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THE INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF CATHOLIC WOMEN

DISCERNING A VOCATION TO RELIGIOUS LIFE

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THE INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF CATHOLIC WOMEN
DISCERNING A VOCATION TO RELIGIOUS LIFE


A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES


BY


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# DEDICATION

*Non nisi te, Domine*

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ABSTRACT

Approximately 10% of Roman Catholic women will seriously discern a vocation to religious life during their lifetime (CARA, 2009).  Spiritual discernment is often characterized by prayer and spiritual direction, but also the acquisition of knowledge and information about religious life.  No study to date has sought to understand how women seek out and retrieve information about religious life, nor have assessments been conducted on the quality and relevancy of the information available.  Therefore, the current study sought to answer the following research question: "what is the information-seeking behavior (ISB) of Catholic women discerning a vocation to religious life?" using Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology.  A survey was administered online, collecting demographic information, inquiring about the kinds of resources discerners used, the quality of the resources available, and the relationship between online vs. offline resources.  Results yielded responses from 124 participants. Findings indicated that digital and print resources were heavily utilized for their ease of access, privacy, and ability to connect with other discerners.  Participants indicated that connecting with a person face-to-face and visiting religious sisters produced a kind of knowledge and information that could not be acquired online, suggesting that their ISB was an integration of digital and print resources, and human connection.  This study contributes to the literature by intersecting the disciplines of information science, religion, and Internet studies to situate religious information-seeking behavior in context using Sense-Making, and by presenting female discerners' information needs, thereby equipping practitioners who seek to develop resources for them.  Whereas previous literature on this topic has largely yielded demographic information and broad assessments of discernment, this deeper look into ISB ascertains their needs, use of existing resources, and decision-making processes.  The study introduces the concept of *limited Internet effectiveness* in order to better understand the integration of digital versus in-person resources in spiritual religious processes.

## Introduction

The word "vocation" is a derivative of the Latin verb "vocare," which means to call. Therefore, a vocation is a person's calling from God. The Catholic Church identifies two vocations: the universal vocation to holiness, which is described as a way of life rooted in the Holy Spirit, "divine charity," and "human solidarity" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, para. 1699), and a vocation unique to each individual that enables them to live their call to holiness. Such vocations may include marriage, consecrated life as a religious brother or sister, priesthood, or celibate life. Each Catholic is encouraged to discern their vocation in order to discover the path chosen for them by God at their baptism. The exact method for discerning one's vocation is nebulous at best: myriads of books, websites, and blogs exist on the topic. Catholics can attend retreats and seminars. Dioceses may host discernment events. Various theologians and prominent theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John Paul II present their own frameworks to understand vocation and discernment. There is no official method to discern, even though existing resources usually encourage prayer and spiritual direction. The lack of cohesion and clear guidance may generate anxiety - one blogger coined the term "vocational trauma" (Wilson, 2014) to refer to a friend's paralyzing anxiety wondering if she was called to religious life. Additionally, there is no clear rule as to how long discernment should last or how to know when it is finished.

Vocational discernment has never been researched in the discipline of information science (IS). However, it is a pertinent subject of scientific inquiry that provides interesting insight into the study of religion and information. Indeed, discernment can be conceptualized as an information-seeking process, as it seeks an answer to a question, albeit from a divine source. The majority of discernment

resources are available online or in print, which leads to questions about access, social disparity, and Internet use.  Existing research demonstrates that information-seeking and access are highly sensitive to social context and marginalization.  The presence of personal support, socio-economic situations, and social status all affect how one engages with information (Savolainen, 2007).  Influential scholar and theoretician Elfreda Chatman (1990, 1996, 1999) found that marginalized individuals often perceive a lack of available resources for their demographic and are suspicious of information providers.  Additionally, a minority community is more prone to "develop collective norms for locating, sharing, and hiding information" (Lingel & boyd, 2013, p. 1) in response to perceived stigma.  While contemporary women discerning religious life cannot be put in the same category of historically oppressed and marginalized populations, they may experience similar feelings of being misunderstood by their families and friends for considering such an unusual way of life.  Therefore, identifying and naming feelings surrounding the information seeking of women discerning may situate the demographic within the larger discipline of Internet Studies by inquiring about their social positioning and its effect on information behavior.

The saliency of context and environment is present within other IS theories, notably Dervin's Sense-Making.  Dervin defines "sense-making" as "behavior, both internal (i.e. cognitive) and external (i.e. procedural) which allows the individual to construct and design his/her movement through time-space" (Dervin, 1983, p. 3). By conceptualizing information-seeking as an amalgamation of both interior and exterior constructs, Dervin acknowledges the role of both contextual and individual characteristics.  This framework lends itself well to the study of discernment, as it is

rarely a merely interior process.  It includes introspection and personal prayer, but also action in the form of community visits and discussions.  No studies to date have applied Dervin's sense-making to a religious information-seeking process.  Therefore, its use in the current study will test its pertinence regarding faith-based practices.  Research on the topic can simultaneously help build the literature on an under-studied population, and help equip clergy, spiritual directors, and those developing discernment materials and events.

The topic of women discerning a vocation to religious life is of particular interest, as they quite possibly receive the least amount of external and physical resources to facilitate their discernment: dioceses often have vocation offices for men discerning the priesthood as well as available financial support; marriage preparation and dating services abound in both Catholic and secular circles.  Most existing women's discernment resources are grassroots movements such as Imagine Sisters, or developed by women religious themselves.  Women discerning are then receiving different kinds of information, from different sources, suggesting that their information-seeking process may differ from that of their male counterparts.  Therefore, the current study will seek to answer the following research question: "what is the information-seeking behavior of Catholic women discerning a vocation to religious life?" utilizing Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM).

**Literature Review**

**Brief History of Religious Life**

Consecrated celibate men and women are a longstanding part of the Christian tradition. The earliest references to consecration are found in Sacred Scriptures (cf 1 Timothy 5:9, 1 Corinthians 7) and describe individuals set a part for devotion, prayer, and service. Eremetic life, characterized by austerity and solitude, emerged during the third century and marked the beginning of actual monastic religious communities made up of consecrated people bound by a common rule. Hidden from the world in an enclosure, the early nuns had limited, if any, contact with life outside their monasteries and observed a strict life of prayer. In the eighth century, they began to expand their life of prayer to include organized forms of service in the form of education of children and the care of orphans. Religious sisters' desire to be more active in their service complicated their status in the Church, and led to several iterations of canonical documents until Pope Leo XIII finally granted these "active" communities the same status within the Church as those who had remained cloistered. Additionally, Leo XIII's apostolic constitution granted religious communities the authority to elect their own superiors (CMSWR, 2012). Further direction and exhortation was provided to religious communities during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which reiterated the importance of consecrated life within the Church, and encouraged religious communities to revisit the original vision and inspiration of their founders/foundresses (see Church documents *Lumen Gentium; Vita Consecrata*). This very concise history of religious life is in no way exhaustive, however, it does reveal the degree to which the perception, treatment, and status of religious people has evolved

since the earliest days of the Church.  This fluctuation is still present today, as religious communities continue to ponder and refine their place through "adaptation and renewal" (Paul VI, 1965).

**Discerning Religious Life**

Discerning a vocation to religious life is a relatively common practice among Catholic women.  In 2012, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University found that ten percent of Catholic women have seriously considered becoming a sister.  The women in the sample were more likely to access religious content online or in print form than women who have not discerned religious life.  A previous CARA study conducted in 2009 also highlighted the importance of information.  Their comprehensive study of men and women in religious life examined their demographic profile, their initial attraction to religious life, their method of choosing a community, their challenges, and finally their hopes for the future.  This data set from 591 religious communities provided the first of its kind in-depth look into the vocation and discernment processes of religious, thereby providing initial data to help frame their information-seeking behavior.  The researchers found that discernment was often prompted equally by interactions with priests and religious, community visits, and information found online.  The availability of online information was positively correlated with attracting new members, and younger respondents were more likely to find media resources and programs helpful than older respondents. Websites, CDs, DVDs, videos, and print and online promotional materials were particularly salient for respondents, who may not otherwise know a religious man or woman.  Nevertheless, respondents stated that interactions with members of the community were the most

important factor while discerning, suggesting that while resources and information are helpful, they are not the final deal-breaker. Religious communities echoed this stating that while online information may be helpful, interactions with the community should and often are a more important factor. Therefore, studies indicate that Catholic women are discerning, and are using various resources to do so. The way they seek out this information, how they use it and its importance in the overall discernment process remains unknown.

