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## **The Effects of Cultural, Geographical and Religious Factors on Information Seeking: A Contextual Study**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates how contextual factors such as culture, geographical location and religious status may either encourage, determine or prevent information seeking behavior. The study applied both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection as a mixed-method. Fifteen Catholic clergymen from Northern Nigeria were interviewed and 109 participated in a survey. Findings show that geographical location, culture, and religious status may influence these clergy's information seeking behavior. This paper contributes to research on information seeking in context. It may help in understanding the effects of some contextual factors, especially religious status, on information seeking behavior and, consequently, aid in the planning of library and information systems that meet the needs of the African clergy and theological institutions.

**Keywords:** Information seeking behavior, information seeking in context, clergy, information use environment, information behavior

### **Introduction**

Research on information seeking in context, where researchers try to examine the context within which information seeking takes place, has grown over the years (Cross, Rice, & Parker, 2001; Kuhlthau, 1991; Vakkari, 1997). Such studies explain information seeking behavior in the context of the structure and culture of the individuals' communities or organizations (Sin, 2011). Although there are studies that have looked at the information seeking behavior of a group in context (Kazmer, Glueckauf, Ma, & Burnett, 2013; Olatokun & Ajagbe, 2010) and how various factors affect information seeking (Borgatti & Cross, 2003; Unertl, Johnson, & Lorenzi, 2012), not much attention has been given to investigating how the combined factors of culture, geographical location and religious status may affect the information seeking behavior of a group of information users such as the Catholic clergy, who are specially identified by their religious way of life as celibates. Religion is very important to billions of people globally, but little is known about the influence of religious status on information seeking. Examining the role of religion as a context for information seeking is central to this paper. Chang and Lee (2001) found that a relationship may exist between the contextual factors of a group of users and their information seeking behavior.

This study investigates the Catholic clergy in Nigeria to understand whether contextual factors such as culture, geographical location and religious status as clergy may affect their information seeking behavior. Specifically, the study tries to find out whether these contextual

factors either encourage, determine or prevent their information seeking process.

The cultural milieu in which the Catholic clergy in Africa live and work is very challenging, especially when it comes to seeking everyday life information among human sources and keeping to the expectations of their ministry. Apart from having a religious occupation, in a general sense the Catholic clergy can be described as a social class that shares an equal level of education and similar work conditions; they tend to share a common experience, which plays a role in determining their expected behavior and their approach to life (Savolainen, 1995). Catholic clergy globally share the same universal hierarchical structure and undergo similar levels of education; they use the same ritual books, carry out the same ritual procedures and are bound by the same code of canon law. Looking at the commonalities, it is tempting to assume that their information seeking process is similar across all geographical boundaries. However, these clergy are products of different cultures, working in different geographical locations. Their worldviews and, consequently, their interaction with information may differ. In addition, these clergy are required to be celibate as a religious way of life, which is the state of being unmarried and to remain chaste for life.

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from a larger doctoral research project (Dankasa, 2015) that investigated the information use environment of Catholic clergy in Northern Nigeria. The research question relevant to this section asked: How do cultural, geographical and religious factors influence the information seeking of Catholic clergy in Northern Nigeria?

This paper may help in understanding the effects of culture, geographical settings, and especially religious values on information seeking, and may contribute to the body of research on information seeking in context. Theological institutions in Africa may find this paper relevant in planning library and information systems that meet the needs of the African clergy. It may also provide a guide in developing programs for training future clergy to understand the context within which they will interact with information in the practice of their profession.

## Literature Review

Context in relation to information behavior has always been a vague concept because of its broad dimensions, the lack of a generally agreed upon definition of the word *context*, and the multi-faceted roles that context may play in information seeking processes (Chang & Lee, 2001; Brenda Dervin, 1997; Kari & Savolainen, 2007). Different scholars who have studied context view it from different dimensions. To some, context means the setting, while to others it is the worldview, problem, or environment (Chatman, 1999; Taylor, 1991; Wilson, 1981, 1997). There is no single way of viewing context. Studying the information behavior of a group in context may help in determining the factors that could affect their interaction with information. Talja, Keso, and Pietiläinen (1999) believe that information seeking processes can be understood when they are mediated through different contexts such as social and cultural factors. The culture of a people, the environment in which they live, and even their religious practices are contextual factors that can influence information seeking behavior. Taylor (1986, 1991) described these factors as information use environments that are capable of shaping the behavior of a group of users in the information seeking process, and that determine the choices they make about information that is particularly useful to them.

