

# Everyday Serendipity as Described in Social Media

Victoria L. Rubin, Jacquelyn Burkell, and Anabel Quan-Haase

vrubin, jburkell, aquan@uwo.ca

FIMS and LIT.RL, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5B7

**Abstract** Serendipity has received much attention from library and information science, psychology, and computer science. Yet not much is known about serendipity in the context of everyday information behavior. In general, a key challenge in the study of serendipity is obtaining accounts of serendipitous experiences that provide insight into the phenomenon. The exploratory research reported here approaches this problem by examining naturally occurring descriptions of serendipity as found on blogs. The paper shows how these data can be collected, stored, and analyzed. We also discuss strengths of the proposed approach in comparison to the use of descriptions elicited in controlled settings for the purposes of research. Through a grounded theory approach, we develop a model of serendipity that can inform the design of information systems. The paper contributes to the LIS field by discussing an alternative data collection method for serendipity research, outlining a tentative conceptual model of serendipity, and showing the utility of this model for the analysis of everyday accounts of serendipity found on blogs.

## Goals

- 1: test the effectiveness of an **alternative data collection method** for serendipity research;
- 2: propose a **conceptual model** that outlines the facets of serendipity;
- 3: better understand serendipity in the context of everyday information behavior.

## Data Collection Method

To gain naturally occurring accounts of serendipity:

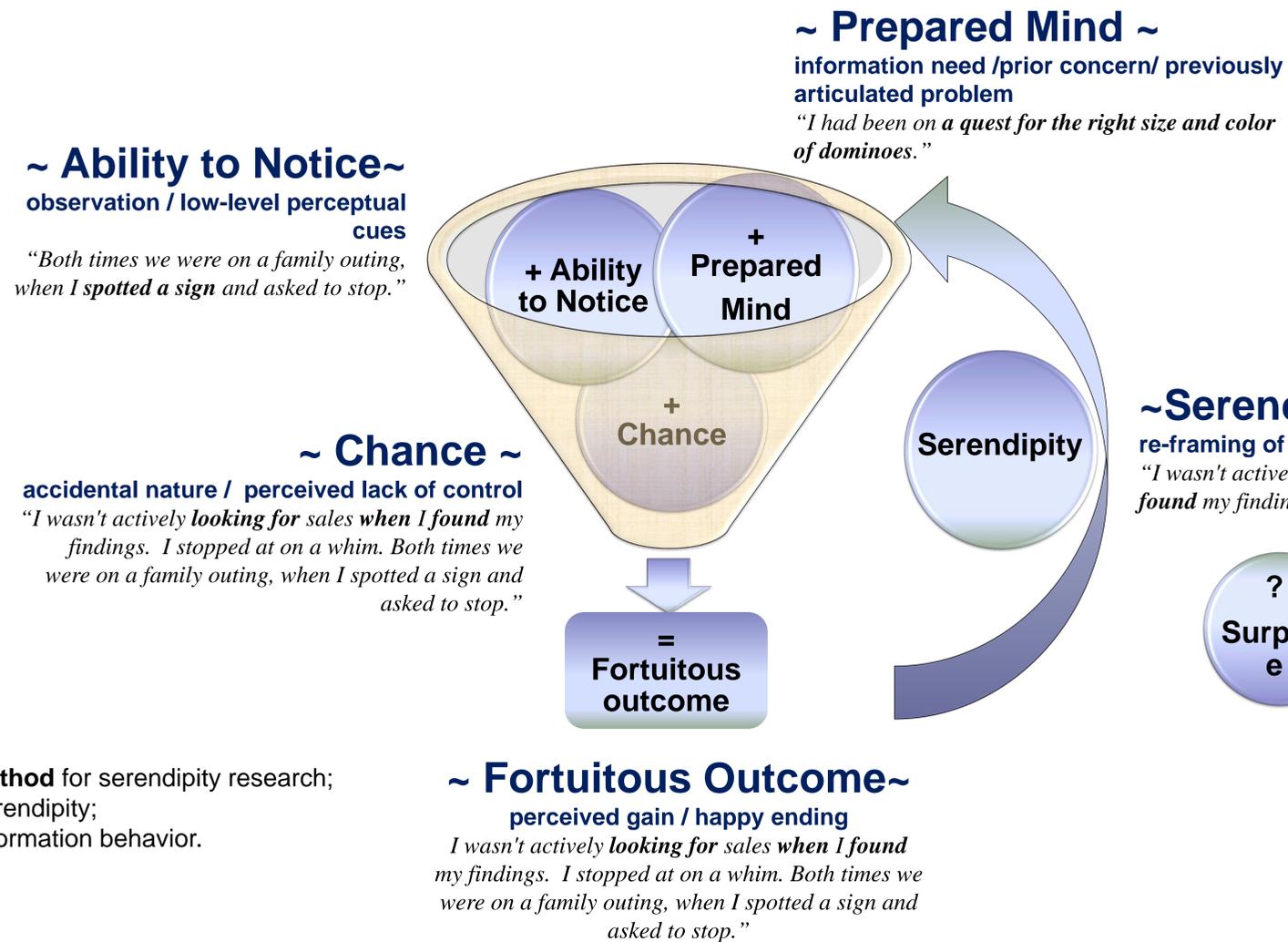
- Constructed 47 **queries**
- Searches in GoogleBlog (04/10 –current)
- Obtained large numbers of potentially relevant reports
- Reviewed and identified rich descriptions
- Total current dataset: 94 accounts