**Information-Seeking Behavior**

Information-seeking became a subject of inquiry in the 1940s and conceptualized information as a passive entity completely void from any environmental and social dimensions. It took approximately thirty years for researchers to connect information and its behavior to its users, emphasizing the process just as much as the result, and considering information-seeking that was not restricted to formal information such as health and politics. Brenda Dervin pioneered the user-centric approach and argued that nearly every dimension of life is information-seeking, and merits investigation (Case, 2002). Following this paradigmatic shift, researchers began to consider the information-seeking behavior (ISB) of many subgroups in order to facilitate the development of information resources for them. The subjects of such inquiry have ranged from academics (De Groote, Shultz, & Blecic, 2014), to first-time mothers (Loudon, Buchanan, & Ruthven, 2016) and musicians (Lavranos, Kostagiolas, Martzoukou, & Papadatos, 2015). These studies testify to the fact that ISB is still a relevant subject of inquiry and an important research area in Information Studies.

ISB literature is increasingly cognizant of the salience of religion, paying particular interest to the role of the Internet. Religion and information scholar Heidi Campbell argues that religion is inextricably linked to Internet behavior in most Western countries, and that the Internet is a space for religion to be defined, challenged, and negotiated (Campbell, 2010). Religious individuals are just as likely to use the Internet (Jansen, Tapia, & Spink, 2009), and recent studies have considered the use of search engines and religious websites (Casey, 2001; Larsen & Rainie, 2001; Ho, Lee, & Hameed, 2008; Wan-Chik, Clough, & Sanderson, 2013). Older studies conducted pre-Internet did not yield similar results, and focused heavily on clergy. One study of Protestant ministers found that their ISB process does not significantly differ from that of secular counterparts. While they tend to gravitate towards religious resources, their processes for acquiring these resources do not appear to be affected by their religion (Porcella, 1973). Two studies, one of Baptist ministers (Allen, 1987) and one of pastors (Tanner, 1992), found that participants made use of formal and informal resources and that the use of such materials was sensitive to environment and socio-economic factors. A more recent study of the ISB of Muslim *Umala* (clergy) further highlighted the use of formal and informal resources, and the degree to which access to information and government support facilitated the process (Saleh & Abu Bakar, 2013). The few studies that have looked at the ISB of Roman Catholic priests reveal that they are more likely to use print resources instead of searching the Internet (Curran & Burns, 2011; Wicks, 1999) Overall, the ISB and religion literature has focused heavily on Internet and clergy, and has not examined religious discerners as a subgroup nor how ISB integrates into larger spiritual practices. In light of the various faith traditions surveyed in the

aforementioned studies, the disparity in findings in the literature suggests that there may be denominationally-sensitive factors in ISB.

**Sense-Making as Theory**

Developed by Brenda Dervin, sense-making (SM) is a "metatheory" (1992, p. 62) that acts as set of ontological and epistemological suppositions to inform theory, methodology, and practice that challenge regular conventions and assumptions of qualitative and quantitative research methods. She argues that traditional research methods negate the individualities and disparities among participants and their knowledge by treating information as a "brick," that is to say a neutral entity separate from the user (Dervin, 1992). Embedding information within a context illuminates the sociological and psychological factors that influence information-seeking. The following concepts, when considered together, construct the information-seeking process: time, space, movement, gap, horizon, energy/power, history, experience, constraint, flexibility, and inflexibility. Together, they create a narrative focused on humans moving through time and space which begins with the experience and knowledge of the actor, not the observer (in this case the researcher) (Agarwal, 2012). Results of SM studies benefit from the use of verbs and gerunds to describe processes as they imply movement, as opposed to nouns which reinforce the concept of information as brick.

In essence, SM describes a situation in which an individual embedded within a specific context seeks to cross a gap by making sense of something which enables them to find relevance. Dervin uses the following figure to illustrate SM (see Figure 1). The stick figure is seeking to cross a gap, utilizing the tools at his disposal, such as speech,

feelings, and knowledge.  SM is a particularly effective method to measure ISB as they both emphasize process, individuality, and context.
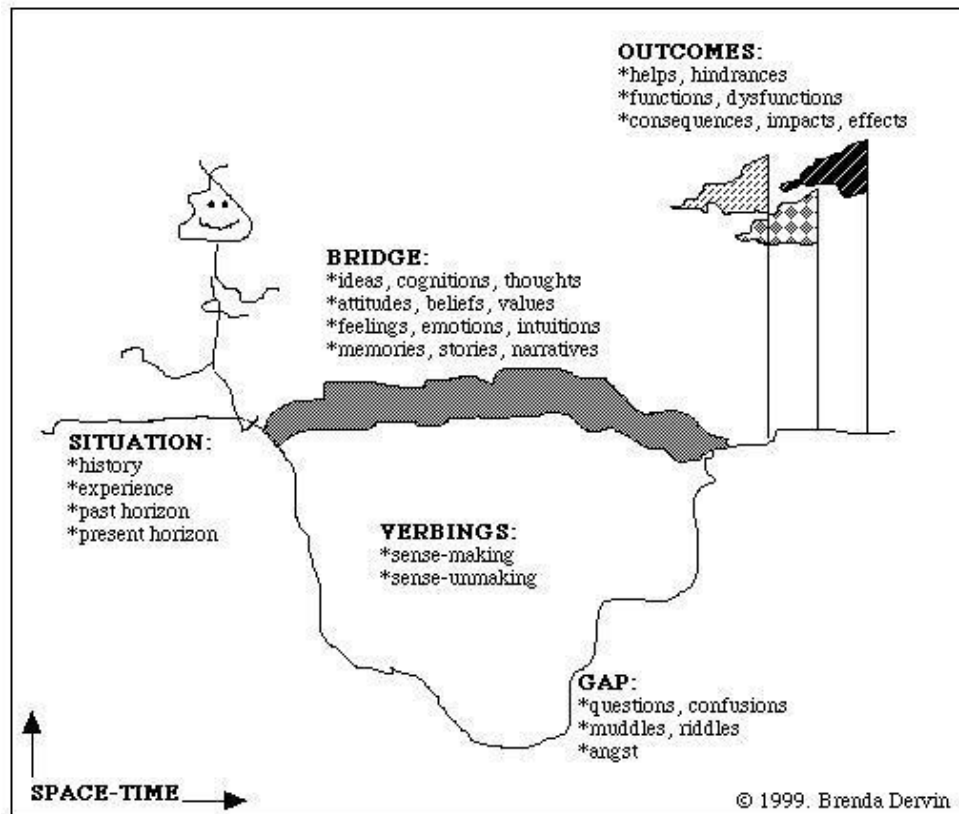


*Figure 1.* Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin, 2008, p. 17)

**Gaps in the Literature**

Discernment has largely been studied in the discipline of psychology and has heavily focused on men discerning the priesthood (e.g. Hankle, 2010; McGlone, Ortiz & Karney, 2010; Perri, 2001; Pietkiewicz, 2015).  The literature on women discerning religious life is non-existent in the field of information studies, as well as broader literature on the topic of spiritual discernment and information-seeking behavior.  The current study fills several gaps: it contributes to scholarship on religion and information, it sets a precedent for conceptualizing discernment as information-seeking, and it provides an initial study on the vocational discernment of Catholic women which will

be helpful in order to build the literature on the topic. There are also important practical implications: understanding female discerners' ISB could help inform the development of future resources, and may help those who accompany discerners, such as priests and spiritual directors, in providing relevant and helpful information support.