The desire to explore information seeking behavior in context brought about the emergence of the information seeking in context (ISIC) conference, which has been highlighting different studies that contextualize information seeking behavior research (e.g. Byström, 1999; Sabelli, 2012; Shoham & Strauss, 2008; Talja, 1997; Veinot, 2010). In a particular study from one of these ISIC conferences, Chang and Lee (2001) tried to develop a framework for studying information seeking in context. According to Chang and Lee, for a context to be meaningful, different contextual factors have to be combined. “Any single contextual factor, either task or problem, alone is unable to describe the situation of a context, and is insufficient to explain why and how certain information behavior occurs in that context” (Chang & Lee, 2001, p. 14). They found that the context of the user is capable of affecting the process of information seeking by either encouraging, determining, or preventing it. They suggested the need for more research on context to build a strong conceptual framework that would be able to explain the multi-dimensional nature of context and show, in a systematic way, how various contexts relate to information behavior. This study is a response to this need.

There are other studies that have investigated how different factors can influence the information seeking process (e.g. Miller & Jablin, 1991; Sonnenwald, 2005). Lee and Cho (2011) found interpersonal social networks, group distinctions and cultural affiliations of individuals to be contextual factors that influence how two different groups of students, drawn from two geographically different universities, exchange information. Each group placed value on information from a source that originated from their social networks. Nandy (2015) showed how factors such as task structure, rewards, and incentives impacted knowledge sharing behavior among students in a team context, while team climate and leadership were negatively correlated with these users’ knowledge sharing behavior.

Some studies found specific concepts as factors influencing information seeking. Savolainen (2006) evaluated time as a context for information seeking, while Anderson, Glassman, McAfee, and Pinelli (2001) found task uncertainty and task complexity as factors affecting the information seeking of engineers and scientists. Pineda, Lerner, Miller, and Phillips (1998) found a positive perception of self as a factor that could influence information seeking among small business managers.

Some studies have pointed to contextual factors based on the environment and the life situations of a group of people. Wilson and Walsh (1996) mentioned environmental, social, and economic factors as some of the intervening variables in information seeking behavior. They mentioned differences in national cultures as part of the environmental variables that could affect information seeking. Similarly, Matthews, Sellergren, Manfredi, and Williams (2002) found that cultural and economic factors play roles in how African American cancer patients seek medical information, engage in treatment or adjust emotionally to their situation. An examination of the studies on information seeking in context shows that the influence of religious factors as contexts for information seeking behavior has been neglected in the literature. Religion is a predominant aspect of society in which adherents hold different beliefs and values that influence their way of life. Studies that have investigated the information seeking behavior of the clergy (e.g., Saleh & Sadiq, 2013; Saleh & Bakar, 2013; Curran & Burns, 2011; Lambert, 2010; Wicks, 1999) brought out the different ways the clergy seek information, but did not examine combination of factors that may influence how

the clergy determine what information is important to them within particular environment or setting. This study sets out to bridge that gap by examining religious status as one of the factors, in addition to cultural and geographical factors, that could influence information seeking.

### **Method**

The study applied both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection as a concurrent triangulation mixed-method (Creswell, 2009). Data were collected through telephone interviews with fifteen participants and surveys of 109 participants. As stated earlier, this paper reports on the findings of a section of larger doctoral research project (Dankasa, 2015). Therefore, the methodology presented here is particular to the section relevant to this paper.

### **Study Participants**

The study was conducted with Catholic clergy serving in the Northern Catholic dioceses of Nigeria. A purposive sample of fifteen clergymen with varying levels of education and years of experience were interviewed. Five have been priests for less than ten years, five have served between 10 and 19 years, and five have been priests for 20 years or more. For the survey, 109 clergy responded to a questionnaire administered through social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp. Individual clergymen from the Northern dioceses were targeted in a non-random sampling. Fifty-three of the participants have been in the priesthood for less than ten years, 44 have between 10 and 19 years of service and seven were 20 years or more in the priesthood.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

#### ***Interviews***

The interviews were conducted between September and November, 2014. Episodic telephone interviews were used to collect data. Participants were asked questions about their geographical location, their culture and their religious status as celibate clergy.

The participants were asked questions to determine whether their environment, culture or religious status as celibate clergy affect their information seeking practices. The environment, as used here, refers to their geographical location, defined by the presence or absence of social amenities such as electricity, water supply, accessible roads, and fitness centers, while culture refers to the communal life of the people and the value attached to marriage and procreation. The interviews further asked several questions to determine not just *whether* each factor affects information seeking, but *how*? Does it prevent, encourage or determine their information seeking? Examples of questions asked include: *Was there any time you found or you did not find some information you looked for because of the environment where you live? Can you tell me about your culture such as communal life, the value attached to marriage and procreation? And in the midst of such culture, you are a Catholic celibate clergy. How does this culture influence the way your people perceive you as a celibate? As a celibate clergy, has this culture ever influenced the way you ask people or look for information from people?*

