

## **Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior as a Lens for Investigating Information Avoidance among Cancer Patients in Third World Countries**

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### **Abstract**

Seeking information provides cancer patients with an effective strategy to manage the disease, however, it has been noted that many cancer patients in third world countries avoid information on the management of the disease. This paper presents a theoretical framework that can be used to investigate information avoidance of cancer patients in social settings. The paper explains cancer information avoidance; reasons or motivations that prompt information avoidance; consequences for information avoidance; information management of cancer and the need for effective management of cancer. Chatman's (2000) theory of normative behavior, one of the leading social theories of human information behavior is considered relevant and will be adopted for the paper because the theory provides scholars with a theoretical framework for understanding and explaining information practices (including information avoidance) in social settings. Finally, the paper displayed how the theory can be applied to investigate information avoidance among cancer patients by raising some relevant questions that can be asked by scholars who are interested in exploring information practices of cancer patients in social settings.

**Key words:** Behavior, Information; Avoidance; Cancer; Patient; and Third World Countries

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Cancer is a public health problem affecting all categories of persons. It is the second common cause of death in developed countries and among the three leading causes of death in developing countries (Abdulkareem, 2009). WHO (2018) reported that about 24.6 million people live with cancer worldwide, and 12.5% of all deaths are attributable to cancer and if the trend continues, it is estimated that by 2020, 16 million new cases will be diagnosed per annum out of which 70% will be in third world countries. It further reported that in indigenous Africans, 650,000 people of an estimated 965million are diagnosed with cancer annually and the lifetime risk of dying from cancer in African women is 2 times higher than in developed countries. In Nigeria WHO (2005) estimated the incidence of cancer from all sites in 2002 to be 90.7 and 100.9 per 10,000 for males and females respectively while mortality rates were 72.2 and 76 respectively. While, in Kano, of 1001 cancers recorded for the period 1995-2004, male cancers accounted for 50.3% and 49.7% in females. This incidence indicates that information for the management of cancer is critical.

Denny et al., (2005) observed that proper and effective use of information often provided by medical workers will help cancer patients to manage the prevalence of the disease for long life and healthy society. Thus, to effectively manage cancer, patients must adhere strictly to cancer information. Information according to Narayan et al., (2011) helps cancer patients understand more about their disease, treatment options, and how they can manage the disease generally. Studies also indicate that information for the management of cancer in Nigeria is available (Rafindadi, A.H. et al. 1999)

However, it was discovered that despite the importance of information 'to managing the prevalence of cancer' in social settings, some people avoided information even when it was accessible and potentially useful to them (Chatman, 1996). In Nigeria for instance a large proportion of the population still never seek orthodox medical care, which invariably makes them avoid information relating to western medicine (Abdulkareem, 2009). This implies that cancer patients do not apply the available information in Nigeria. And that the action contributes in no small measure to plaguing so many communities for decades which mostly results in negative consequences to those who are involved in the practice (Abdulkareem, 2009).

It is because of the above that the paper aims to present a theoretical framework that can be used to explore information practices of cancer patients using Chatman's (2000) theory of normative behavior four constructs; worldview, social norms, social type, and information as a theoretical framework.

### **Cancer Information Avoidance**

Information avoidance is defined as a step taken to, actively and purposefully dismisses, shuns, or avoids learning about or being exposed to information (Miller, 1995). It is the process of staying away from knowing or applying available information. According to (Melynck, 2009) information avoidance is distinct from instances of acting or failing to seek information in that with the former, people wish not to know the information, whereas, with the latter, people do not recognize that the information has value. Hence what motivates information avoidance?

There are three reasons for information avoidance: 1) people are motivated to avoid information if the information might produce an unpleasant experience, 2) people are motivated to avoid information when it requires a response or action that the person will prefer not to perform, and 3) people are motivated to avoid information when they anticipate that the information may challenge their cherished belief (Malynk, 2009).

Avoidance of information due to belief is related to the socio-cultural perspective (Iwu, 1994). People avoided information that did not agree with their interests, needs, or existing attitudes (Narayan, Case & Edwards 2011). Many cancer patients avoid information for the management of cancer if it contradicts their cherished beliefs or worldview. Research shows that people who have a negative perception of cancer are more likely to avoid cancer information (Miles et al., 2008).

