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INFORMATION AVOIDANCE IN THE ARCHIVAL CONTEXT

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Agenda

01 **Background**

02 **Literature Review**

03 **Methodology**

04 **Findings**
- Themes
- RQ1 Findings
- RQ2 Findings

05 **Discussion**
- Contributions
- Implications

06 **Conclusion**
- Key Takeaways
- Limitations
- Future Work

BACKGROUND

What is Information Avoidance (IA)?

Broadly...

“any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341).

Research Problems

01

IA literature lacks a consistent theoretical framework and vocabulary (Sweeny et al., 2010)

02

Concepts of IA sometimes vary from one discipline to the next, perhaps due to embedded concepts (Fugmann, 2022)

03

Heavy focus on information *seeking* behavior despite calls for distinct theoretical models (Foust & Taber, 2023)

Suggestion

Why Archivists Should Care

In archives, IA studies are nearly non-existent

Archival records and those who interact with them enter into an information exchange in which the phenomenon of IA can affect how individuals interact with archives.

Research Questions

RQ1

What abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?

RQ2

How do archivists experience IA in their daily work?

What is Information Avoidance (IA)?

Broadly...

“any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341).

LITERATURE REVIEW

IA in Psychology

IA studies in this field focus on intrapersonal traits such as cognition, personality and demographics, emotions, and coping skills

- Cognitive aversions to information (Alam, 2024; Hart et al., 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2008; Sweeny et al., 2010)
  - Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and selective exposure theory (Festinger, 1954)
  - Relies heavily on information in which the content is known to the receiver (Sweeny et al., 2010)
- Personality traits like agreeableness, openness and curiosity (Deng et al., 2022; Howell & Shepperd, 2016)
- Demographic traits like age (Deng et al., 2022), gender and political orientation (Howell & Shepperd, 2016)
- Emotions and coping skills (Miller, 1987; Sweeny et al., 2010)
  - These are **not** stable personality traits (Baker & Pettigrew, 1999)

Interpersonal and situational factors also make an appearance, such as preferences for positive feedback from others (Trope et al., 2003; Vu et al., 2023).

IA in Economics

IA studies in this field focus on interpersonal motivations and instances that are not restricted to one's self, but are Intrapersonally measured by utility (Golman et al., 2017).

- Emphasis on active IA
- Utility based on hedonic and strategic outcomes

Hedonic evidence

- Disappointment aversion, curiosity, boredom (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016)

Strategic evidence

- Sense-making and confirmation bias (Chater & Loewenstein, 2016)
- Political partisanship (Momsen & Ohndorf, 2023)

IA may be imposed on others in the interest of positive hedonic and strategic outcomes for the individual imposing IA on others.

- Those receiving the diluted information, if at all, are more likely to see negative outcomes.
- The control of the flow of information could also be strategically permanent or temporary.

IA in Consumer Health Informatics

IA studies in this field shift to a focus on unknown information (e.g., medical diagnoses, genetic markers) (Case et al., 2005; St. Jean et al., 2017) and emotion

- Receiving this information could cause negative emotions or impact one's ability to cope, as discussed previously
- A person could impose IA on another in attempts to protect the other person who the information is about (Rauscher & Dean, 2018).

Information overload can cause anxiety or fear (Nelissen et al., 2015)

- IA may be employed to positively or negatively negate those feelings

Physical and digital access barriers can cause IA

- More prevalent in those with low digital literacy levels (Institute of Medicine, 2004; Norman & Skinner, 2006) and marginalized populations (National Network of Libraries of Medicine, 2014; St. Jean et al., 2017).
- Those who face limited digital access also face more limits to physical access (Rauscher & Dean, 2018)

IA in Communications

IA studies in this field focus on affective and social implications, and feedback preferences are heavily implicated here as well (Afifi et al., 2004; Afifi & Weiner, 2004)

Emotional evidence

- Emotional variables like fear, anxiety, and hope linked with risk assessment when retrieving information (Chang & Huang, 2020; Deline & Kahlor, 2019).

Social evidence (big-picture)

- A person's community, or social sphere, can influence the way they handle information (Lu et al., 2022; Yang & Kahlor, 2013).
  - In a digital application, social networks can create overload, perceptions of irrelevance, time pressure and social network fatigue (Guo et al., 2020)

Social evidence (small-picture)

- More intimate relationships (e.g., loved ones, family) impact avoidant behavior (Chang & Huang, 2020; Schrodt et al., 2024)

IA in Information Sciences

IA studies in this field focus everyday life information behaviors (Narayan et al., 2011) with several concepts previously discussed

- Cognitive barriers and biases (Singh & Brinster, 2021)
- Emotions (Savolainen, 2013; Willson & Given, 2020)
- Feedback preferences which lead to filtering of information (Behimehr & Jamali, 2020)
- Information overload creates negative emotions (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022; Soroya & Faiola, 2023)
  - Impact people's expectations about the validity of the information (Sultana et al., 2022).
- Active and passive IA are common, with implications for peoples' physical and mental health, finances and relationships.
- Positive and negative outcomes (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022; Manheim, 2014; Riley et al., 2022; Willson & Given, 2020)

Social evidence

- Library anxiety (Larsen et al., 2019; Mellon, 1986)
- Task difficulty (Zhang et al., 2023)
- Trust (Bressel et al., 2023; Riley et al., 2022)

Key Tenets of IA

Who?