## Methodology

### Sense-Making as Methodology

In addition to providing a strong theoretical background, SM also operates as a methodology. Sense-making methodology (SMM) does not impose a particular or strict methodology. Instead, Dervin encourages researchers to adapt SMM to each population by considering how the core concepts are ossified in their environment. Forcing the use of specific questions, methods of data collection, and analysis is incompatible with a framework that pursues the experience of the participant and not the researcher. Therefore, studies have adapted SMM to ISB research to qualitative interviews (e.g. Meyers, Fisher, & Marcoux, 2009), surveys (e.g. Pettigrew, Durrance, Unruh, 2002), and mixed methods (e.g. Madden, 2014). However, interviews are often deemed the best mechanism to capture the sense-making process as they permit researcher and interviewee to engage in dialogue in an egalitarian and open way, and they allow participants to use their own vocabulary and language to describe their experiences.

Cognizant of this dimension of SMM, I chose to develop a largely qualitative survey. Face to face interviews would not be feasible due to the time limitations of the project, and the likely travel that would be involved. I deemed a survey with open-ended questions as the next best solution, as it would allow a high participation rate

while still allowing participants to share their experience in-depth and with their own language.

**Data Collection**

The current study is exploratory in nature. That is to say, its purpose is to cast a wide net in order to identify narrower topics of inquiry for future research and to assess the feasibility and implementation of a larger scale study. Given the dearth of research on the subject at hand, a pilot study provides footing to understand the demographic and identify core concepts that can be researched more in depth (see Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Furthermore, it acts as testing mechanism for data collection tools. Since no study to date has looked specifically at the ISB of female discerners, framing the project as a pilot study allowed me to test broad questions in the survey covering a wide-range of topics, and to ascertain the questions' quality and success in measuring participants' experiences.

The survey with both closed and open-ended questions was distributed through Qualtrics, after approval by the University's Internal Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A). Any Catholic woman discerning religious life could participate. Women under the age of 18 had to receive signed parental permission which was then to be e-mailed to the researcher.

In order to increase reliability and effectiveness, I asked one doctoral student with a research focus on religious life as well as a researcher at CARA to review the survey; their suggestions were integrated into the questionnaire. The questions were developed to capture the main elements of SMM: context, bridges, and gaps. They addressed demographics and how women discerned (context), what information they

felt was missing to guide them along their discernment (gaps), and how they sought to fill the gaps (bridges).  The survey in Appendix A is color-coded to reflect each element of SM captured in the questions.

**Recruitment**

Recruitment occurred exclusively online.  From my personal Twitter account, I tweeted the link to the survey to nearly forty well-known Catholic authors, speakers, and bloggers and asked them to retweet it.  According to a recent Pew Research Center Study, 23% of all Internet users are on Twitter.  It is more popular among younger adults who make up 30% of Internet users on Twitter (Duggan, 2005).  Its reach has made it a popular recruitment method for hard to reach populations.  It is cost-effective, provides anonymity, and allows access to populations that may not otherwise be interested in participating in research (O'Connor, Jackson, Goldsmith, & Skirton, 2014).  Additionally, I posted about the study on a popular Catholic discernment forum. Both recruitment methods produced a snowball effect, as participants then shared the survey with friends or retweeted the information.  This method proved to be successful as my original tweets were retweeted nearly sixty times by individual users.  Members of the forum were also enthusiastic about participation and expressed their interest in and support of the project.  I did not receive any pushback or negative reactions from recruitment.  Due to time restraints because of the short-term nature of the project as a master's thesis, the survey was closed after two months.

**Participants**

The study resulted in 129 participants. Five minors participated without obtaining parental consent, and their responses were deleted from the data set reducing the total number of participants to 124 ($n = 124$). Only 88 (71%) participants answered every question. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 61 ($M = 27.5$; $SD = 10.81$). Participants largely identified as White ($n = 80$); nine identified as Hispanic or Latino ($n = 9$), three as Asian ($n = 3$), three as "other" (North African, white/mixed, and multicultural) ($n = 3$), and one as American Indian ($n = 1$). Participants were geographically dispersed. Seventy-five participants ($n = 75$) were from the United States, with a majority of them from Texas ($n = 9$), Kansas ($n = 6$), and Oklahoma ($n = 5$). Twenty participants ($n = 20$) were international, with Canadian ($n = 7$) and British ($n = 5$) being the most represented (see Appendix B for a full breakdown of demographic information). They were well-educated: 34 % ($n = 32$) had completed some college, 26 % ($n = 25$) had a bachelor's degree, and 16% ($n = 15$) had a master's degree.

**Analysis**

Demographic and discernment information was largely collected with quantitative questions. The crux of the data, relating to information, resources, and gaps, was collected through qualitative questions. Therefore, I viewed this data set as primarily qualitative, informed and contextualized by quantitative data. The quantitative data was helpful to measure importance of resources, their access, and efficiency. To an extent, the quantitative helped answer the "what?" and "when?" questions, while the qualitative answered the "why?" and "how?" The quantitative data

was also deemed necessary in light of the project's intent to support future vocational

material.  It is helpful to be able to provide numbers to stakeholders in order to quickly

and clearly communicate the scope of a gap or a bridge.

Conventional methods of content analysis guided analysis. Conventional content

analysis methods describe an iterative coding process in which themes can emerge

(Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This is particularly well-suited for studies in which existing

literature is limited, as the likelihood for bias and preconceived categories is diminished

(Kondracki & Wellman, 2002).  Researchers are encouraged to repeatedly read the data

to identify reoccurring themes or ideas.  As researchers revisit the data, they are able to

make meaningful connections among themes and group them in clusters.  Finally, the

clusters solidify into fixed themes.  As opposed to Grounded Theory Methods that

pursue the creation of a model, conventional methods identify themes but do not claim

to capture the intricacies of lived experience or produce a model (Hsieh & Shannon,

2005).  In light of this study's exploratory nature, such in-depth and complex

methodologies would not yield the broad results the research question is intending to

capture.  Conventional methods are therefore pertinent for studies seeking to understand

a phenomenon or a process with a diverse population.

Using these recommendations for analysis, I immersed myself in the data by

reviewing it multiple times, and highlighted themes and concepts as they began to

emerge using a color-coded scheme.  There were three major phases of coding: the

initial coding in which reoccurring words, themes, and phrases began to emerge, the

second phase of coding in which the elements identified in the first round were merged

and made more concise, and finally the third phase in which all elements of the previous

two phases were organized into categories and named with titles germane to sense-making.  That is to say, Dervin's concepts of gaps, bridges, context, and outcomes guided how I named and identified the categories.  This process is depicted in Table 1.  Each row lists the elements that emerged during coding and the initial headings I gathered them under.  Once clustered, the categories were assembled through exemplars in order to answer the research question, "what is the information-seeking behavior of Catholic women discerning a vocation to religious life."

Reflexivity is an increasingly important component of Information Studies research (see White & Gillilan, 2010).  Acknowledging researcher biases and personal connections to the topic under study does not seek to attenuate their influence on data analysis, inasmuch as to recognize the co-constructed reality between researcher and participants.  Therefore, practicing self-awareness allows researchers to situate themselves within the data and research questions instead of attempting to position themselves as outsiders looking in (Finlay, 2002).  Such transparency promotes "moral integrity" (p. 536) and can be implemented at every stage of research.

I am personally connected to this project in multiple ways: as a Catholic, as a woman, and as someone who has undergone vocational discernment and is involved in discernment ministries.  Cognizant of the potential for me to project my own experiences and language onto the data, I sought to frame the project with the primary documents of the Catholic Church on religious life, such as the *Essential Elements of Religious Life* and *Vita Consecrata*.  These documents approach the topic of religious life and discernment theologically and historically, providing a dominant discourse that has trickled down to the local parish and discernment materials.  It was important for

me to read these documents to ensure I was adopting the "official language" of the Church and not using my own while coding the data.  I regularly referred to these texts and concepts during the iterative coding process.

There were challenging instances in which participants' experiences did not mirror my own: I had to remind myself that my discernment experience was not universal and be intentional about highlighting those that differed.  The temptation for a researcher to read herself and her experiences into the data is considerable.  To account for this, I regularly "checked-in" on myself and the data, asking "do the results mirror or not my own experience?"  If the results were similar, I probed the data further and practiced self-reflection to determine whether or not the results were actually similar or if they reflected myself.