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour 50 minutes. The interview data were

transcribed and imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software and were analyzed using various coding methods. This process started with the first cycle coding, where categories and sub-categories were developed using a combination of different types of coding methods called eclectic coding (Saldaña, 2013). This was followed by the second cycle coding, where similar nodes were merged to form larger categories. Various criteria were used to determine the development of categories during the coding process of the data analysis. At the first cycle coding, the expressions of the participants were placed into different categories created from interview questions; these were expressions concerning such things as how communal life and culture, the description of their geographical location, and their religious status as celibate clergy influence their information seeking. In the second cycle coding, the categories developed in the first cycle were placed into larger categories of *prevent*, *encourage* or *determine*. These were determined by the following: to *prevent* means that one did not proceed to seek a particular piece of information *because of* either the environment, culture or religious status; to *encourage* means that one proceeded to seek the information *because of* either the environment, culture or religious status; and to *determine* means that one is influenced by either the environment, culture or religious status to choose either to proceed with the information seeking or not.

This study did not use the grounded theory method; it rather used the different coding methods suggested by Saldaña (2013) as mentioned above. As stated earlier, this study is based on a larger doctoral research project (Dankasa, 2015) in which the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately using two different types of software. The data of the entire doctoral research project were later combined and compared during the interpretation stage as a form of concurrent triangulation mixed-method proposed by Creswell (2009). However, the section presented in this paper does not show the triangulation process.

### Survey

In the surveys, participants were asked questions about their geographical location, their culture and their religious status as celibate clergy just as in the interviews. The questions were intended to determine how these contextual factors affect their information seeking behavior. They were asked to indicate their level of agreement, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with these three statements: 1) *The environment where I live affects the way I seek information.* 2) *Our culture affects the way I seek information.* 3) *Being a celibate clergyman affects the way I seek information.* The survey data were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques such as frequency analysis and Mann-Whitney U Test.

### Findings

The findings are presented in two-fold. The first part presents the results of the quantitative data, followed by the findings from the analysis of the qualitative data.

### Quantitative Data

#### Geographical Location as Factor

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement: *The environment where I live affects the way I seek information.* Frequency analyses (n=109,

missing data=8) showed that a combined total of 78.9% (86) indicated they either agree or strongly agree that the environment where they live affects the way they seek information, 2.8% (3) neither agree nor disagree, and a combined total of 11% (12) either disagree or strongly disagree.

A Mann-Whitney U Test revealed no statistically significant difference in the scores for geographical location as a factor based on years of experience ( $U = 1106, p = .28$ ) or level of education ( $U = 833.5, p = .19$ ).

### **Culture as Factor**

In this survey participants were asked to state their level of agreement with the statement: *Our culture affects the way I seek information*. From the frequency analyses (n=109, missing data=9), the majority of the participants, with a combined total of 56.9% (62), indicated that they either agree or strongly agree that culture affects the way they seek information, 4.6% (5) neither agree nor disagree, and a combined total of 30.3% (33) either disagree or strongly disagree.

Mann-Whitney U Test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the scores of culture as a factor based on years of experience ( $U = 1063.5, p = .23$ ) or level of education ( $U = 832.5, p = .25$ ).

### **Religious status as Factor**

To determine whether religious status, such as being a celibate clergy, affects their information seeking, participants were asked to state their level of agreement with the statement: *Being a celibate clergyman affects the way I seek information*. Frequency analyses (n=109, missing data=8) showed that the majority of the participants, with a combined total of 61.5% (67), either agree or strongly agree that being a celibate affects the way they seek information; only a total of 7.3% (8) neither agree nor disagree, while a combined total of 23.8% (26) either disagree or strongly disagree.

Mann-Whitney U Test revealed there was no statistically significant difference in the scores of being a celibate clergy as a factor based on years of experience ( $U = 1110, p = .31$ ) or level of education ( $U = 900, p = .49$ ).

### **Qualitative Data**

In presenting the results of the qualitative data, real names of the participants were replaced by letters so that P1 stands for participant 1, P2 stands for participant 2, etc. Other identifiable information in the narratives were replaced with fictitious names and placed in brackets to protect privacy.

### **Geographical Location as Factor**

The majority of the participants mentioned how they lacked basic social amenities where they live. The main problems mentioned were poor electricity, poor Internet network and poor road network. P9 explained his situation thus:

...electricity is fluctuating. Sometimes you get it for two days and for the next three days, you don't have electricity. You depend more on generators, buying gas

almost every day, and you spend more than ehnn, ehnn, sometimes I spend about 5, 6, 7 thousand [about \$30 to \$40] a week on the gas, depending on the usage. In fact, I had to cut down the usage that I cannot measure how much I spend. I believe I spend about 5 thousand every week. Sometimes I don't put light until around 7:30 or 8pm and by 11pm I put it off. And then put it for an hour to go to church in the morning and on Sunday you have about 3 hours. So sometimes it's even more than that. So that's it with electricity.