Everyone is susceptible to IA and likely has engaged in IA behavior in combination of any of the following concepts.

What?

1) Info content can be known or unknown
2) IA can have positive or negative outcomes
3) IA can be temporary or permanent
4) IA can be active or passive
5) IA is not restricted to one's self
6) IA can manifest as outright denial of information or omission of information already received

Key Tenets of IA

Why/When?

(these can be individual or can be combined in any order)

Moderators
Intrapersonal factors
Interpersonal factors
Situational factors

Rationale
Change in beliefs
Undesired actions
Unpleasant emotions

Measurements
Control over final outcomes
Ability to cope with receiving information
Ease or difficulty obtaining or evaluating information
Expectations about the information itself
Lack of interest/relevance
Availability of time, energy, money, etc.

Key Tenets of IA

The recipe for IA is multivariate, complex and not dichotomous (Sweeny et al., 2010; Howell & Shepperd, 2016)

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Approach

Step 1: Systematic Literature Review

Step 2: Phenomenological Framework

Step 3: Semi-structured Interviews

Step 4: Hermeneutic Philosophy

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Systematic Lit Review

01 Vague searches for “information avoidance”

02 Iterative and refined search strategies applied

03 Targeted peer-reviewed journals from psychology, economics, consumer health informatics, communications and information sciences

04 Boolean operators, truncation and phrasing techniques applied

05 178 results across databases

06 Final selection based on relevance to data collecting in this study and priority given to more recently published studies (2019-2024

Phenomenology (Creswell & Baez, 2020, p. 273)

Steps	This Study
“Focus on a single **phenomenon** to explore.”	Phenomenon = **Information Avoidance**
“Collect data from **individuals who have experienced the phenomenon**.”	Individuals who have experienced IA = **Archivists**
“Explore the **context** in which the individuals experience the phenomenon.”	Context = How IA may relate to and manifest itself **within an archivist’s daily work**
“Frame the study within a broad **philosophy**.”	Philosophy = **Hermeneutics**: How archivists interpret the concept of IA, and how they experience it through this concept to create meaning of the experience.
“**Bracket** out personal experiences.”	Bracket = Approaching the interviews **without inserting my own experiences**
“Report on the **essence** of the experience.”	Essence = **Aggregate meanings** of the transcripts, **provide a description**

Interviews

Participants

Purposive and snowball sampling

12 archivists from in the United States

Criteria (IRB approved)

1. 18 years of age or older
2. Actively work in an archives-related position of any kind in the United States
3. Earned a graduate degree related to archival, library, museum or information studies

Final selection

1. Various regions of the United States
2. Various types of archival institutions

Regions of the U.S.	# of Archivists Interviewed
Mid-Atlantic	2
Midwest	3
Northeast	2
South	2
Southwest	2
West Coast	1

Types of Institutions	# of Archivists Interviewed
Academic	6
Museum	2
Historical Society	2
Public Library	1
State Archive	1

Interviews

Procedures

Semi-structured protocol (IRB approved)

- One-on-one format
- In person or online venues offered
- ~60 minutes long
- 3 pilot interviews conducted before study interviews

Conducted between March 25 and May 23, 2024

Audio recorded and transcribed with AI

- Informed consent received from all participants in writing prior to interview
- Transcriptions edited by hand
- Member checks offered to all participants

Interviews

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic coding approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015)

- Analog coding by hand to develop initial codebook
- Ingested code into QDA software NVivo to refine and organize

Synthesis Grids (Miles et al., 1994)

- Visual digestion of data
- Consolidated variables that helped identify themes
  - Compare frequency of mentions compared to other data
- Helpful in identifying trends

Hermeneutics

Broadly...

The study of interpretation to create "new understanding... through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding we already have" (George, 2021, para. 9)

Created interpretive structures in the form of models to create understanding for "ourselves" as archivists, but also understanding of how our engagement with IA affects the experience of "others."

FINDINGS

Summary of Key Themes

RQ1: Abstract Ideas

01 IA Susceptibility

02 Contributing Variables

03 Denial vs Omission

RQ2: Experiences

04 Applications

05 Archival Practices and Workflows

RQ1

What abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?

Theme

IA Susceptibility ("Who")

Finding

Archivists and researchers are both susceptible

Evidence

74 total references

Archivists: All 12 interviewees relayed ideas about archivists exhibiting IA, with 42 references across all transcripts.*

Researchers: All 12 interviewees relayed ideas about researchers in archives exhibiting IA, with 32 references across all transcripts.*

* Will use "XX interviewees | XXX references" format moving forward

“To the point of actively withdrawing material from certain... archival collections, so you know, we are imposing our own information avoidance on the researcher.”

–A7

“If a researcher wants to leave out information to create something, obviously there might be intention where somebody’s leaving information out to create a narrative.”