Table 1

*Coding Process*

| | Research Question: What is the Information-Seeking Behavior of Catholic Women Discerning Religious Life? | |
|---|---|---|
| | Concepts | Name of Cluster/Emerging Category |
| **First Iteration** | Relationships, fear, scared, advice, easily accessible, living in area with no resources, inadequate online resources, expectations, ask questions, confidence, normalize religious life. | • Talking to people<br>• Connection<br>• Usefulness of existing resources<br>• In control of discernment/anonymity |
| **Second Iteration** | Interactions with others, online vs. offline resources, importance of geographical location and available resources, expectations. | • Relationships<br>• Access<br>• Control (anonymity/privacy)<br>• Less scary<br>• Knowledge<br>• Interaction<br>• Agency |
| **Third Iteration** | Integration of human and digital/print resources, access to information otherwise not available, normalizes religious life, importance of interactions with people. | Context<br>Gaps and Bridges:<br>• Accessing Information<br>• Intimidation<br>• Privacy<br>• Human connection<br>Outcomes:<br>• Knowing<br>• Interacting<br>• Developing agency |

**Findings**

The following results are organized according to Dervin's Sense-Making, by

identifying context, gaps, bridges, and outcomes.

**Context**

Context describes the left side of the image in Figure 1. It makes up the

identities, experiences, and histories of an information user who travels through time

and space.  Context is further mitigated by the cultural and social realities that the user

is embedded in, particularly systems of power which may yield agency or restraint

(Dervin, 2005).  For women discerning religious life, context describes the environment

in which they are discerning and the level of support they receive, as well as basic

demographic characteristics which may cause variation in their environment.  For

example, a woman's age may affect the level of support she receives.

 Participants first considered a vocation to religious life at various points in life,

the youngest at 4 years old and the oldest at 40 ($M = 17.46$, $SD = 6.05$).  Furthermore,

they varied in their current stage of discernment: 9% had just begun thinking about

religious life, 13% were certain they did not have a vocation to religious life, 19% were

planning on contacting a community in the near future, 17% were already in touch with

a community, 22% were discerning with a spiritual director, and 24% had discerned

they were not called to religious life.  The communities that participants had discerned

with displayed a wide variety of charisms, apostolates, and spirituality.  Women tended

to be very active in their local parish: 56% attended a Bible study or faith formation

program, 59% attended retreats, 55% assisted in a parish ministry such as religious

education or community outreach, and 28% were involved in a young adult group.

Situated within sense-making, such level of involvement constitutes an environment

which can provide resources and agency, or it can contain gaps and create deficits.

Participants identified several gaps in the information provided to them that

complicated their discernment process.

**Gaps and Bridges**

Participants had varying views on what constituted a bridge and a gap; in many cases, what some considered a bridge others considered a gap. For this reason, gaps and bridges are presented together, and fall within two categories: digital resources and human support. The following figure (Figure 2) indicates what participants selected as the first most helpful resources during discernment (they were asked to rank the six resources from most helpful to least helpful). Twenty-five percent indicated that spiritual communities (which might include a parish, a discernment group, etc.) were the most helpful, followed by websites (21.4%), then by online resources (19.6%). If websites and online resources are combined, the sum (41%) would supersede community. Websites imply static content maintained by one entity (such as a religious community's website, or the website of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious) whereas online resources designate social media content, videos, blog posts, etc. Given the difference in content between the two categories in spite of their common platform (the Internet), they are kept separate.

The data presented in Figure 2 on the usefulness of resources (gathered from Question 11 in the survey, c.f. Appendix A) is consistent with the findings in the qualitative data addressing the same topic (Questions 14, 15) which are described more in detail below. Apart from print resources that no participant described as "most helpful," the totals for every other category do not exceed a 9% difference from one another (16% to 25%) suggesting that there was not one resource that emerged as the clear, dominant, and preferred one. Each kind of resource contributed to discerners' ISB in a unique way.

**Resources Described as "Most Helpful"**

25.0%

21.4%

19.6%

17.9%

16.0%

Most Helpful

■ Websites　　　　　　　　　　　■ Online Resources
■ Community　　　　　　　　　　■ Spiritual Direction
■ Support from Family and Friends ■ Print
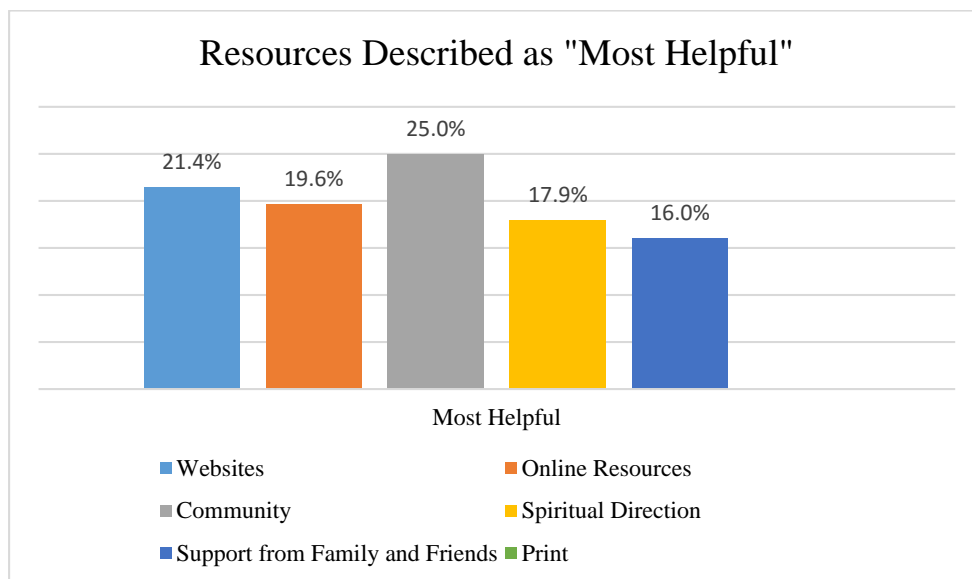
*Figure 2.* Most Helpful Resources during Discernment

**Using Digital Resources**

In the data, participants described three motivations that made online resources appealing: access, less intimidating, and privacy.

**Accessing information.**  Access to information about religious life and access to other discerners was the most cited reason for utilizing online resources.  Women identified a dearth of resources in their geographical area making personal contact with a community or support group difficult, *"online resources have been very important to me because there is very little information available about vocations in my parish."*  Furthermore, they grant immediacy which does not occur through e-mail which requires a waiting period for a person to respond, *"I could learn about religious life and specific communities much more rapidly and efficiently."*  The volume of information online is also much greater than any one person might be able to provide, and they answer more

specific questions about life as a religious than what a discerner may be able to glean from a phone conversation.

While online resources were deemed helpful by some, others stated they often lacked helpful information and were "*overwhelming or difficult to navigate*." In this regard, online resources were simultaneously a bridge and a gap. One participant acknowledged the limitations of online resources, *"from the road of hard knocks, I have learned that you can only glean so much online."* The inadequacy of online resources was attributed to a lack of relevant information: *"they give a lot information, but they don't always give all the information that is needed."* Figure 3 details what information users expect to find on religious communities' websites. Participants reiterated the disparity between what they would like to find and the information actually available, *"info for parents is nice, but so few websites have it that I don't expect to find it."* One women stated, *"I've really answered this as things I HOPE to find there. There are really the basic things I think every community SHOULD have on their websites."*

The quantitative data in Figure 3 echoes the sentiments expressed in the qualitative Questions 14, 15 and 18: that women expect factual information coupled with representations and descriptions of religious life in the form of stories and media. Figure 3 also reveals that women expect to find a significant amount of information on communities' websites. The nine data points presented all amount to a considerable volume of information to present on one website.