For a few participants, especially those who live in major cities, the situation was better. This is what P10 said:

I'm blessed. The parish is situated between a hospital and a school. And it is an industrial area, so we have advantage of social amenities over other places. So water is not our problem, and electricity is relatively better than other places; the supply are little bit more constant than other communities. So I say we are fortunate to be located where we have these things.

### **Effects of Geographical Location**

From the analyses of the interview, geographical location either *determines* or *prevents* information seeking for these clergy.

#### ***Determines Information Seeking***

A few participants stated how they had to make choices about what information to seek and what not to seek because of where they live. For instance, according to P12:

Nigeria being the kind of place it is, what you may find in one city you may not find in another city. And the only way you could do is to ask across by making calls, you know, do you have this kind of product in that your city or not? Otherwise that's the way to try to get what you want, where and at what time.

#### ***Prevents information seeking***

A good number of participants indicated how they were not able to get certain information they were looking for because they lacked certain amenities where they live. When P15 was asked if there was any time he looked for certain information and he could not get it he said:

Sure, because sometimes, because of the environment, we often have poor network, phone network. That sometimes making a call becomes difficult; browsing of the Internet becomes difficult. Sometimes it hinders the whole ahh, it hinders free access to certain information.

P3 shared an episode that was frustrating to him because he had no other means of getting urgently needed information:

I was in a certain village in a parish I worked. While I was there, someone ran in and brought information that there was a fight in the neighboring villages. And I tried to get connected to know what was happening—no network. I tried all I

could, and it was not in a situation where anybody could go out of that village because the story was that the roads were blocked. So here are the roads blocked and no network to make any call or get any information or send out any information. So I caught myself in that wave of not knowing left or right, looking in all directions but no specific direction, just lost.

### **Culture as Factor**

Participants brought out three characteristics of the culture in which they belong. These characteristics are shown below:

#### ***High Value on Marriage, Procreation and Community Life***

The culture places a high value on marriage, procreation, and community life in general. P14 captured the story:

Here in Nigeria, we attach high premium to family life. Community living is the order of the day over here. You are because the community exists. Procreation, too, we put a high premium on procreation within the context of marriage. And any (pause), it appears the major reason people go into marriage is to have procreation, giving birth to children. Any marriage that is not blessed with offspring, sometimes, the average understanding here is that people see it as a minus, a curse.

#### ***Gender-centered***

Participants explained that, traditionally, their culture is gender-centered with more preference for a male child and pressure on women who are not married. P2 explained it thus:

Once a woman gets married and she stays for one year, two years, three years without giving birth, then you begin to hear questions, tongues wagging, and so many other things like that. And to the point that there are women that are frustrated, they are living in serious frustration simply because they cannot give birth.

P15 reiterated the preference for male children, which adds to the problem:

...the culture also values more the masculine gender. You can give birth to ten girls or ten women; once you are not giving birth to male child it is still a problem.

The pressure on the female gender to get married was emphasized by P11:

Generally, the family aspect is well appreciated and marriage itself, at the point that when you are not married people are asking questions. It's even more on the part of the girls; why is she not married up to now? And things like that. So people ask questions when you are not married.

#### ***Changes in Cultural Values***

Some participants observed how the culture is changing in modern times due to the economy, marital issues and general changes in society. These changes are adding new characteristic traits to the culture. One example was P10, who explained it this way:



Every woman and man that go into marriage first of all look forward to having children. But at the moment, not too many children. It is better to have one child than not to have any at all, and it is worse to have too many children. So, that fear of having too many is there with the people because economically they cannot afford the training of these children from elementary to university level. So the value is there, but the fear is there as well. Every family wants a child, but not every family wants too many children as it was in the recent past 10 years.

### **Effects of Culture**

From the analyses of the interviews, culture *determines* information seeking rather than preventing or encouraging it.

### ***Determines Information Seeking***

A few participants expressed how their choices to seek certain information were determined by cultural perceptions. Some couples, for instance, who come to the priest seeking counseling may find it difficult to openly discuss marriage and sexual issues, and this problem is mostly based on cultural influence. P4 described an episode:

For example, couples who come to the office with marital problems. Sometimes they just have the surface of the problems to you, and they choose not to open up to say the real issue and the real problem. Sometimes holding back the information will make it difficult, you will also be giving wrong advice because you have not gotten the real issue. So there are times, after these years of experience I have been (pause), what I do now is instead of working on what they say, I probed them and trying to dig deep, and sometimes they open up to tell me, sometimes they don't open up, they choose to remain adamant and all of that stuff. So whether the reason why they hold that is because I am a priest or because of celibacy and all of that stuff, I cannot get into the depth of marriage life, to sex life and to other issues and all of that stuff. So you find them talking about something which is just the result of the real problem, in other words, dealing with the symptoms instead of addressing the main disease.