–A10

RQ1

What abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?

Theme

Contributing Variables (“When/Why”)

Finding

Several variables contribute to IA in archives that impact and are impacted by the following

Evidence

605 total references

Scoping: 12 interviewees | 113 references
Self-Preservation: 12 interviewees | 103 references
Access: 11 interviewees | 89 references
Experience Level: 12 interviewees | 69 references
Bias/Worldview: 12 interviewees | 61 references
Type of Archive: 12 interviewees | 56 references
Obscurity: 12 interviewees | 44 references
Outside Influence: 11 interviewees | 42 references
Resource Availability: 11 interviewees | 28 references

“[It’s] always a challenge of historians and researchers that your scope is supposed to be one that is manageable... and so you really might be, even though you see information that kind of contradicts your point of view, you’re specifically avoiding that.”

–A1

“I feel very strongly that archives are to the average Joe... people have no idea what we’re talking about in archives... the only people who could have come up with the idea of a finding aid is an archivist, because [other people are] like ‘what are those?’ [We] use words like ‘provenance,’ and like, nobody in the real world walking around has any idea what you... mean.”

–A5

RQ1

What abstract ideas do archivists have about IA as it relates to archives?

Theme

Denial vs Omission ("What")

Finding

IA can manifest itself in 2 ways in archives

Evidence

93 total references

Omission: 11 interviewees | 58 references

Denial/Misdirection: 12 interviewees | 34 references

“[Content warnings] kind of enables somebody to kind of consent to whether or not they want to see that... that could lead to information avoidance, and maybe for good reason, because somebody doesn’t want to be retraumatized.”

–A6

“I think that there are archives that are more closed than others that serve the needs of a subgroup for whatever reason and they have less interest in providing all... the information”

–A9

RQ2

How do archivists experience IA in their daily work?

Theme

Applications

Finding

Archivists discuss real life applications of IA hypothetically and anecdotally depending on how public-facing they perceive their role to be

Evidence

95 total references

Anecdotes: 12 interviewees | 55 references

Hypotheticals: 12 interviewees | 40 references

- Those archivists who perceived their role to be more public-facing were able to provide more anecdotes across the board (all 4).
- Those who saw their role as a mix of public-facing and behind-the-scenes work were less predictable (2 with more anecdotes, and 3 with the same number or within a margin of 1).
- Those behind-the-scenes each reported differently (1 with more anecdotes, 1 with a near even split, and 1 with more hypotheticals.

“Hypothetically, if... a researcher were to be looking for images related to vascular surgery or something like that, of which they’ve got three images that they’re particularly interested in... it really comes down to how they’re utilizing it and what they’re open to.”

–A4

“In my experience... it tends to be those people who are not, again like, that affected community, they’re not a member of a community of consequence in whatever situation...”

–A12

RQ2

How do archivists experience IA in their daily work?

Theme

Archival Practices and Workflows

Finding

Several archival practices and workflows impact and are impacted by IA

Evidence

312 total references

Experience with Archival Research: 12 interviewees | 45 references
Collection Management: 10 interviewees | 39 references
Overall Visibility: 11 interviewees | 35 references
Digital Access: 9 interviewees | 32 references
Description: 10 interviewees | 29 references
Reference Skills: 9 interviewees | 27 references
Archivist's Training/Experience: 8 interviewees | 25 references

(list cont'd next slide) →

RQ2

How do archivists experience IA in their daily work?

Theme

Archival Practices and Workflows

Finding

Several archival practices and workflows impact and are impacted by IA

Evidence

312 total references

Archivist's Bias: 8 interviewees | 23 references
Physical Access: 9 interviewees | 19 references
Processing: 8 interviewees | 16 references
Trigger/Content Warnings: 4 interviewees | 8 references
Exhibits/Public Displays: 2 interviewees | 6 references
Arrangement: 4 interviewees | 4 references
Metadata: 3 interviewees | 4 references

“We’re a state chartered institution and what we store, in a sense, being supported by tax dollars should be open... I have to keep in mind that we do have sensitive information in the records, but I don’t, in terms of collecting, I try to avoid those sorts of materials because we have a different mandate in terms of access.”

–A2

“[Archivists give] lip service to [diverse collecting practices] like ‘oh yeah, well, of course we wouldn’t ignore a movement that we may not personally agree with,’ but I never saw much evidence that they actually follow through with documenting that kind of thing.”