## Expected Information to be Found on Communities' Websites

92% — Description of Daily Life
91% — Description of Values and Ministries
68% — Dates for Vocation Events
74% — History of the Community
68% — Description of Prayer Life
64% — Vocation Stories
77% — Contact Information for Discerners
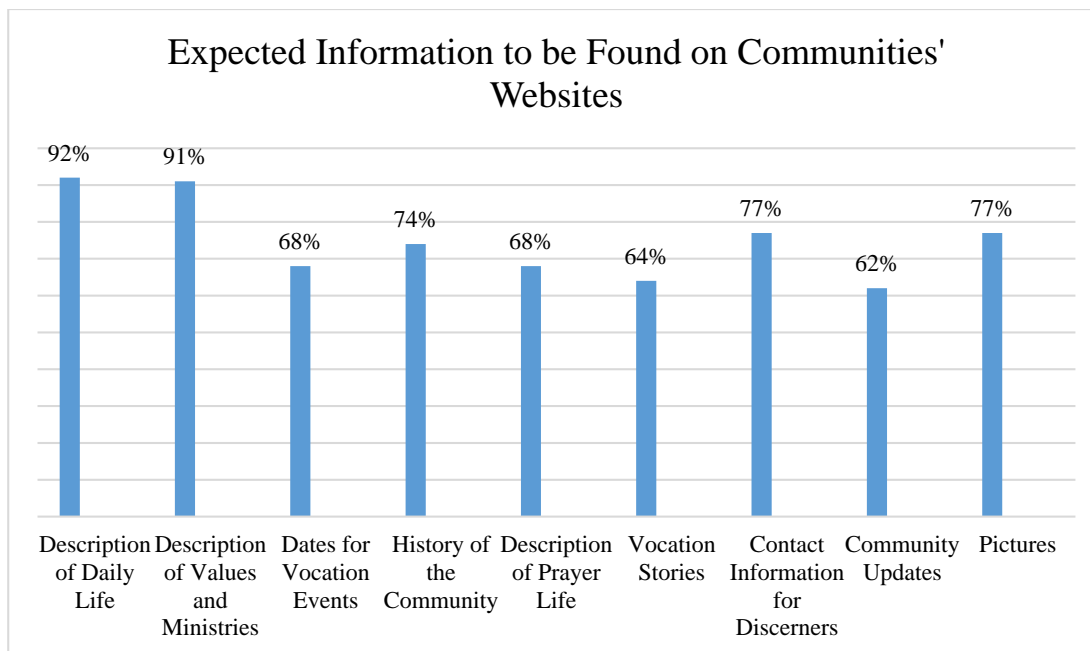62% — Community Updates
77% — Pictures

*Figure 3.* Expected Information on Religious Communities' Websites

Therefore, online resources only bridge an access gap to the extent that the information provided is helpful.  Several characteristics make a resource helpful.  First, it humanizes religious women and provides a glimpse into their day-to-day lives: "*Sr Kathleen seems so real, like someone I would get ice cream with.*"  Demystifying religious life helps discerners imagine the possibility of becoming a sister, *"I like how [Imagine Sisters] showcases the beauty of religious life in a relatable way."* Furthermore, websites that provide interaction generate a sense of community and companionship which facilitates the exchange of information.  Forums in particular grant access to other discerners' experiences, "*they've given me a way to gauge how others discern, and what's expected in discernment, which tells me what to do, and whether I'm doing it right."*  Forums meet an information need, through passive reception of information on a static site as well as  by connecting discerners with

individuals who are willing to share their knowledge. This proved to be invaluable for discerners who did not necessarily have a physical community in their area:

> Forums are the best. You get to actually read the questions, thoughts, comments from other people all around the world who differ greatly but are still somehow undergoing a similar process of discernment.

Overall, participants primarily sought access to information about communities but also access to other discerners.

**Reducing intimidation.** Several participants described a degree of intimidation associated with contacting a religious community. It made their discernment more concrete and realistic. Visiting an online resource felt more casual, and less committal. One woman stated, "*I don't have to vocalize anything which makes it less real and easier to think about.*" Another participant claimed that contacting a religious community for information implied a higher level of commitment to follow through with them, *"I personally feel pressured to move forward with a community if I have contacted them even if it is just to find out more information.*" The level of detachment while consulting online resources makes them "*a nice starting point, they can be an unintimidating, anonymous way to get more info.*" Therefore, online resources present the advantage of being passive and impersonal which can be an attractive feature for participants. The Internet acts as a kind of security blanket where users maintain their agency and control over the situation. This sentiment was coupled with the fact that online activity maintains user privacy. Discernment is a vulnerable and personal process, and women may choose to remain private about it, "*I was too afraid to talk to anyone about it, so I searched it a lot online!*"

**Granting privacy**.  Participants expressed feelings of intimidation over speaking with communities, but also their peers.  The privacy and anonymity granted by the Internet allowed them to obtain information without having to speak in person with a peer and reveal their interest in religious life.  One participant expressed concern over fear of what her peers might think: "*I did not have to tell anyone that I was thinking about religious life, because I was nervous what they would think.*"  Another person associated a stronger feeling than concern, fear, with speaking with peers, *"I was too afraid to talk to anyone about it, so I searched a lot online."* Juxtaposed against participants' use of forums, the privacy of the Internet yields two desirable effects: privacy from peers, and anonymity from forum users.  This two-faceted desire for privacy reveals a desire for discretion but also connection: *"you necessarily find someone who's wondering or living the same experience as you.  It is comforting to know not simply that you are not alone, but also that it is "universal."* Participants highlighted the value of human connection and interaction throughout their discernment process, suggesting that ISB is not solely characterized by the retrieval of information but also relationships that enable the information to be retrieved.   Figure 4 presents the quantitative data detailing why participants use online resources for discernment.  Four participants selected "other" in order to provide a more detailed explanation about their online behavior. One participant stated, "*I value religious life and am energized by the stories shared by others who live the life as well as those discerning.*"  Another explained, "*To read about different vocation stories and experiences of religious life.*" Interestingly, Figure 4 shows that a majority of participants went online to gain factual information, not to connect with others in spite of reiterating in the qualitative data that

community was one of the primary benefits of digital discernment spaces. This yields a unique dichotomy between the original intent for using digital resources described in the quantitative data and their actual effect described in the qualitative.
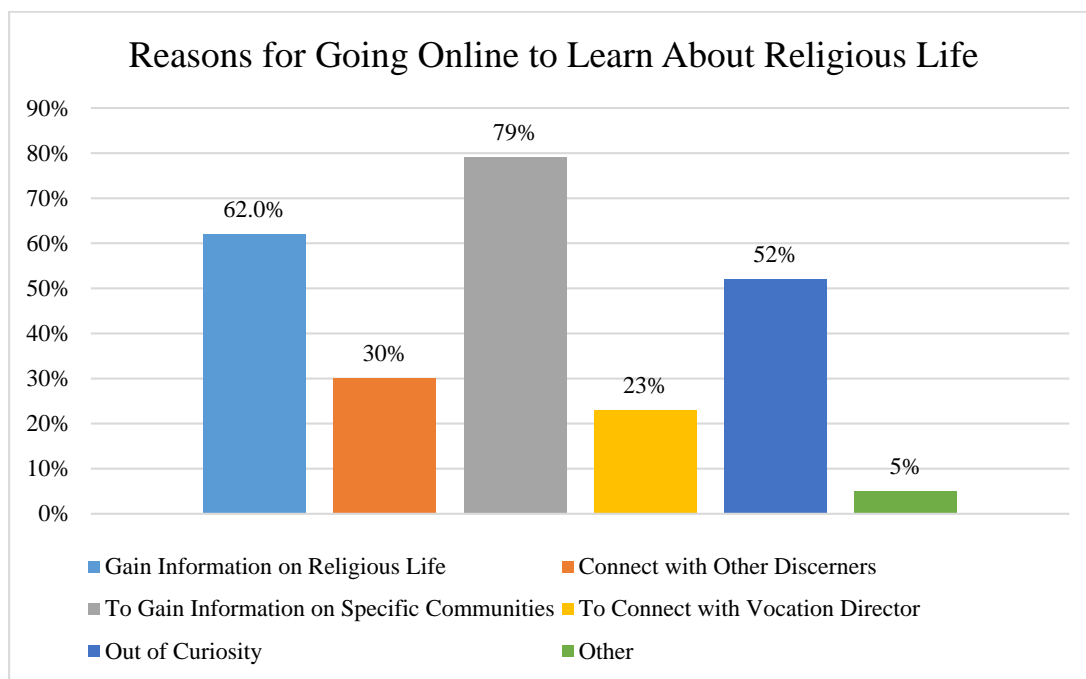


