

We Are Starving for Information: The Information Practices of Life Coaches

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Abstract

Life coaching is an emerging and ambiguous new profession. This study examines the information-rich worlds of three life coaches living in Toronto, Canada. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, in conjunction with Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) Information Horizon Interview technique, this exploratory research offers a window into life coaches' information exchange practices (Stebbins, 2001). The central research query guiding this study is: What are the information sources that life coaches rely on? The study yields both qualitative and quantitative findings, which were inductively analyzed using thematic analysis. First, it reveals that on their journeys to becoming life coaches, participants relied heavily on the insights of other life coaches. Next, life coaches share how they collect, share, and create resources for their clients. Finally, life coaches demonstrate how they utilize resources in many mediums and from many origins. This report adds to a burgeoning area of interest in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS), as it builds on recent dissertation research published by Klein (2022) about the information seeking practices of life coaches. Ultimately, this report diverges from Klein's by introducing an alternative theoretical framework with which to make sense of life coaches' information practices. Instead, it likens life coaches' information practices to Willson's (2021) "bouncing ideas" theory, whereby life coaching entails a back-and-forth exchange of ideas, questions, and goals that ultimately generates new information.

Keywords: life coaching; information practice; information exchange; information horizon interview; everyday life information seeking; bouncing ideas; thematic analysis

Upon graduating from my bachelor's program, and as soon as I started earning a stable income, I began investing in life coaching services. I have worked one-on-one with coaches I discovered through late-night subject searches online, or through a coach's podcast. Once, I even won a raffle prize of three free sessions with a local life coach. I find these relationships to be immeasurably supportive and beneficial in navigating changing life circumstances. Especially in moments of

converging and compounding global crises, I feel grateful to be able to pull from the toolkit of resources I have gathered from my multi-year engagement with life coaches. Since I have only had the experience of working with life coaches as a client, I wanted to learn from life coaches about their journeys, their practices, and their information sources. In other words, what resources are in the toolkits that life coaches are drawing on?

This study examines the information-rich worlds of three life coaches living in Toronto, Canada. In the absence of a universal definition of life coaching, I adopt Klein's (2022) description of the profession: "[l]ife coaches engage in advising and assisting concerned individuals caught in the midst of economic, personal, and social changes" (p. 2). Klein further articulates the value of studying coaching at this moment in time:

[T]he recent global pandemic, the economic downturn, and destabilization of familiar work situations afford individuals with unexpected opportunities to explore new career paths in non-traditional formats. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has wrought unprecedented change in the lives of millions of individuals. It is projected the utilization of life coaches to cope and adapt to new realities will increase. (p. 1)

Nevertheless, this emergent profession is challenging to study, in large part because "the coaching industry does not have a unified body of knowledge, methods, or guidelines for practice; this imprecision allows for a wide range of services to fall under the category of coaching" (George, 2013, p. 182). Moreover, the legitimacy of life coaching as a profession—as well as its cultural, gendered, and class dimensions—is often problematized in scholarly discourse (e.g. George; Makinen, 2014; Morgan, 2017; Pagis, 2016, 2021). For this study, I set aside judgement about the legitimacy of the life coaching industry, and instead I approach this query with the assumption that coaching *information* is a worthwhile site of study.

Utilizing semi-structured interviews and a drawing activity inspired by Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) Information Horizon Interview (IHI) technique, this exploratory research offers a window into the information exchanges practices of life coaches (Stebbins, 2001). These methods help shed light on the otherwise opaque

information toolkits of life coaches. It also adds to a burgeoning area of interest in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS), as it builds on recent dissertation research published by Klein (2022) about the information seeking practices of life coaches.

Literature Review

Due in part to the emergent and ambiguous nature of the life coaching industry, there is not a significant body of literature on life coaching. In the past ten years, a few key studies in psychology and sociology have attempted to fill in this gap (Aboujaoude, 2020; George, 2013). My research is sensitized by these fields. Significantly, Klein (2022) contributes the first LIS dissertation on the information seeking practices of life coaches. Utilizing a survey, semi-structured interviews, and social network analysis, she maps out the diverse information needs of life coaches, as well as their engagement with online communities of practice.

Looking broadly at the field of LIS, there has been a trend in scholarship to shift away from the cognitive qualities of information to the social and cultural contexts in which information is shared (Savolainen, 2007). An example of a scholar who has embraced the social exchange of information is Willson (2022), who developed a theory of information seeking, sharing, and creation called “bouncing ideas” (p. 81). Likewise, there is a growing interest in information behaviours of individuals in moments of life transition. Ruthven (2022) articulated an “information behaviour theory of transitions” to demonstrate that moments of transition are dense with information. The contexts in which individuals pursue life coaching as clients or as coaches are often defined by a change in external life circumstance, or an internal change. Thus, the container of life coaching is one venue to study transitions and their associated information behaviours.

In all, life coaching is an emergent and influential “helping profession” which merits further study (Aboujaoude, 2020, p. 975). A vibrant social world of life coaching is flourishing, and it is largely outside of the purview of academic scholarship. Klein (2022) asserts that “life coaches are coming together to share information and expertise and draw upon each other for support, assistance, and the opportunity to engage in peer networking” (p. 16). We are in a moment of groundswell enthusiasm about themes of

social information exchange and life transitions in the field of LIS, and life coaching is a valid subject through which to explore these themes.

