"Sorry, I Don't Work at Your Library!"
The Effects of Revealing Institutional Affiliation in a Consortial Chat Service

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Ask a librarian

OCUL's Ask a Librarian Service

The Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL) is a consortium that represents the libraries of all 21 universities in Ontario, Canada. Scholars Portal (SP), OCUL's service arm, offers a variety of online services through shared technological infrastructure and collections.

Ask a Librarian is a virtual reference service managed by Scholars Portal that connects students, faculty members, and researchers from participating university libraries with real-time library and research assistance through chat. Ask a Librarian reaches around 400,000 FTE students at 15 participating university libraries and handles roughly 25,000 chats per year in English and French.

Research Objectives

Consortial virtual reference services aim to match users with chat operators from their home institutions. However, patrons are often served by providers from outside their university libraries. In most cases, these mismatches are not obvious to the user, unless the operator makes the choice to disclose that they do not work at the user's home library.

Previous research has shown that an institutional mismatch is not related to user dissatisfaction (Barrett & Pagotto, 2019). However, what happens when such a mismatch is revealed to the user?

This study investigated how users perceive the service they receive from chat providers outside their home institutions. We sought to answer the following questions:

1. Does disclosing that the chat operator is not affiliated with the user's home institution increase user dissatisfaction?
2. Is this relationship mediated by user type, question type, or operator behaviours?

Methods

The researchers examined complete chat transcripts, metadata, and exit survey results from 293 chat interactions that occurred between June and December 2016. The sample only included chats in which the chat operator and user were affiliated with different institutions.

Transcripts were coded for reveals of this institutional mismatch, as well as user type, question type, and operator behaviours that might mediate user dissatisfaction: chat transfers, referrals, admitting a lack of expertise, and saying "no" to the user.

Chi-square tests were performed to compare variables to user dissatisfaction.

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Users of a collaborative chat service are more likely to be dissatisfied if they learn they are being served by someone from another library.

This response is stronger in graduate students and in response to research-based questions.

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The relationship is stronger when the operator doesn't transfer the user or admit to a lack of expertise.

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Key takeaway: pay attention to context! Be thoughtful about whether/how you reveal an institutional mismatch.

Cross-tabulation: Institutional Mismatch Reveal and User Dissatisfaction				
	Dissatisfied Users		Not Dissatisfied Users	
Institutional Mismatch Reveal	Observed Count	Expected Count	Observed Count	Expected Count
Reveal	27	20.9	19	25.1
No Reveal	106	112.1	141	134.9

Results of Chi-Square Tests of Independence: Study Variables and User Dissatisfaction			
Variable	Pearson Chi-Square Value	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Significance
Institutional Mismatch Reveal	3.896	1	0.048
Graduate Student	6.933	1	0.008
Research Question	11.091	1	0.001
No Transfer	4.304	1	0.038
No Referral	3.193	1	0.074
No Reveal of Lack of Expertise	7.008	1	0.008

Results

Users were more likely to be dissatisfied when the operator revealed a mismatch in institutional affiliation, x^2 (1, N = 293) = 3.896, p = .048.

This relationship is mediated by user type. Graduate students were more likely to be dissatisfied when a mismatch was revealed, x^2 (1, N = 293) = 6.933, p = .008.

This relationship is also mediated by question type. Users were more likely to be dissatisfied by a mismatch reveal when they were asking research-based questions, x^2 (1, N = 293) = 11.091, p = .001.

Some operator behaviours mediate this relationship. Users were more likely to be dissatisfied by an institutional mismatch reveal when a transfer did not take place during the chat, x^2 (1, N = 293) = 4.304, p = .038, or when the operator did not reveal a lack of expertise about the user's question, x^2 (1, N = 293) = 7.008, p = .008.

Several other operator behaviors did not mediate the relationship, including making a referral or saying "no" to the user.

Discussion

Users are more likely to be dissatisfied when the operator reveals a mismatch in institutional affiliation. This response is stronger in graduate students and in response to research-based questions. Since these users tend to have significant and specific research needs, and research-based questions tend to require the most in-depth knowledge, this finding may indicate that users expect to receive specialized expertise from their home libraries when they have a detailed question.

Some operator behaviours also mediate this relationship. Users are more likely to be dissatisfied by institutional mismatch reveals when a transfer does not occur during the chat or when the operator does not reveal a lack of expertise. This suggests that context is important when revealing a mismatch. When the reveal seems irrelevant, the user may question the service model or why they are being helped by this particular individual. While this variable did not meet the threshold for statistical significance, not making a referral was also a mediating factor (p = 0.07) between dissatisfaction and mismatch reveal, playing into this trend. It may also indicate a specifically local question that was not sufficiently answered but for which no alternatives were provided.

References

Barrett, K., & Pagotto, S. (2019). Local users, consortial providers: Seeking points of dissatisfaction with a collaborative virtual reference service. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, 14*(4), 2-20. doi:10.18438/eblip29624