*Figure 4.* Reasons for Going Online to Learn About Religious Life

**Experiencing Human Connection**

Human connection is conceptualized as a relationship that can be embedded within a network: the connections created through online spaces allow exchange of information, as well as support, and interaction between multiple individuals. The importance of community and physical interaction, as noted in Figure 2, is integral to discernment. Approximately 55% of participants indicated it was a contextual or environmental factor that first led them to consider religious life, as opposed to an internal prompting. Thirty-four percent said that it was due to an experience they had in prayer, and 11% selected "other". Among the 55%, 23% percent indicated their first considered religious life after meeting a consecrated person, 12% were encouraged to

do so by someone, 8% indicated they first considered religious life after knowing a friend was discerning, 8% read something on religious life in print or online , and finally 4% were inspired by an immediate or extended family member who joined a religious community. Participants acted upon their interest in religious life through two main mediums: they talked to a consecrated religious person (37%) or sought out a printed or digital resource (50%). Print and digital resources played a minor role in initiating discernment, but they became increasingly helpful afterwards once participants began to actively discern. This is most evident in the fact that community was the most highly ranked resource by participants; 25% indicated that community was their most helpful resource (see Figure 2). Therefore, it appears that human connection, which includes meeting and/or speaking with another person, is an essential element of ISB. Community remained important in both prompting interest in religious life and throughout discernment.

In fact, even participants who celebrated the efficiency and usefulness of digital resources stated that their utility could only go so far, because ultimately human, face-to-face interaction, is the most meaningful key to discernment:

> While I have looked at websites and blogs/social media accounts such as Imagine Sisters from time to time, including reading discernment testimonies, I have found that examining my own vocation has been best fueled by talking and engaging with others that I know, not in seeing personal stories with which I had no connection and therefore failed to take root in my life or perspective.

Because religious life is not a vocation lived online or in print, a thorough information-seeking process for participants necessarily included interactions with religious sisters:

*"the more important aspect is getting to know the sisters one-on-one."* Additionally, some participants simply felt more comfortable talking directly to them: *"I learn more by talking to people than by reading about religious communities online. They tend to be impersonal. I like actually getting to talk to a person and ask questions."* Spiritual direction was also an in-person resource that participants sought out. Spiritual direction is a kind of mentor-mentee relationship in which a person, often a clergy member, helps a person discern their vocation. Fifty-six percent (56%) of participants indicated they had a spiritual director, and 27% indicated they did not have a spiritual director, but would like to have one if they had more information on where and how to find one. In spite of 27% participants indicating they would like a spiritual director, only one participant mentioned the lack of information on finding a spiritual director in the qualitative data. She stated in the final, open-ended question asking if there was anything else she would like to share, "I am getting no support from my community-they find my discernment "interesting" but I cannot find a spiritual director or anyone to help me in my parish-I'm on my own.".

## Do You Have a Spiritual Director?



*Figure 5.* Use of Spiritual Direction

**Outcomes**

Participants utilized information as a means to make sense of their discernment and vocation. How did their discernment evolve over the course of the information-seeking process? Did the information actually help them discern? These questions are difficult to navigate because discernment resources are not always initially helpful. They may cater to individuals in different stages of discernment, meaning that what is not helpful in the beginning may become helpful in the future. Furthermore, the lack of structure in discernment and the variability in individuals' contexts makes it difficult to gauge what constitutes "progress." Something that may be deemed benign may become in retrospect, at the end of discernment, of essential importance. Three main outcomes emerged from the data: knowing, experiencing, and developing agency. They must be strongly embedded within Dervin's space/time continuum and be viewed as dynamic and relevant to a specific moment in time, as identified by participants. Outcomes

constitute the end result of the information-seeking process, or more generally, where a person finds him or herself after having bridged a gap. Outcomes may be experiential and framed by feelings or thoughts, or they may be described as the acquisition of sought-after knowledge (e.g. "I found what I was looking for"). The outcomes are in the gerund tense to highlight their fluidity and the fact that their exact mechanisms varied by participant.

Table 2

*Outcomes of Information-Seeking Process*

| Outcome | Elements |
|---|---|
| Knowing | Knowledge about vocation, discernment, religious life, and/or a religious community |
| Interacting | Interaction with religious men and women, spiritual direction, community, support |
| Developing agency | Ability to initiate information-seeking, to contact a religious community, and search for new forms of information. |

Through searching print or digital materials, speaking with spiritual directors, friends, and support groups, participants came to *know* more about religious life and their own vocation. They could contrast the information they acquired with their own feelings and interests. One participant said that information-seeking "*helps me to see myself in that type of life*." Another claimed social-media helps "*give insight into the type of tasks I will be doing and confirms my desires to join*." This internalization of information contributed to their sense-making process primarily through granting them various forms of knowledge, whether factual or experiential. In addition to interior knowledge about experience ("could I see myself doing this?"), the information-seeking process often times included an interaction.

By *interacting*, speaking, and spending time with other people, discerners were granted a different kind of information characterized by a sense of community, safety,

and care. These interactions occurred with other discerners as well as religious men and women. They helped participants make sense of the kinds of relationships they might have in religious life, and helped attenuate feelings of isolation. Community provided motivation to persevere in discernment, and filled information needs that if not met, may have resulted in a person ending their discernment. One woman highlighted how forums benefited her: "*Vocation Station at Phatmass has been very encouraging because a lot of the people are dealing with the same issues that I am.*" Another stated, "*PhatMass is a real mixture of people at different stages, in various areas and ages, helping each other.*"

Discernment and information-seeking require the *agency* to seek out information. The scarcity of existing resources makes it unlikely that a person will simply stumble upon desired information without some kind of initiative on their behalf. Overcoming feelings of intimidation, connecting with other discerners, and implementing others' advice all require agentic behavior. Community in particular helped women feel more confident in their decisions: *"[PhatMass] actually really helps to see how people discern poorly. People post crazy things there sometimes, and when they do, it helps me to identify tendencies that I want to avoid."*

## Discussion

The findings of this study on the information-seeking behavior of women discerning religious life nestled well within Dervin's Sense Making concepts of context, bridges, gaps, and outcomes. Participants' demographic information, religious involvement, and faith background helped to identify the context in which they were

pursuing information.  The data highlighted the usefulness of community, which they

found online and also in-person.  Digital and print resources also supported their

discernment by providing information they did not want to seek out in person or could

not seek out due to a lack of access, or due to a lack of usefulness of the materials.

Feelings of intimidation, fear, and desire for control sometimes mitigated where and

how they pursued information.  In spite of the anonymity and control associated with

pursuing information online, participants indicated that their most valuable help came

from human interaction, which I named "human connection."  Human connection

allowed them to witness and discuss dimensions of religious life that could not be fully

communicated in a digital format.  It occurred in the form of friendships, spiritual

direction and interactions with consecrated men and women.  Therefore, their ISB was

characterized by the melding of factual and experiential information, which resulted in

an increase in knowledge, interpersonal communication, and the development of

agency.  Due to the scarcity of religious men and women in most Catholics' social

environments, the pursuit of information often times required the initiative of the

discerner.  The ability to contact religious communities, share experiences of

discernment, and seek out a spiritual director all developed agency and confidence

within participants.  This tableau of their ISB displays discernment as a spiritual process

propelled by various kinds of support, that are in turn used to make sense of an interior

prodding towards religious life.  The qualitative data was supported and informed by

quantitative data – this yielded a fuller picture of ISB by measuring the extent of an

experience or use of a resource.  Graphs and charts certainly limit the richness of data,

but they do provide quick visual representations that can connect concepts and ideas

expressed in participants' quotes. In the case of spiritual direction, it was interesting to note that while 27% of participants said they would like more information on how and where to find a spiritual director, only one participant brought it up in the qualitative data. This dissonance between the two types of data produces a paradox that may be of interest in future studies, connected to issues of motivations and expectations. Indeed, do discerners want a spiritual director because they see value in it, or because it is an expectation that a person discerning will have a spiritual director?