–A3

DISCUSSION

Interpretive Structures

Contributions

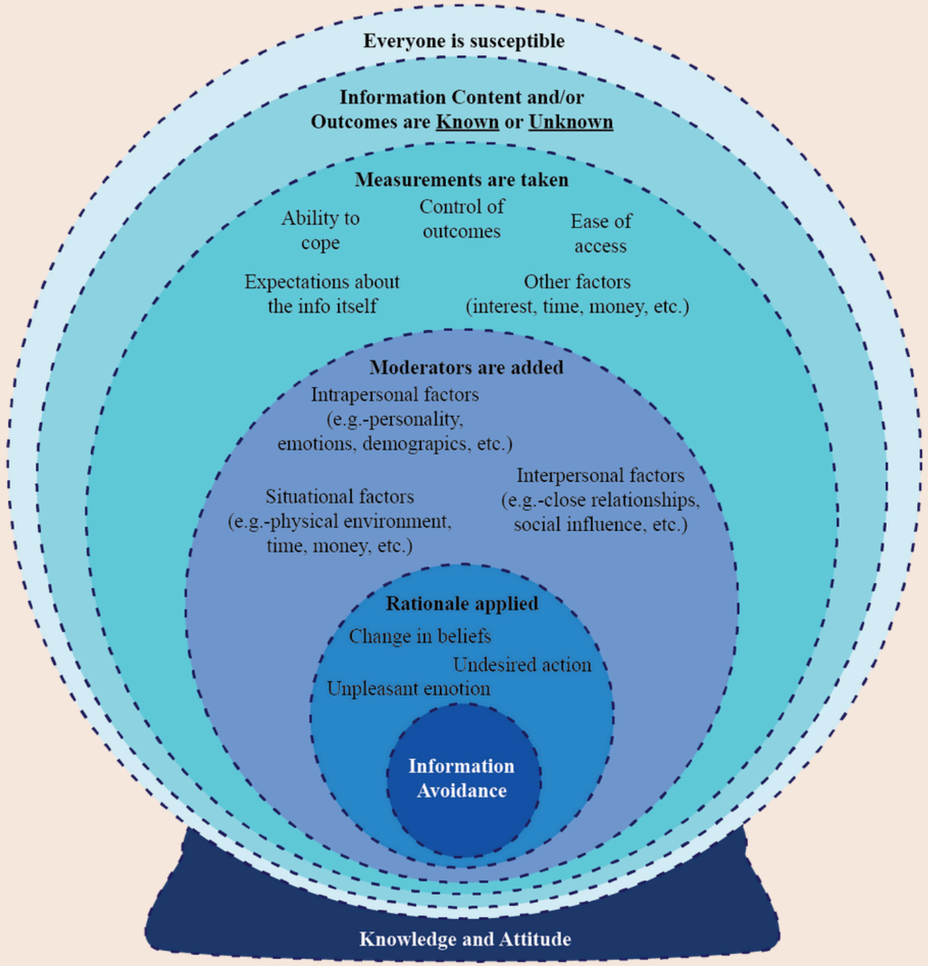
Two models are proposed as a hermeneutic tool to make sense of the data and findings collected in this study

- The Relational Information Avoidance System (RIAS) Model
- The Archival Information Avoidance Exchange (AIAE) Model

Implications

The models above demonstrate the linkages between the phenomena of IA and tie it back to this study's original suggestion: **Archival records and those who interact with them enter into an information exchange in which the phenomenon of IA can affect how individuals interact with archives.**

Contributions



The Relational Information Avoidance System (RIAS) Model

- Interrelated converging spheres that represent the key tenets (see next slide) of IA found through the 4-part methodological approach.
- Provides a conceptual theoretical model of IA.
- Adapted from Littletree et al.'s (2020) model of the relationality of Indigenous systems of knowledge.