P1 put it more bluntly:

You cannot just meet a man and a woman, that is husband and wife, and begin to ask them when was the last time you made love to each other? If there is a problem in that marriage, the consummation of that marriage, or the marital rituals are not being done, and the man is always drunk, he comes back home always drunk, he cannot perform his marital duties, and the woman is complaining and complaining. In trying to settle them, there are areas you cannot just go as a celibate person.

### **Religious Status as Factor**

Participants, who are all celibate clergy, brought out perspectives of their perception about celibacy within their culture and environment. They presented their perspectives in

terms of *strong cultural views against celibacy* and *cultural change in the perception of celibacy*.

### ***Strong Cultural Views against Celibacy***

Participants pointed out how the cultural views of the people on the value of marriage and procreation have influenced the perception of some people against celibacy. P7 gave an episode to explain this point:

I remember people come to ask once in a while that why did you take up this responsibility, why did you make this choice of becoming a celibate? Why did you become a priest? In fact, at one time somebody came to me once, even before I got admission to the seminary. This guy was my parishioner, a big chap, he has made money. But he took, you know, interest in me because I was writing some articles here and there in the parish bulletin. And then he now said to me, [Angelo], he called me formally and had a meeting with me. And he said that his wife and him have agreed to give me scholarship to study in the university. So a few months after that my admission into the seminary came and I went, I met him. He said, “why do you want to go and waste your life there. I’m going to sponsor you in the university.” These were his exact words: “Why do you want to go and waste your life there?”

### ***Cultural Change in the Perception of Celibacy***

Some participants, however, expressed how the cultural views of the people on celibacy are changing over time. They are witnessing some acceptance of celibacy, regardless of the high value placed on marriage and procreation within the culture. P4 put it this way:

Though I see generally, in Africa, with the vocation boom, like the issue is gradually dying to some extent. So it’s no longer raising problems to families when somebody chooses to become a celibate or a priest, who by implication, there is no marriage and there are no children to that as a result, and this issue of procreation would not be there. But that does not rule out the fact that this culture is still there, this marriage and procreation.

Some participants believed that these perceived changes are due to a value change in the culture which is affecting people’s view of celibacy, hence leading to a change in perception. Some of the reasons for the changes include the following:

### ***Economic and social factors***

P10 painted a picture of why he thinks the people are beginning to accept celibacy. He linked it to the harsh economic situation and the perception that the clergy are doing well in the midst of the hard economy. This is in addition to the view of the priesthood as a prestigious profession. P10 gave this view:

But in the middle, somewhere around [19]95/2000, the focus of celibacy is dropped, the focus of materialism was shining more, that priest is living a good life. Averagely they are above their peers. So the parents are forcing the children

to go into the priesthood because of material attachment. As soon as you are ordained, you have a car; some of them (priests) are even telling their parents to retire from farming because they will shoulder the responsibility of both bringing up the children of the father or the children of their uncle. In the environment which they live, parents of the priest are considered to be middle class, they are not first, but they are not in the low. So the attraction now is unfortunately not on poverty, but on the opposite of poverty. So the procreation aspect is diminished. Nobody worries whether we are supposed to have children or not. So procreation is not conflicting the vocation. That is the community that I live and I see. The community is respecting, is applauding. They think priesthood is a prestigious position that every family is yearning to get. So the procreation aspect doesn't bother families. And then the third stage, you find grown up girls saying what is marriage, what do I have to do with marriage? So even the marriage itself, some are already embracing the celibacy. ...in Nigeria today, the cost of living, you find more people are willing to remain celibate, they don't want the wahala (problem) of marriage. They envy the way they see priests. They will say we wish, if we have known, we wouldn't have married. So it makes priests not to regret being priests; this feeling of theirs is nothing to worry about. They don't see it as a sacrifice to the society. Today marriage is not a do-or-die thing; therefore, procreation itself is not something that people are yearning for now. The society we live, they are not talking about children like 20 years ago.

### ***Influence of religion***

Some participants attributed the changes to the influence of religion on the people. According to P15:

Christianity and Catholicism has eaten deep into the fabric of my society such that it's no longer a mis-normal for people to know that these persons are priests and they are celibates. Before now, it was more difficult, but in our own generation, actually people have come to embrace and accept the fact that this is a practice or a life in the Catholic Church.