The findings provide important implications for existing research on ISB, religion and the Internet, and future research on the topic of women discerning religious life. First, participants actively sought out information as part of their discernment. While this may seem self-evident, it reveals that resources are needed and are being used. Discernment is a dynamic process that utilizes a variety of means. Reducing it to a long-term prayer endeavor negates the *sense-making process* that occurs during information-seeking. Information is assimilated and used to prescribe meaning to experiences, which may in turn affect how women pray and interact with religious men and women, their spiritual directors, and sources of community. Participants' description of how gaining information affected their decisions, thoughts, and feelings fits squarely within Dervin's SMM: no information can be divorced from its context and its user. The importance of context was further highlighted in the saliency of access. Access to resources constituted a significant disparity among participants. The level of support by parishes and families, and the presence of religious women in their geographical area had a significant effect on their information use. SMM proved to be an incisive framework for understanding ISB and may yield interesting findings in

future studies on the intersection of information and religion. The theme of human connection paralleled Kulthau's information theory and its concept of "affective variables" (1993) which highlights the importance and saliency of emotions in information-seeking.

**Limited Internet Effectiveness**

The role of Internet information was of particular interest throughout this study. As Internet use continues to rise, it is not surprising that participants gravitated towards and largely appreciated the information they acquired online. However, participants did not claim that online information met all of their information needs. Certain kinds of information vital to discernment *could only be* acquired in person, such as how sisters interacted with each other and the quotidian habits of a community. Internet information was therefore of *limited* effectiveness in discernment. The current study did not consider the use and effectiveness of information throughout the different stages of discernment. However, future studies may consider if effectiveness varies according to a person's current state of discernment. Human connection bridges a gap that digital interactions cannot, or, human connection could be conceptualized as a short bridge that is not long enough to cross the gap. I choose to name this concept "limited Internet effectiveness." The use of the word "effectiveness" over "efficacy" is intentional. In scientific research, effectiveness refers to how beneficial a resource is and efficacy designates whether or not a resource yielded the expected result (Gartlehner G., Hansen R. A., Nissman D., et al. (2006). Given that the concept refers to how helpful a resource is in meeting an information need, effectiveness appeared to be the most relevant term. To date, the literature has largely conceptualized Internet *use* examining

who does and doesn't use the Internet and why, versus how *effective* the Internet is for individuals who do use it (Wyatt, 2005).

The limited nature of Internet effectiveness is intrinsically tied to the kind of information pursued in vocational discernment. Indeed, Wyatt (2015) highlights the commodification of knowledge online by stating, "we implicitly accept the promises of technology and the capitalist relations of its production" (p. 69). Dominating information platforms like Google, Yahoo, and even specialty websites like WebMD treat information as a product to be sold to a client, thereby *encouraging* its users to gravitate to the Internet for their needs. Discernment, by its very ontology, cannot be commodified since it is an interior, spiritual process that benefits no one financially. Religious life itself, through the vow of poverty, does not yield a financial gain that might incentivize corporations to produce discernment material. Additionally, there inevitably rise questions of veracity: how accurately can religious life be presented online? Because religious life is a vocation of interpersonal and not digital nature, online information will always fall short in communicating the fullness of the experience. I hope that naming the concept of limited Internet effectiveness in this study will encourage further nuances in literature discussing how effective the Internet is in meeting information needs, and why they might not be depending on the kind of information individuals are seeking. It is important to avoid a hagiographic narrative of the Internet as it discourages researchers and practitioners from supplementing information-seeking with other kinds of resources.

**Contributions to Existing Literature**

The identification of gaps revealed a certain degree of frustration when existing resources did not meet users' information needs. Information-seeking may generate what the literature denotes as "information anxiety;" a concept describing feelings of inadequacy, fear, and being lost associated with seeking information (Wurman, 1989). While some participants did describe online resources as sometimes overwhelming, the theme was not salient enough to make it dominant, suggesting that their frustration had not reached a high enough degree to be called anxiety. This is an encouraging finding, as anxiety in information-seeking often results in feelings taking control over the process to the point where users are no longer able to think rationally or methodically (Erfanmanesh, Abdullah, Harun, & Karim, 2013). The information-seeking process was not without its difficulties, however. Participants expressed a heightened sense of alertness: some did not want their friends or family to find out they were discerning, and this led to a strong use of anonymous resources in order to maintain control over the situation. Others disparaged against the inadequacy of online information. In a way, this mirrors the information-seeking behavior of whom Chatman (1996) describes as "the information poor." The "information poor" are outsiders to a majority group, who perceive a lack of resources for their information needs and take strong precautions for secrecy, privacy, and control as means of self-protection in response to a perceived threat. It is important to mitigate this comparison though. Chatman's language of "insider/outsider," "risk-taking," and "threat" may be too intense for the purposes of discernment. The similarities are worth noting though: the participants identified

access, privacy, and control as important factors influencing their information-seeking suggesting an awareness of others' perceptions of their behavior.

The concept of limited Internet-use also contributes to the definition of information. The nature and definition of information is a perpetual source of scholarship and inquiry in information science. Some scholars posit information as a passive entity (e.g. Porat, 1997), a cognitive stimulus (e.g. Hayes, 1992), or a form of knowledge (e.g. Debons, Horne, & Cronenweth, 1988). Bateson's definition is widely supported in the field of information science for its generality and breadth (Case, 2002): "information is any difference that makes a difference" (1972, p. 453). By conceptualizing information as a difference, Bateson grants users the ability to define for themselves what constitutes a difference. Dervin's (1976) definition of information moves beyond acknowledging its subjectivity to state that it actually affects how users view the world, and in turn affects their decision-making. Interacting with individuals granted information to discerners. It was not a fact or a piece of data. Instead, it was experiential knowledge into a way of life. This problematizes definitions of information that are based solely on process (e.g. Losee, 1997) or on action (Barlow, 1994) and provides further fodder to support Dervin's definition.

This contextual view of information contributes to the existing studies on religious life by CARA (2009; 2010). Their studies' broad scope provides a bird's eye view of discerners and religious men and women, and the social, religious, and cultural dimensions of the discernment process and their experiences in religious life. The current study hones in on the mechanisms and intricacies of support, resources, and information-seeking thereby laying down groundwork for future studies on the topic.

Existing literature on religion and the Internet has not yet addressed discernment or religious vocations.  Heidi Campbell's pioneering work on the religious social-shaping of technology and religion and the media has largely addressed groups, movements, and religious communities' reaction to and use of technology.  Examining an intra and interpersonal religious process in-depth therefore shifts the literature from a macro to a micro perspective, and opens the door for more of these kinds of studies in the discipline of information science.

**Recommendations**

By asking women directly what kind of resources they find helpful and why, this study provides fodder for priests, religious men and women, vocation directors, and lay ministers who may encounter women discerning and may seek resources on how to best support them.  As highlighted throughout the study, the integration of digital and print resources with human connection is essential.  The resources participants highlighted as particularly helpful, such as forums and grassroots movements like Imagine Sisters, provide the opportunity to consume the material passively (e.g. viewing a page) or actively (e.g. asking a question, responding to a comment).  It granted discerners the opportunity to choose how they sought out information instead of having to engage in a way that wasn't comfortable for them.  This was most evident with participants' comments about being able to view information on a website without having to ask a religious sister directly which was perceived as intimidating.  Therefore, resource creators should be cognizant of the intimidation factor, which may deter some discerners.  Providing options for acquiring information may help reach a wider variety of women.

The participants in the study were at various stages of discernment and expressed different levels of knowledge about religious life. Some sought out information on the nature of religious life, while others sought out more practical implications like a religious sister's day to day schedule. Future resources must be cognizant that women discerning do not begin discernment at the same information level. Complex theological information may be helpful, but some users may be seeking out more practical, basic information. This was most evident in the information that women expect to find on religious communities' websites. A person may view a religious community's website to learn about the community, but also to learn about what it means to be a religious sister.