## Sample Queries

using  
relevant lexics,  
syntactic structures,  
Boolean operators, and  
wildcards

1	"wasn't actively looking OR searching for" "when * found"
2	"found OR discovered * * by accident OR serendipitously OR by chance"
3	"had a eureka moment"
4	"light bulb went off" "connection"
5	"put the two together"
6	"that made me reali[s/z]e"
7	"that's when I made the connection"
8	"out of the blue I found *"
9	"and then it hit me"
10	"I had an aha moment" "connection"

## Conceptual Model of Everyday Serendipity



## An Example: The Complete Story

*I wasn't actively looking for sales when I found my findings. I stopped at on a whim. Both times we were on a family outing, when I spotted a sign and asked to stop. I had been on a quest for the right size and color of dominoes. I was still in thinking, "I'll give it another try". At one particular estate, I was getting ready to pay for my broken vintage jewelry treasures when the cashier asked me if I make jewelry. "YES", I said and elaborated, "Not only that, but I have friends who also make jewelry and other things out of bits and pieces of pretty vintage things." The cashier proceeded to pull out a box full of findings. She offered them to me at a price I couldn't refuse.*

**~Serendipity~**  
re-framing of events / a story re-told  
*"I wasn't actively looking for sales when I found my findings..."*

## Interrupted Activity

*"At one particular estate, I was getting ready to pay for my broken vintage jewelry treasures when the cashier asked me if I make jewelry."*

## Conclusions

- We confirm that bloggers reflect upon their experiences and circumstances of serendipitous encounters, allowing researchers to construct a rich data set on serendipity from productions in social media environments.
  - The collected data strengths
    - 1) they are freely and publicly available online
    - 2) created by bloggers independently of the study, and
    - 3) are written by self-motivated writers for an unknown audience.
- Analysis of these descriptions allows us to identify critical contextual facets associated with serendipity. Ultimately, the results of this research will inform the development of information interfaces that support serendipitous discovery.

## References

- Erdelez, S. (2004). Investigation of Information encountering in the controlled research environment. *Info. Processing and Management*, 40, 1013-1024.
- Foster, A., & Ford, N. (2003). Serendipity and information seeking: an empirical study. *Journal of Documentation*, 59(3), 321-340.
- Rosenman, M.F. (1988). Serendipity and scientific discovery. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 22(2), 132-8.
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Thom-Santelli, J. (2007). Mobile social software: Facilitating serendipity or encouraging homogeneity? *Pervasive Computing*, 6(3), 46-51.
- Toms, E., & McCay-Peet, L. (2009). Chance encounters in the digital library. In M. Agosti, J. Borbinha, S. Kapidakis, C. Papatheodorou & G. Tsakonias (Eds.), *Research and Advanced Technology for Digital Libraries*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 192-202.