### ***Perceived as sacrifice***

To some participants, the changes could be as a result of the perception of the priesthood as a noble sacrifice. P9 put it this way:

But eventually now people are beginning to understand. Now they know what the priest does. But in those days it was only the white man so they thought, oh, maybe the white man doesn't marry in his country. But now they have come to accept that people are even happy and that is why they expect so much from the priest because he dedicated his life to serve the people, not a particular family. That is why they have that high regard for the priesthood, and not to say just children; but no, you are a father to all the children; they are your own.

### Effects of Religious status

From the analyses of the interviews, this study found that religious status such as being a celibate clergyman either *encourages* or *prevents* information seeking for these clergy.

#### *Encourages Information Seeking*

Some participants believed that priests are more likely to receive unsolicited information from people because of *trust*. These types of information may not be directly desired or requested by the priest, but people volunteer such information, which the priests in most cases are expected to keep confidential. This encourages the priests to acquire some important privileged information, which may not be available to the general public. According to P11:

...people see you as very different, and so they are ready to open up to share with you even things they cannot share, let's say, with their wives or their husbands. Because they know you are different, they trust you, and so because of that when you ask them about certain information, things they have not even told any person, they would just willingly tell you out of trust. So at least, to a larger extent, it influences the way you get it because like the common feelings that, ah, this one na fada oh, tell him the truth (meaning: this is a priest, tell him the truth). So they even feel that once you are not telling the truth when it involves the priest, you should please tell him the truth. So that influences greatly the way and manner in which you gain information from people when you are either asking or when they come to tell you themselves.

#### **P2 reiterated this point thus:**

Generally, once I'm able to like open up to people to tell them I'm a priest if I'm trying to find out something, maybe confidential, they will readily give out the information to me based on the fact that they know that the information will be safe, it will not go out of me. Like most times when I come in contact with sick persons during my visitations to the sick, there are certain things that I will try to find out. I have come around people that are HIV positive, so because they know that I am a priest they now opened up to me to tell me that this is actually what is disturbing them. So things like that I get such information very, very easy based on trust, which of course I have it as a duty to keep such information.

#### *Prevents Information Seeking*

For some participants, being a celibate priest *prevents* them from obtaining some relevant information. According to them, it makes them shy away from seeking certain information, which leads to *information avoidance*. According to P6:

Most times when you go to seek information as a priest, when they see you close to women, sometimes they want to see the way you react whether you look at them the way they look at them or whatever. So they suspect at times. When you go to look for information from the opposite sex, at times, you fear the freedom; at times, your freedom will be restricted in a certain way at times so that you don't attract questions or give people opportunity to talk. It at times affects one, because you are now conscious, because of your state, who to relate with when and how.

P3 talked about avoiding certain information:

I find it difficult to ask information concerning certain sicknesses like HIV. Let's say a priest who goes suffering from one or two things, I find it difficult to ask them how is that person going about it, is he really having this kind of problems here and there and there. Just a way of covering up. So I will not be too free to do that.

The findings show the different factors that may affect how the Catholic clergy in this environment seek information. The section that follows discusses these findings and their implications to the information seeking process.

## **Discussion**

### **Factors Influencing Information Seeking**

The findings of this study pointed to geographical location, culture and religious status as factors that play roles in the processes and directions of information seeking habits of these clergy. The following section discusses the roles of these three factors in the way these clergymen interact with information. It shows how each of these factors either prevents, determines or encourages information seeking. To *prevent* means that one did not proceed to seek a particular piece of information *because of* a contextual factor; to *encourage* means that one proceeded to seek particular information *because of* a contextual factor; and to *determine* means that one is influenced by a contextual factor to choose either to proceed with the information seeking or not.

### **Geographical Location as a Factor**

The *locations* where these clergymen live and work, characterized by the presence or absence of social amenities such as electricity supply, Internet connectivity and accessible roads, have an effect on their information seeking behavior. Of the survey participants, 78.9% believed that the location where they live is very likely to affect the way they seek information. This feeling was the same among these clergy regardless of years of experience in the ministry or level of education attained. Analysis of the qualitative data supported and provided explanation for the survey results. The findings showed that geographical location could affect the clergy's information seeking behavior in two ways: by either *determining* or *preventing* the way they seek information.

### ***Geographical Location Determining Information Seeking***

The geographical location *determines* the clergy's information seeking behavior, especially when they have to make a choice to either proceed to look for a particular piece of information or not, because of where they live. This compels them to use one particular source or channel of information over another. For instance, due to poor Internet connectivity, one may decide to make a call asking a friend for a recommendation for a product he needs instead of searching over the Internet. He may be subscribed to Internet services, but at the point of need he is unable to connect and search for the product. This may limit the choices needed to make an informed decision on a preferred product. The seeker is therefore limited to whatever information the friend he calls provides.