**Limitations**

The study presents several limitations. The small sample size is limited to a mostly American demographic that has access to the Internet and utilizes social media. The recruitment method excluded potential participants who do not use Twitter or forums. The experiences of discerners who have limited Internet access may vary, and further studying their information-seeking behavior may shed light on how economic and social disparities affect discernment. The intersection of race and religion also merits further examination: the sample was largely white and the data did not account for the racial and cultural factors that may influence discerners. Unfortunately, the recruitment did not yield any data from minors. This is problematic as discernment often begins before the age of 18. In fact, the data collected attests to this: one participant first thought of religious life at the age of 4. Pursuing the experiences of

minors would grant a longitudinal view of their ISB and would provide data for interesting generational comparisons.

Additionally, the methodology presented several limitations.  Interviews are often the most effective ways of implementing SMM as they provide more space and flexibility for participants to describe their experiences.  The use of multiple coders, or having participants provide feedback on initial findings would have strengthened the results.  Currently, the data, in spite of all other attempts at accuracy and rigor, is still analyzed and presented through the monolithic lens of the primary researcher.  Finally, the brevity of the survey did not allow for in-depth responses.  Its broad content allowed the identification of general themes that may be salient in future research, but it still only scratched the surface of female discerners' ISB.

## Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to explore the information-seeking behavior of Catholic women discerning religious life.  Findings were presented and conceptualized using Dervin's sense-making methodology, which identifies context, gaps, bridges, and outcomes.  It is important to note that the study does not claim to expose how women discern, but how they seek out information and the role of information in their discernment.  The study did not touch on the spiritual and psychological dimensions of discernment.  The results cannot claim to offer a picture of discernment, only a fragment of it through a certain disciplinary lens.  The introduction and description of the concept of *limited Internet effectiveness* complicated assumptions about Internet use and non-use in existing literature in order to better understand how digital resources are

integrated into spiritual processes.  In conclusion, the information-seeking behavior of

Catholic women discerning religious life is heavily influenced by the context in which

they find themselves and the access and efficacy of the resources available to them.

They primarily seek out information to gain knowledge, to be able to connect with

others, and to be able to overcome doubts and questions in order to move forward with

their discernment.  Information is then much more than a passive "brick" as Dervin

describes.  It is internalized and incorporated into the larger discernment process.  This

information process is characterized by an integration of both online and in-person

resources suggesting that the Internet, while certainly valuable, is only of limited utility.

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APPENDIX A
Survey

Blue: Context
Green: Bridges
Red: Gaps and Bridges

1. **What is your gender?**
   Male
   Female
2. **Please select the category that best describes your primary ethnicity/cultural background**
   White
   African American
   Black
   American Indian
   Asian or Pacific Islander
   Hispanic/Latino
   Other, please specify
3. **If you live outside of the United States, where do you currently reside?**
4. **What is the highest level of education you have completed?**
   Some high school
   High school graduate or GED
   Some College
   Associate's degree
   Bachelor's degree
   Some graduate school
   Master's degree
   A professional graduate degree
   Doctorate
5. **At what age did you first consider religious life?**
6. **In what stage of discernment are you?**
   I've just started thinking about religious life
   I'm hoping to contact communities in the future and attend discernment retreats
   I am in contact with a vocation director at a religious community
   I am in contact with a vocation director for my diocese or archdiocese
   I am certain that I have a vocation to religious life
   I'm discerning with my spiritual director
   I am in the process of applying for candidacy/postulancy
   I have discerned that a religious vocation is not right for me at this time
   Other, please specify
7. **What religious communities are you discerning with or have discerned with in the past?**
8. **Do you have a spiritual director?**
   Yes
   No, but I would like one if I had more information on where or how to find one
   No

**9. What parish activities and/or religious groups are you involved in? (select all)**
Discernment group
Bible study or adult faith formation
Planning and/or attending retreats
A parish ministry, such as a catechist, music, RCIA, community outreach, etc.
Parish young adult group
Newman center/Campus Ministry
A lay movement, such as Communion and Liberation, Legion of Mary, Focolare, Cursillo, De Colores, Opus Dei, FOCUS, etc.

**10. What first led you to consider the possibility of religious life?**
An experience I had in prayer
I had a friend/relative who was discerning
Meeting a sister, nun, brother, or priest
Someone told me that I should consider it
Family member who is a priest/a religious
Something I read, such as a book by the saints, a pamphlet, something in a parish bulletin, etc. Please describe.
Something I saw online, such as a website or a video. Please describe.
Other, please describe.

**11. Please rank what has been the most valuable and important to you in your discernment process**
Websites (vocation or discernment website, websites of religious institutes, arch/diocesan websites, etc.)
A spiritual community (discernment group, parish, etc.)
Other online resources (blogs, podcasts, social media, forums and discussion boards, chatrooms, etc.)
Spiritual direction
Support from family and friends
Books/other printed materials

**12. Where did you first go looking for information on religious life?**
I talked to a nun, sister, brother, priest, or spiritual director
I went online
I read a book, or other printed material
I asked a trusted friend or family member
I contacted the vocation director for my diocese
Other, please specify.

**13. How important have online resources been in your discernment (online resources can include websites, Facebook pages, twitter, forums, etc.)**
Very important
Somewhat important
Somewhat unimportant
Not important

**14. Why or why not have online resources been important to you?**

**15. What are some of your favorite online resources on discernment. What do you like about them?**

**16. If you visit religious communities' websites, what kind of information do you expect to find on them (select all that apply)?**

A description of daily life in the community

Information for parents

A description of the values and various ministries (charisms, apostolates) of the community

A general description of religious life

Dates for vocation events

The history of the community

A blog

Pictures

A description of the community's prayer life

Vocation stories

Forum, discussion board

Podcasts

Contact information for discerners to use

Some kind of news updates of things happening in the community

Other, please specify.

**17. Is there a specific community's website that you think has good and helpful information on it?**

No

Yes, please provide the URL:

**18. How important to you is it that a community you're discerning with has a social media presence (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Pinterest)? Why or why not?**

**19. What best describes the reasons you go online to learn about religious life? (select all that apply)**

To gain information on religious life

To gain information on specific communities

To connect with other women discerning

The information I get online helps me when I speak with a vocation director or spiritual director

Out of curiosity

Other, please specify

**20. Is there anything else you would like to share?**

APPENDIX B
Participants' Demographic Information

| State | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| California | 7 | 9% |
| Idaho | 1 | 1% |
| Indiana | 3 | 4% |
| Iowa | 2 | 3% |
| Kansas | 6 | 8% |
| Kentucky | 1 | 1% |
| Louisiana | 1 | 1% |
| Maryland | 2 | 3% |
| Massachusetts | 3 | 4% |
| Michigan | 2 | 3% |
| Minnesota | 3 | 4% |
| Mississippi | 3 | 4% |
| Missouri | 3 | 4% |
| Montana | 1 | 1% |
| Nebraska | 2 | 3% |
| Nevada | 2 | 3% |
| New Jersey | 1 | 1% |
| New York | 3 | 4% |
| North Dakota | 1 | 1% |
| Ohio | 1 | 1% |
| Oklahoma | 5 | 7% |
| Oregon | 1 | 1% |
| Rhode Island | 1 | 1% |
| South Carolina | 1 | 1% |
| South Dakota | 1 | 1% |
| Tennessee | 2 | 3% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Texas | 9 | 12% |
| Virginia | 1 | 1% |
| Washington D.C. | 2 | 3% |
| Washington | 2 | 3% |
| Wisconsin | 2 | 3% |
| Wyoming | 0 | 0% |

| Countries | Number |
|---|---|
| France | 1 |
| Quebec, Canada | 1 |
| Germany, rural area | 1 |
| Sweden | 1 |
| Australia | 1 |
| Italy | 1 |
| Canada | 5 |
| Uruguay | 1 |
| UK | 5 |
| Saskatchewan, Canada | 1 |
| Haiti | 1 |
| Italy | 1 |