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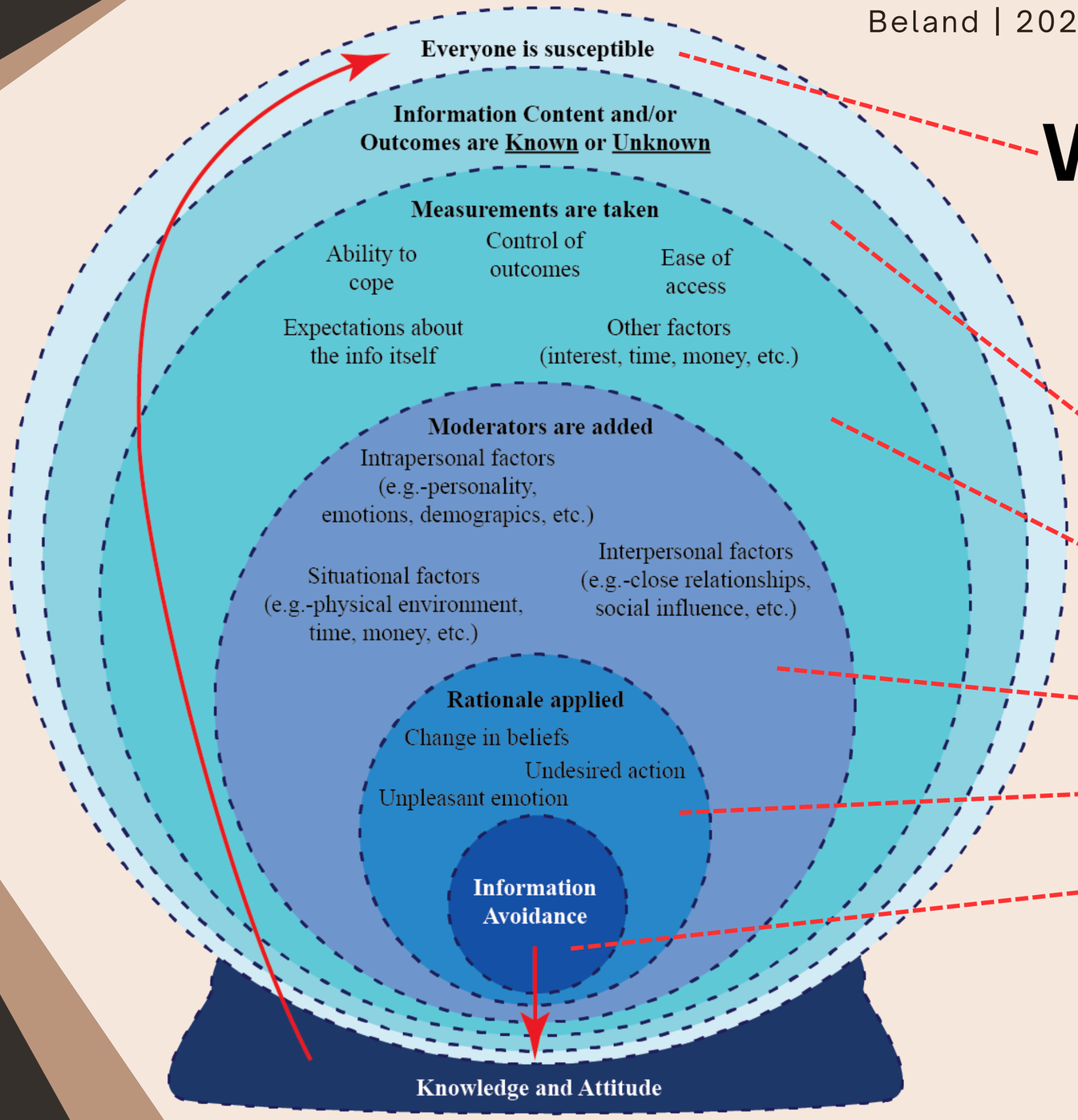