### **Geographical Location Preventing Information Seeking**

The geographical location of these clergy has the tendency to *prevent* information seeking on some occasions. This is seen especially when they decide not to proceed with their search for a particular piece of information because they lack the necessary infrastructure to get to a source or channel of information at the moment of need. Due to poor electricity supply, poor Internet connection and lack of accessible roads, these clergymen have missed out on some vital information at a time when it was most needed. This lack of basic amenities has prevented information seeking or hampered the clergy's ability to access vital information for many study participants.

### **Culture as Factor**

The *culture* of the people is another factor that is very likely to affect the way these clergymen seek information. Culture was narrowly defined in this study as the communal life of the people and the value attached to marriage and procreation. As shown in the findings, 56.9% of the survey participants indicated that the culture affects the way they go about looking for information, especially in relation to their status as celibate clergy. This is likely due to the cultural bias against the life of celibacy. The distribution of those who agreed that culture affects their information seeking was the same regardless of years of experience in the ministry or level of education attained.

The results of the interviews agreed with the outcome of the survey. Participants believed that the culture places *a high value on marriage, procreation and community life*, and in its traditional sense, it is *gender-centered*. The desire for procreation leads to emphasis on productive marriage that raises offspring. This is not viewed as merely for individual good, but for the good of the community in general. The participants described the culture as gender-centered in the sense that a productive marriage, in most cases, is viewed as successful when more offspring are male than female. In other words, there is a preference for males in the culture. Furthermore, the woman is generally the first to be blamed if a couple is unable to give birth to a child after a few years of marriage. In other words, for this culture, more children are preferred to few, but they are even more preferred if they are male. However, modern times, with the effects of the economy, marital issues leading to a high rate of divorce, and other societal changes, were thought by some participants to have brought some changes and deviations from the strict adherence to these aspects of the culture. Nevertheless, this traditional sense of the culture still abounds.

It is within this culture that the clergy in this study, who have chosen a lifestyle that is perceived as contrary to the demands of the culture, live and work. The findings of the study showed that the culture does not encourage or prevent information seeking for this clergy but it *determines* it.

### **Culture Determining Information Seeking**

Several participants in the study expressed how their decision to seek a particular piece of information was *determined* by their perception of the culture. Such situations influence their decision to use certain sources rather than others, or to avoid seeking certain information for cultural concerns. For instance, couples with marital issues consulting the priest for help may

not be open to explaining that their problems are connected to issues about their sexual relationships, such as the inability of one partner to have access to the other. Open discussion of sexual issues is seen by most people in Nigeria as culturally inappropriate. In addition, there is the assumption among some people that because the Catholic priest is an unmarried man who handles spiritual issues, he should have nothing to do with issues concerning sex. In situations where the priest tries to offer counsel to people with such a mentality, he may not have enough information to delve into the issue directly, in order to assist the couple, because of their lack of openness. It takes the clergy a little bit more effort to elicit the information, which is vital for the resolution of the problem, from the couple. Such cultural concerns have the tendency to determine what type of information the clergy seek, and from what source, especially as it pertains to marriage and sex.

### **Religious Status as Factor**

The set of people who are the actors in this information environment are Catholic clergy. By their religious calling, Catholic clergy accept the choice to practice celibacy, which is the state of being unmarried and living the virtue of chastity. Their chosen religious lifestyle appears to be contrary to the African culture, which places a high premium on marriage and procreation. This study shed some light on how the status of the clergy as celibates in African culture affects their interaction with information. The findings showed high interrelatedness between the effects of culture and celibacy on the information seeking of these clergy. Being a celibate clergy in an African culture has the likelihood of affecting the way the clergy look for information, especially among people sources such as friends, relatives and those who are not clergy. As reported above, 61.5% of the clergy surveyed indicated that being a celibate clergy is likely to affect the way they seek information. This opinion was the same across the group of participants regardless of years of experience in the ministry or level of education attained. This effect does not, however, translate to a merely negative effect. Findings from the interviews showed that being a celibate clergy could either *prevent* information seeking or *encourage* it in some cases.

### ***Religious Status Preventing Information Seeking***

*Strong cultural views against celibacy* due to the high value placed on marriage and procreation is a major factor affecting the clergy's interaction with people sources, and may *prevent* the clergy from seeking certain information. Since these clergymen are not married, they are conscious that people expect them to keep a certain degree of distance from women. They are aware that they are viewed by some people as sacred because of their counter-cultural lifestyle. This has a tendency to affect their interaction with women and, consequently, affect the way they seek information from such sources in some situations. This leads to a conscious behavior in which the priest tries to prevent suspicious behavior by avoiding certain places and people.