Cancer information avoidance may occur due to fear (Rees and Bath, 2001; Case et al, 2005), negative views about cancer (Miles et al, 2008), a desire to maintain hope (Barbour et al., 2012), as a result of exposure to confusing or excessive information gathering and decision making to medical workers (Czaja et al, 2003).

Cancer information avoidance has consequences such as a lack of effective information, knowledge, and skills needed to manage the disease (Song, 2007; Germeni&Schulez, 2014). It also provides patients with undesired emotions which will result in negative consequences such as sorrow, tears, and death (Melynck, 2009).

Melynck (2009) has developed a model for information avoidance. The model consists of calculations of benefits and costs, which involve several factors that people consider when, deciding whether to avoid information: potential for negative consequences, potential to change outcomes, perceived coping resources, and ease of information attainment. Melynck suggested people are more likely to avoid information when they regard it as useless than when they regard it as useful. Potential cost calculation is based on the four factors listed above. Potential for negative consequences refers to the likelihood that the information will be severe. The potential to change outcomes refers to the amount of control people have over the outcomes associated with unwanted information. Perceived coping resources refer to personal strengths and social support. And ease of information attainment refers to the degree to which the information is readily available and how easy it is to obtain.

### **Information Management of Cancer**

Information for effective management of cancer is available (Lorig et al., 2001; Lorig and Holman, 2003; Rees and Bath, 2000; Degner, 1997; & Squires et al., 2005). WHO (2005) developed a series of six modules that provides practical advice for effective management of cancer in third world countries: planning, prevention, early detection, diagnostic and treatment, palliative care, and policy and advocacy. Although these management strategies emerged to increase the effectiveness, precision, survivability, quality of life, and healthy lifestyle of cancer patients, palliative care provides the most effective and efficient management strategy for cancer patients in social settings (Case et al., 2005 & Johnson, 2009).

Palliative care refers to a management strategy that attempts to make cancer patients feel better and improve their quality of life. It involves action to reduce the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psycho-social distress experienced by people with cancer. Palliative care is also called comfort care, supportive care, and symptom management (Song, 2007; Germeni & Schulz, 2014). The goal of palliative care is not to cure but to care.

It is given the above that the paper aims to present a theoretical framework that can be used to explore information practices of cancer patients using Chatman's (2000) theory of normative behavior four constructs; social norms, worldview, social types, and information behavior as a theoretical perspective, This is because Chatman theory of normative behavior provides scholars with a theoretical framework for understanding and explaining information practices (including information avoidance) in social settings (Musa, 2013).

### **Theory of Normative Behavior**

Chatman's theory of normative behavior attempts to address how social expectations and behavior affect information behavior (Beasant& Chatman, 2001). It examines aspects of information behavior in the context of definable social groupings of people, or "small worlds"(Burnett, et al., 2001). A small world as explained by Chatman (2000) is "a community of like-minded individuals who share co-ownership of social reality." In other words, a small world focuses on constrictions to information access. The theory explicitly addresses the relationship between groups and their use of information resources — how they understand the

place of information in their world, what types of information they value (and what types they disregard), how they interact with information providers of various sorts, how they exchange information between themselves, etc. According to the theory, information is never, within a small world, a neutral value, nor is it a commodity imposed from the broader world outside of its boundaries. Rather, it is always embedded within the specifics of the world itself, and, thus, is given significance by the values and norms of that world. Furthermore, the theory focuses on how information is made visible and shared publicly — or, as Burnett, et al. (2008) put it, “public expressions of the information.” Chatman maintained that information behavior is socially embedded, and the values of information are socially determined or defined.

Four aspects constitute the theory of normative behavior within small worlds: 1) Social Norms; 2) Worldview; 3) Social Types; and, 4) Information Behavior. Collectively, defined as states in which one may or may not act on the received information (Pettigrew et al. 2001).

Social Norms refer to codes of behavior within the small world to give it balance. It defines acceptable public behaviors, giving a sense of "rightness" and "wrongness" in social appearances" and activities. Social Norms identify how members of a world "should" present themselves to other members of their world - ways in which they should behave and interact. They also have an impact on how - and what kinds of - information is valued. Social norms subconsciously guide and dictate the acceptable behaviors of people, including their attitude toward information (Musa, 2013, p. 18).