WHO

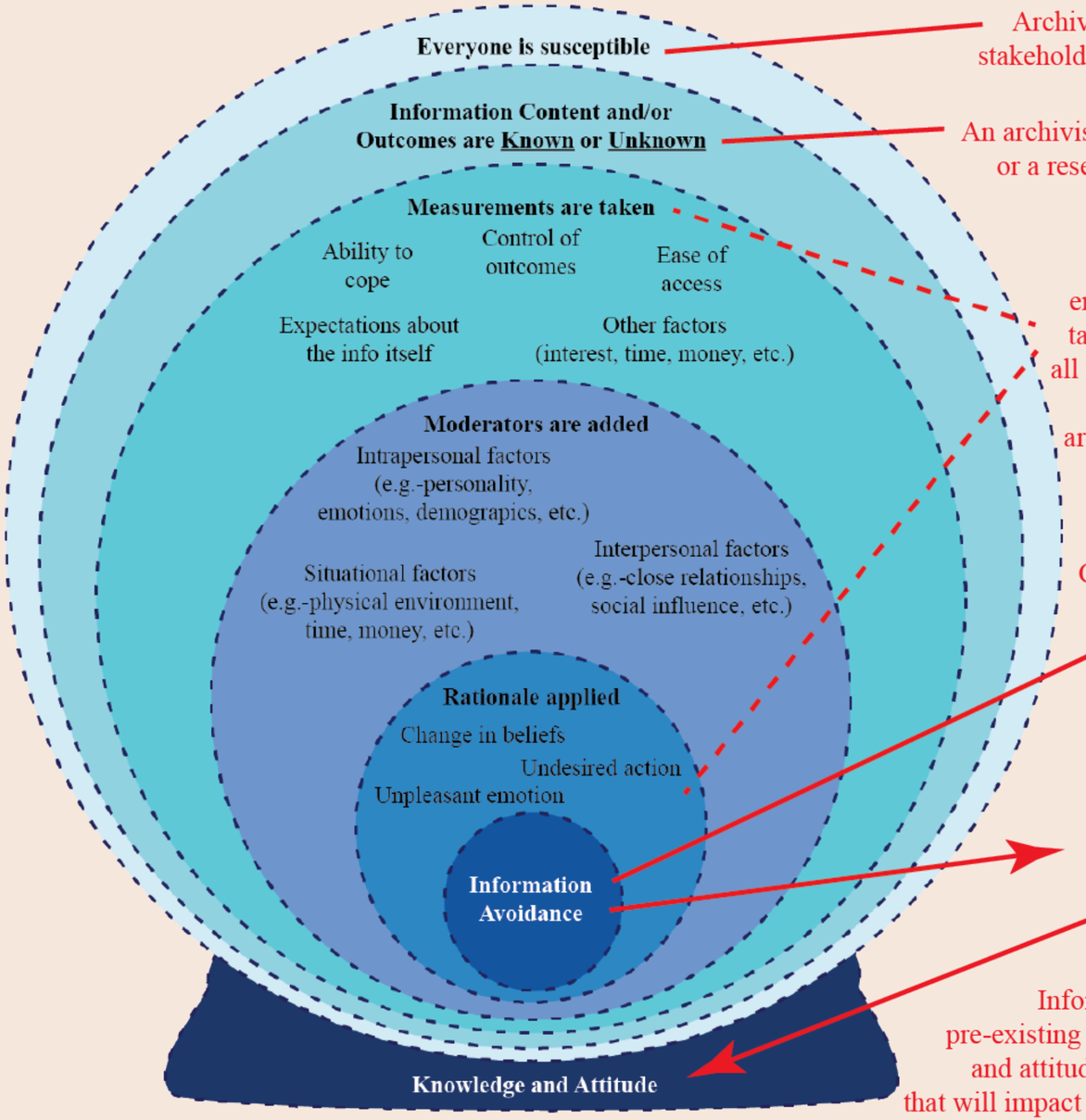
WHAT

WHEN

WHY

The RIAS Model in the Archival Context

Annotated with RQ1 Findings



Archivists and researchers + stakeholders and other consumers. (Finding 1)

An archivist's lack of institutional knowledge or a researcher's lack of understanding of how archives work.

Personal judgements, subjectivity, emotions, personality, social structures, task difficulty, outside forces and more all apply to archives and archival research. These impact measurements taken, are moderated internally and externally, and are rationalized in archives.

Can impact or be impacted by scoping, self-preservation, access, experience level, bias, characteristics about the archive itself, obscurity, outside influences and resource availability. (Finding 2)

Denial/Misdirection and Omission. (Finding 3)

Information avoided becomes pre-existing knowledge (e.g.-experience level) and attitudes (e.g.-self-preservation, bias) that will impact how future information is approached

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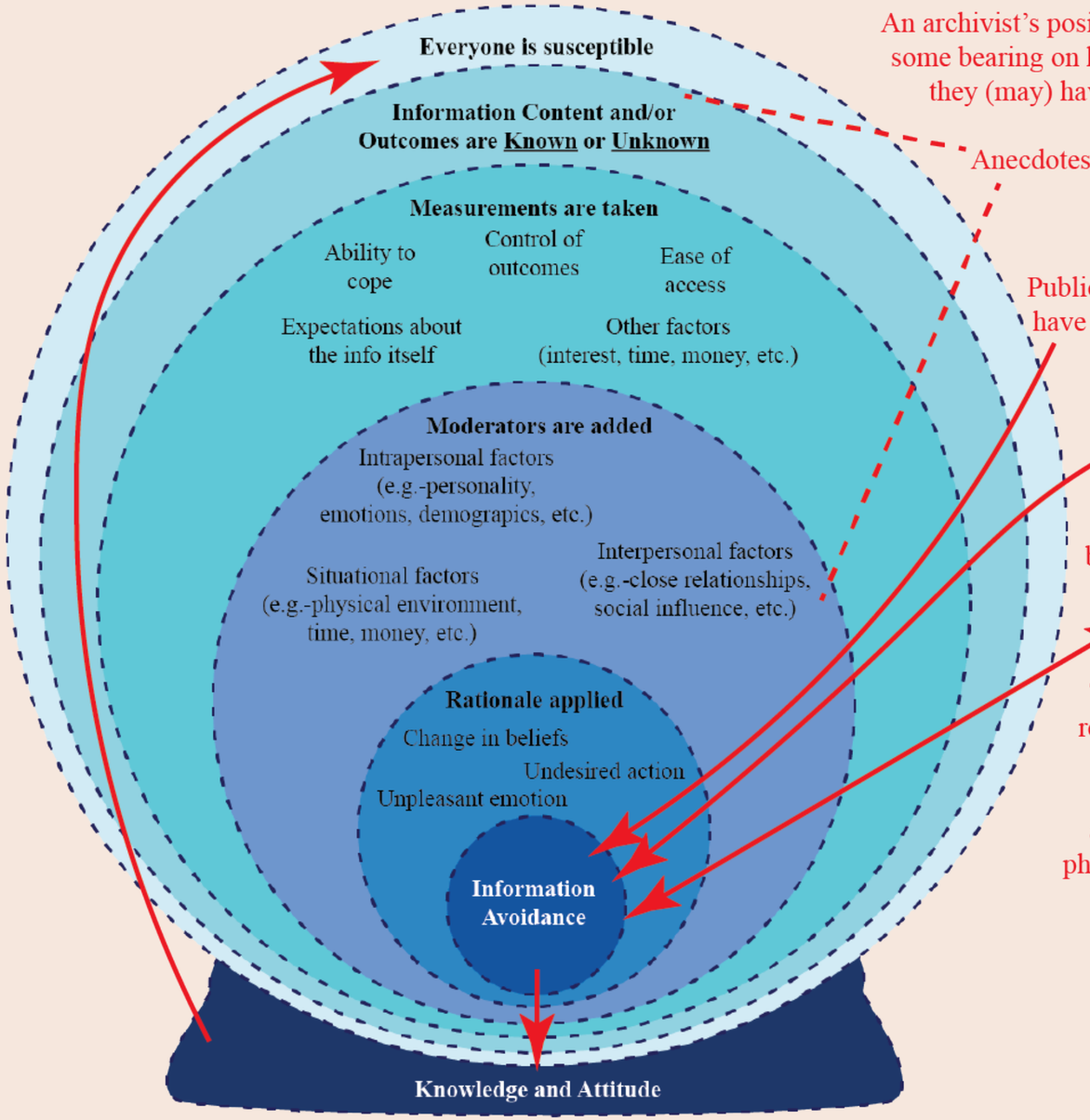
The RIAS Model in the Archival Context