This conscious behavior extends to other domains, such as the search for certain health information about some types of diseases that are sexually related. For instance, the link between HIV and sex is strong among people in this culture. The clergy may become conscious that, because of their celibate state, the people do not expect them to look for

information about HIV, which can be contracted through sex. This, in effect, could lead to *information avoidance* (Case, Andrews, Johnson, & Allard, 2005; Narayan, Case, & Edwards, 2011; Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010), in which the clergy avoid seeking certain information, at least publicly, to minimize the impact that seeking such information may have on the people. This finding agrees with Dervin (1980) and Chatman (1996) that information seeking behavior of members of a small world may be guided by their social norms, where members develop some tactics that will help them make sense of information. These tactics may include secrecy or avoidance of risk.

Because of high expectations from the people, these Catholic clergymen tend to develop a way of life that meets such expectations by practicing *selective behavior* in the course of information seeking. This is the type of behavior in which the priest carefully chooses whom to relate with, how to relate and where. This supports Chatman (1999) in that, because of social norms held by a group, public behavior receives increased scrutiny, which influences what type of information seeking behavior is deemed appropriate, or not, by the members of the group.

### ***Religious Status Encouraging Information Seeking***

There are, however, instances where being a celibate clergyman affects information seeking in a positive way by *encouraging* it. Some of these clergy stated that they were witnessing some *cultural changes in the perception of celibacy*. These changes could be the reasons why this state of life may, at certain times, encourage the acquisition of information. Some clergy participants reported witnessing a growth in the number of people joining the priesthood in Nigeria. More men are entering into training for the priesthood, and some parents are even encouraging their children to embrace celibate priesthood despite the high cultural value on marriage and procreation. There are several factors responsible for this perceived shift; *economic and social factors* emerged as primary reasons. Due to the harsh economy and the perception that the Catholic clergy do not need to worry much about making a living, as well as the perception that the priesthood is a prestigious profession where the clergy are respected and taken care of by the people, some may see it as a preferable way of life.

Another factor that is motivating the shift in the perception of celibacy is the *influence of religion*. Some study participants emphasized how Christianity and Catholicism have taken root in the hearts of the people, which is influencing and altering their cultural perception about life. The third factor traced in this study was related to the perception of celibacy as a *sacrifice*. Some clergy noted how people commend them for having resisted immense pressure from the culture to raise a family and chosen a nobler way of life.

These changes in the perception of celibacy are also influencing people to see the clergy as *trusted* counselors to whom they can go for help. Most of the clergy in the interview stated that they sometimes receive privileged and unsolicited information from people because the people trust their priests. Most of such information is confidential and private information that may not be available to the general public. In this sense, these clergymen believed that their religious status as celibate clergy could *encourage* information seeking to an extent.



### **Implications and Limitations of Study**

This study has several implications for research and practice in the area of information seeking. It contributes to the research on information seeking in context as it brings out the influence of religion on the information seeking process; this area has not been given much attention in the information science literature. The study aligns with the findings of Chang and Lee (2001) that a relationship may exist between the contextual factors of a group of users and their information seeking behavior. It advances our understanding of the effects of some contextual factors, especially religious status, on information seeking behavior.

In addition, the study may provide policy makers, Internet content developers, information professionals and media centers with data needed to become cognizant of the particular environment in which the clergy live, in order to make appropriate information available and accessible. It creates an awareness of the contextual differences in the information environment of the clergy so that information services can be provided to them according to their settings and problems. This may aid in the planning of library and information systems that meet the needs of the African clergy and theological institutions. The study provides data that could be used as a guide in developing programs for training future clergy to understand the context within which they will interact with information in the practice of their profession.

The study, however, has some limitations because it uses a sample of Catholic clergy only from Northern Nigeria. This may affect the generalization of the findings to other settings. Future study may examine clergy from different settings and compare the findings with the present study.

### **Conclusion**

Examination of the data showed that the contexts within which this group of Catholic clergy live and work have a relationship to their information behavior. The contexts in this study were determined by three factors: culture, geographical location and religious status. The results showed that these contexts are capable of either encouraging, determining or preventing information seeking for these clergy. For this group of information users, the findings show that culture determines information seeking but does not encourage or prevent it; geographical location either determines or prevents information seeking but does not encourage it; and religious status as celibate clergy either encourages or prevents information seeking but does not determine it. Therefore, in the setting of the sample in this study, the geographical location where the clergy live, the culture, and their religious status as celibate clergy have some effect on decisions about the choice of sources to be used for the resolution of an information need.

### **About the Author**

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