitters are optimistic-cognitive, feeling capable of solving any problem.

Fencesitting as Information Behavior: A New Model?

For me, fencesitters reveal an anomaly unaddressed in information behavior, wherein a user is confronted with two equally viable, but opposing, outcomes. Most information behavior theories

and models suggest singular, forward-facing, outcome-oriented trajectories. While they may meander or involve extensive time in various explorational stages as in Kuhlthau's ISP model, they have exit points, generally implied to be definitive. Whereas for fencesitters, information seeking happens on two simultaneous, but completely different, levels. To demonstrate this, I've proposed a new model, called information fencesitting.



Plus, while a decision may eventually be reached, it may or may not be a definitive outcome. In the case of choosing to not have children, one can leave that door cracked, but not completely shut for a long time, leaving the option of adoption or surrogacy on the table, which may incite brand new information seeking. Though the situation of two opposite, but equal, destinations for information seeking is likely not a common situation for users, it's one that should at least be considered in the design of information systems and information behavior models.

The Future of Fencesitters

In 2010, a variety of information behavior experts gathered together at a conference to forecast the future of the field. They predicted the following: "...as developments in information and communication technologies make the information tools we use more portable, mobile and accessible at any time...the old dividing lines between contexts are blurring. Context is becoming an integrated multiple, rather than a singular, and these multiple contexts impact information behavior simultaneously" (Burnett & Erdelez, 2010). As we approach 2020, and as the internet becomes more embedded in our daily lives, this seems to be coming true. Much like Jaeger and Burnett's

information worlds theory, many of us are trying to bump and break into other information worlds bubbles at any given moment (2010). This is essentially what fencesitters are doing: straddling the bubbles of two information worlds at once, blurring the lines between social contexts, and trying to figure out which one they should break into. Hopefully, as this becomes more common, information poverty among fencesitters will lessen, and their predicament will become less cloistered.

Unfortunately for fencesitters, there's really no in-between, fully blurred option, but some will wait things out on the fence, or on the barrier between bubbles, for as long as they possibly can.

Deciding whether or not to have children is a huge decision that may require a novel blend of information behaviors to problem-solve.

As we trend toward a future filled with more information than ever, it may be worthwhile for fencesitters, and others encountering difficult information seeking experiences, to consider the following wisdom—from a book called *All Joy and No Fun*, which was recommended on r/fencesitter, and which I subsequently read:

“Just a few generations ago, most people didn't wake up in the morning and fret about whether or not they were living their lives to the fullest... If most of us don't know what to do with our abundant choices and the pressures we feel to make the most of them, it may simply be because they're so new” (Senior, 2015).

Anxiety over how to behave in the face of information overload only seems to be increasing, and as information professionals, we'll have to find a way promote effective, less overwhelming, and more emotionally healthy information behavior.

As for myself and my fencesitting, it's still ongoing. To put it in Kuhlthau terms, I'm moving out of formulation and into collection, but I'm not yet at presentation. Thankfully, through the process of information seeking and sharing, I've been able to move past most of the negative emotions associated with the process as described by Kuhlthau and Savolainen, and into a calmer,

less urgent place. For the longest time, one of the major emotions driving my information behavior in this area was fear of regret. But then I read a post from user “SelfishThailand” on r/fencesitter about this: “Fear of regret is not a worthwhile motivator, because there is no avoiding it” (2018). Thanks to their information sharing, that was part of a big breakthrough for me, and now, as Savolainen would say, I believe I’ve moved into a mostly optimistic-cognitive (1995) approach to mastering information in this part of my life. Thanks to the fencesitter community, I no longer describe myself as information poor on the topic of whether or not I should have children, and instead of hiding my information and feelings about it, I’ve recently found it cathartic to be open about it, even with family and friends who disagree, in hopes that more information worlds can collide, and my information sharing might lead to less confusion and anxiety for the next person to undertake this information seeking journey.

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