Annotated with RQ2 Findings



An archivist's positioning within an archive may have some bearing on how they ideate and reflect on how they (may) have experienced IA in their work.

Anecdotes and hypotheticals provided. (Finding 4)

Public-facing usually have more anecdotes

More behind the scenes, more unpredictable

Archival practices are equated with being impacted or impacting the potential for IA among archivists and researchers. (Finding 5)

These included experience with archival research, collection management, visibility of archives, digital access, description, reference skills, the archivist's training and experience level, the archivist's bias, physical access, processing, trigger warnings, archival exhibits and public displays, arrangement, and metadata.

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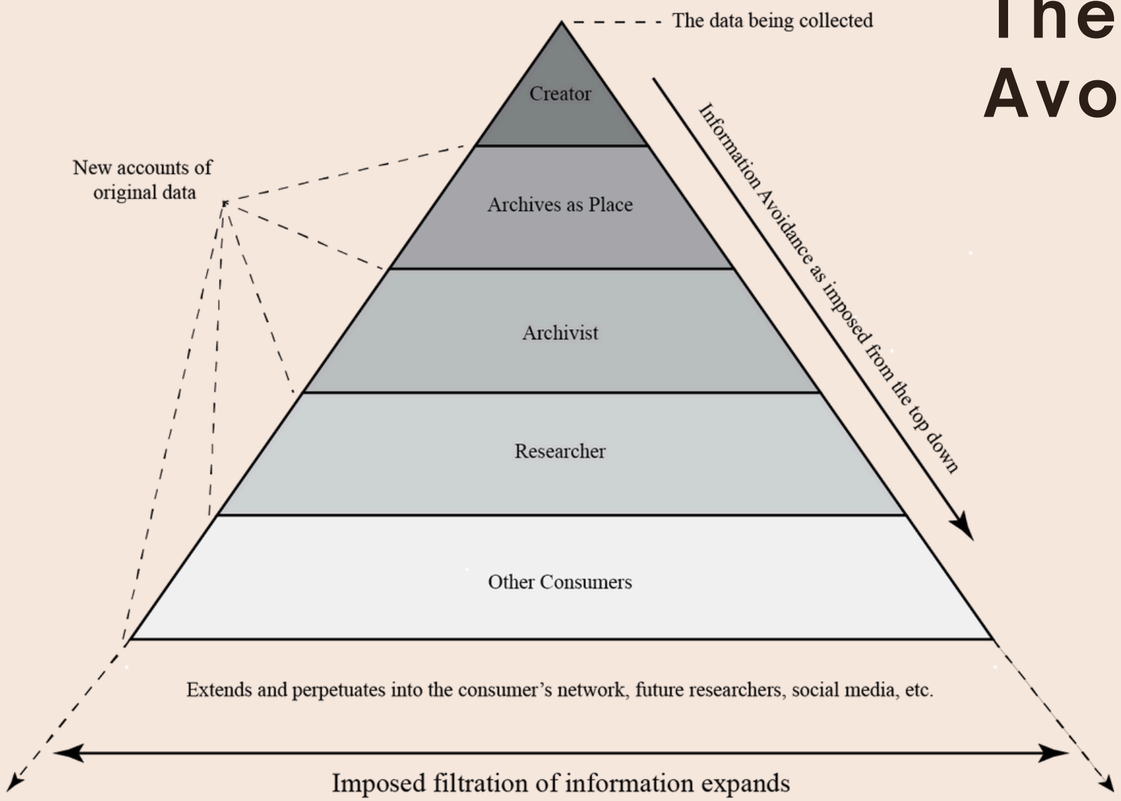

The Archival Information Avoidance Exchange (AIAE) Model

- Top-down exchange of information starting with the creator of an archival document and the potential for IA to occur as imposed from above.
- Provides a conceptual theoretical model of a major implication for IA in the archival context: **Archival records and those who interact with them enter into an information exchange in which the phenomenon of IA can affect how individuals interact with archives.**