The concept of social norms relates to several other concepts. For example, anthropologists have described how social norms function in different cultures (Geertz 1973), sociologists have focused on their social functions and how they motivate people to act (Durkheim 1950; Parsons 1937, Parsons and Shils 1951; Coleman 1990; Hechter and Opp 2001), and economists have explored how adherence to norms influences market behavior (Akerlof 1976; Young 1998). More recently, also legal scholars have touted social norms as efficient alternatives to legal rules, as they may internalize negative externalities and provide signaling mechanisms at little or no cost (Ellickson 1991; Posner 2000).

A worldview is a set of beliefs held by members of a small world setting. A worldview is “a collective perception held in common by members of a social world regarding those things that are deemed important or trivial.” (Chatman, 1999). Worldview provides a way of analyzing what is of concern - and what is not important - within specific social contexts. In a nutshell, a worldview is a philosophy that shapes beliefs.

Other concepts related to worldview include the idea of "taken for granted" beliefs by Gergen (2009, p. 32) and the idea of “frame of reference” by Mezirow (1997). Frames of references are the “structures and assumptions through which we understand our experiences (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5)” They are “primarily the result of cultural assimilation and the idiosyncratic influences of “primary caregivers” and the agents of socialization: teachers, the media, and religious institutions (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). This theory suggests the strong role of culture and social environment in nurturing people’s worldviews. In this sense, Burnett et al. (2008) suggested that, when different small worlds with conflicting worldviews come into contact, they may act at cross-purposes with one another.

Social Types are members of a small world who are assigned a specific social role. It addresses the role of individuals within a small world, and how individuals are classified (or "typecast"), which is a "classification of a person or persons" (Chatman, 2000). In addition, Social Types influence the acceptance or rejection of information apart from its actual content; for example, Burnett and Nocasian (2008) reported that "information (even if it is accurate) coming from an individual typed as untrustworthy or from one who is seen to be at odds with the norms of the world will, often, not find an easy welcome from other members of the world.”

Human Information Behavior is members choosing not to search for needed information or rejecting useful information when it is presented to them. Information Behavior broadens the concept of "information seeking" to include all kinds of possible human behaviors or activities related to information. People not only seek information actively by presenting queries to a formal information system such as a library or an online database, but also informally share information as part of their normal social activities, and even overtly ignore, avoid or dismiss information that is available to them. The concept of information behavior, further, relates to the uses to which information is put within a small world - whether, for example, it is used for health purposes – cancer information, for education; to support community activities, or for entertainment and leisure activities. It refers to acting or not acting on the available information (Chatman, 2000).

Chatman's (2000) notion of information behavior relates to Wilson's (2000) definition of human information behavior as "the totality of human behavior about sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use" (p. 4). It is also related to the definition by Fisher, Erdelez, and McKechnie (2005) who conceptualized human information behavior as to how people need, seek, manage, give, and use information in different contexts.

Therefore, to help researchers who wanted to investigate information practices of cancer patients in socio-cultural settings, Chatman's theory of normative behavior (TNB) provided background and a framework for the analysis of information practices in social settings (Musa, 2013).

Equally important, Pettigrew et al. (2001) and Musa (2013) reported that Chatman's (2000) TNB interrelates with the IP theory and the theory of life in the round by clarifying the importance of cultural dynamics regarding human information practices through five propositional statements:

- a) Social norms are standards with which members of a social world comply to exhibit desirable expressions of public behavior.
- b) Members choose compliance because it allows for a way by which they affirm what is normative for this context at this time.
- c) Worldview is shaped by the normative values that influence how members think about the ways of the world. It is a collective, taken-for-granted attitude that sensitizes members to be responsive to certain events and to ignore others.
- d) Everyday reality contains a belief that members of a social world do retain attention or interest sufficient enough to influence behavior. The process of placing persons in ideal categories of lesser or greater quality can be thought of as social typification.
- e) Human information behavior is a construct in which to approach everyday reality and its effect on actions to gain or avoid the possession of information.

The choice to decide the appropriate course of action is driven by what members' beliefs are necessary to support a normative way of life.