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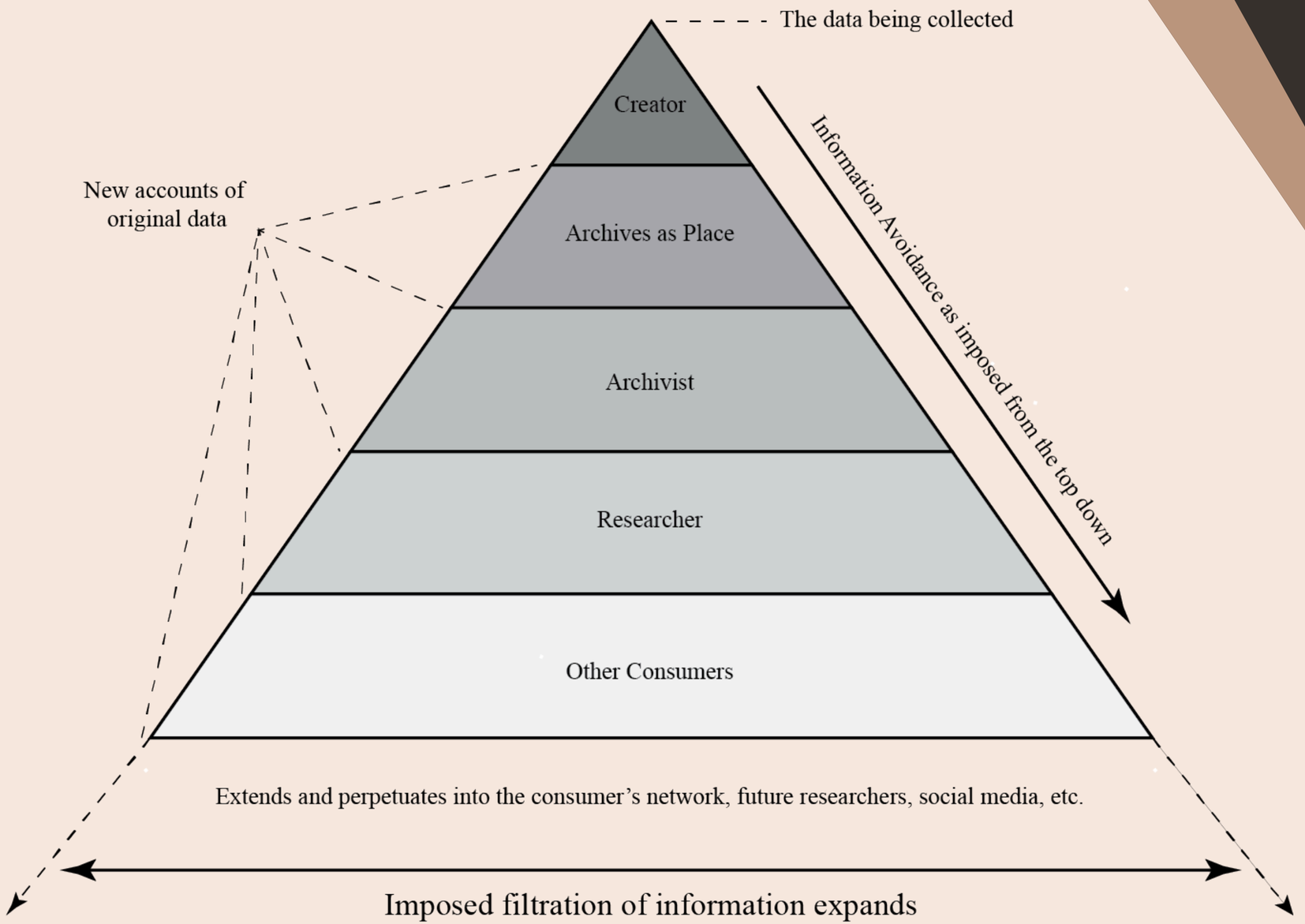
The data being collected
Creator
Archives as Place
Archivist
Researcher
Other Consumers
New accounts of original data
Information Avoidance as imposed from the top down
Extends and perpetuates into the consumer's network, future researchers, social media, etc.
Imposed filtration of information expands

Implications

01

The RIAS and AIAE Models demonstrate the linkages between the phenomenon of IA and the archival context.

02

IA is complex and easily misunderstood, but exposure to key concepts can allow an archivist to make meaning of the phenomenon in conversation with their past experiences.

03

This study's findings and contributions should help in providing a roadmap for other archivists who want to understand IA.

CONCLUSION

Key Takeaways

- Exploring archival frameworks and practices from the information *seeking* perspective is not the only option
- Important for practitioners in the field to consider how tendencies towards information *avoidance* are impacting their daily work
- Long term effects and impacts on others
- Potential for more mindful and empathetic ethic of care in handling information

Limitations	Future Research
• Limited scope focusing on archivists and researchers as avoiders of information • Only archivists were interviewed ◦ Beyond, only archivists with MLIS or equivalent were interviewed	• The AIAE Model suggested in this study illustrates that research expanding to look at other stakeholders could be beneficial

• Lack of controlled vocabularies
• IA still often nested under information *seeking* studies
  ◦ Even these are uncommon in archives
  ◦ IA studies nearly non-existent
	• Studies centering IA could be highly impactful to the archives community in considering future policies and standards

• This study did not specifically apply practical frameworks to examine IA in context ◦ Literacy frameworks in particular	• Mentioned by all participants but only in title. In depth exploration could provide a lens to apply to frameworks to test outcomes and develop competencies and educational responses

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