### **Application of Chatman Theory of Normative Behaviour (TNB) in Explaining Cancer Information Avoidance**

The theory of normative behavior described in the preceding paragraphs will be used to explain information avoidance, non-use, and resistance among cancer patients in palliative care settings. This is because, Chatman's (2000) normative behavior theory provides scholars with an epistemological frame for understanding and explaining information practices, including information avoidance or non-use. Chatman (2000) explored the ways individuals interact with information in the context of a social and cultural perspective of the "small world" settings. A small world is defined as a social group in which "mutual opinion and concerns are reflected by its members and in which the interests and activities of the individual members are largely determined by the normative influences of the small world as a whole" (Chatman, 1999).

Understanding Chatman's (2000) TNB four constructs will assist us to investigate issues related to cancer information non-use in socio-cultural settings, through finding answers to the following questions from each of the constructs: social norms, worldview, social types, and information behavior.

**Social Norms:** This concept will help us find answers to questions like, what type of information is deemed necessary by cancer patients? How do cancer patients understand the place of information in their world? What type of information cancer patient's value? What information behavior cancer patients display in their world? This is because social norms as explained by Burnett et al. (2008) dictate the behaviors of people, including the value they place on information. For example, if the information coming to the world from outside is somehow perceived to be at odds with the norms and values of the world, it will be seen as "wrong" to members of that world and, thus, may be either disregarded or actively dismissed. In this case, therefore, cancer patients will avoid information if it is perceived to conflict or at odds with their social norm. This indicates that it is the society that defines, dictates, or decides the information that is (considered) acceptable or rejected. Hence in this regard cancer, patients will use or not use information because society told them to do so.

**Worldview:** The sorts of questions that can be answered through worldview include, why do cancer patients in the developing world believe in unorthodox information about cancer? How patients' information about cancer influence their perception of collectivities? How cancer patients' collective attitudes mold their thinking about cancer information? Worldview serves to unify members of small worlds. It filters the aspects of the world, both local and global, that are worth attending to, including the relative importance attached to the information. It constrains or inhibits members of the small world from using certain types of information (Musa, 2013). Therefore, people's worldview could be the reason for their use of traditional information about cancer treatment as against the orthodox medical information in managing cancer.

**Social Types:** The concept of social types can also be understood through requesting answers to questions such as, what is the perception of cancer patients about orthodox medical workers? How do cancer patients perceive orthodox information about cancer management? What information behavior occurs in cancer management? How are these information behavior manifested? What social types exist in cancer patients' information practice? Social types categorize and assign roles to members of social groups. It influences the acceptance or rejection of information within the small-world group. Burnett & Nocasian (2008) reported that "information (even if it is accurate) coming from an individual typed or categorized as untrustworthy, or from one who is seen to be at odds with the norms of the world will, often, not find an easy welcome from other members of the world." For example, some individuals are stereotyped as untrustworthy in Nigeria (e.g., corrupt

politicians) and consequently not trusted (Musa, 2013). Therefore, information coming from such persons may be considered rejected or avoided by cancer patients due to stereotyping.

**Information Behavior:** Finally, the concept of information behavior too will be used to find answers to questions like, how do patients with cancer seek information related to cancer disease? How cancer patients interact with information providers of various cancer management strategies? How cancer patients exchange information between themselves? As Musa (2013) pointed out, the concept is being considered as the full spectrum of normative behavior regarding the information behaviors of members of a small world. These behaviors include information seeking, informal exchanging of information among friends, posting fliers, and actively avoiding information.

## II. CONCLUSION

Information avoidance is very common among cancer patients particularly in third-world countries like Nigeria. This behavior on part of some cancer patients contributes to the prevalence of cancer disease and result in negative consequences that cause grief, incapacitation, and even death to those who are involved in the practice.

The prevalence of cancer requires an effective strategy to manage the disease. Therefore, information on how to manage this often serious, chronic, and incurable disease that requires prompt or ongoing medical treatment is critical, to help cancer patients maintain a healthy lifestyle and last longer (Case et al., 2005; Johnson, 2009).

The paper succeeded in highlighting the theoretical framework that can be used to explore information avoidance practices of cancer patients in a social setting, using Chatman's (2000) theory of normative behavior as a framework, by showing how theory can be applied, through raising relevant questions from each of the theory's four constructs: social norms, worldview, social types, and information behavior.

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