Research Methods

My project follows in the tradition of an exploratory—as opposed to confirmatory—social science research study (Stebbins, 2001). It utilizes the Information Horizon Interview (IHI) technique to yield insights about the participants' information landscapes and to produce a visual representation of information phenomena (Sonnenwald et al., 1999). Combined, these frameworks afforded guidance and flexibility for the design and execution of my research to answer my query: What are the information sources that life coaches rely on?

For recruitment, I developed a list of potential participants by reviewing two online directories of Toronto-based life coaches. A cutting point in this study was business or executive coaching, which are coaching specializations that focus on performance improvement in the workplace (Klein, 2022). By contrast, life coaching broadly focuses on a “whole person approach” in work contexts and in everyday life (Klein, 2022). In all, I emailed ten individuals in Toronto who offer general life coaching. From this outreach, I received five replies and scheduled three interviews. All the participants are women, they have completed life coaching training in the past five years, and they are accredited by the International Coaching Federation (ICF). The ICF is the world's largest membership-based organization of coaches, which operates as a credentialing, education, and advocacy body for coaching professional (International Coaching Federation, n.d.) While it is beyond the scope of this report, it is worth noting that the participants of this study each hold additional, professional roles, in healthcare, employment support, and business sectors.

The interviews took place between October 29 and November 3, 2022. Two interviews were conducted in public spaces at the participants' condos, and a third was conducted at a bagel shop. At each meeting, participants confirmed their consent to be involved in the process before audio recording began. Interviews varied in length between 25 and 33 minutes (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym; Gina and Sarah picked their preferred names, and Juno left that decision to me. Interview recordings were uploaded to Otter.ai for transcription. I reviewed each

generated transcript twice for accuracy while listening to the audio recording, and I manually anonymized any identifying information. Audio transcripts were then destroyed.

The methods afforded rich data that can be analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively (Case & Given, 2016). Given the complex textual and visual details the Information Horizon Interviews yielded, I chose a more inductive approach, Thematic Analysis, to make sense of the data, meaning that I developed my analysis without much influence from existing theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, I familiarized myself with the transcripts by reading each one individually, in full, and generating preliminary codes to capture the meaning I perceived in the participant's comments. Then, I reviewed the preliminary codes across the entire data set. Through this, I generated ten open codes (see Figure 1) and I processed the transcripts through Nvivo. This yielded 84 references in the three transcripts. These codes were then grouped into thematic categories through an iterative and recursive process. I noticed ideas that were present in each of the coaches' explanation of their journeys, coaching practices, and information horizons; I landed on themes that tell an interesting, novel story about the life coaching information landscape.

Second, I created various matrixes to analyze the number and types of information resources that participants drew on their information horizon map. This quantitative process complements Thematic Analysis, which has not been used widely on visual data. I drew on Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) data analysis process of transferring the graphical representations to a matrix for quantitative calculations.

Figure 1

Ten Open Codes Developed for Sorting

- career change
- certification and training
- challenges hesitations insecurities
- coaches' main job
- coaches' other roles hats
- coaching practice
- creating new materials
- providing existing resources
- resources
- sensitizing concepts to inform coaching practice

Findings

Information from Other Life Coaches

On their journeys to becoming life coaches, participants relied heavily on the insights of other life coaches. During the interview, Gina explained her thought process about picking a coach training program:

It was actually my coach and his ethics and his really strong adherence to the coaching practice and the coaching code of ethics that made me inspired and then I sort of ruled out, I just took a little dive into like other training programs. I was like, meh. So my research pretty much consisted of like a day of just, I really wanted to go to iPEC [Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching] and I just want to like, take a quick look around like, nothing else is good out there right?

Regarding which coach training program to pursue, the coaches listened to the recommendations of a friend who was working as a life coach, coaches-in-training, or their personal coach. The coaches did not conduct extensive internet or market research to come to their decisions about which training course to pursue. Certainly, other factors informed their choice, including the option of ICF accreditation, the price, training hours, location, and content of the courses. However, in their decision-making process, the participants relied on first-person experience and advice from other life

coaches to inform their choice. Thus, socially mediated information seeking practices are paramount for life coaches.

Life Coaches' Information Exchange Practices

Life coaches provide and create resources for their clients. Gina described part of the job as “being resourceful, cobbling things together.” In our interview, Sarah reflected that she enjoys providing people with tools, information, exercises, and resources so that they can continue their learning:

It might be books that I'll recommend, articles, meditations, things that come up in a session that I think would be helpful to them. And that's almost always the important piece. That's an important learning piece for me, for them, to help them help themselves.

Likewise, all three coaches mentioned that in addition to gathering existing resources, they create materials to share with their clients. Gina takes meticulous notes during sessions with clients, which she shares with them. Sarah and Juno create their own content, drawing on their career backgrounds and lived experiences. Juno, describing her process that yields new content, said:

So it's based on a lot of it is mindfulness, a lot of it is like stress management, resilience, that kind of stuff. I mean, I'm always learning. So, you know, I couldn't even say there's one specific modality that I pull from because like, I have a background in psychology, I got my bachelor's in that. And then just along the way, always all the different things that I'm learning, so it's like, "oh, drop a little bit of this, drop a little bit of that."

In short, the coaches see themselves as curators of resources and materials; they notice an information need during their sessions with clients, seek out a resource to suit the need, and share that resource with their clients. Moreover, they are also producing new materials for their clients, based on the coaches' own life histories, praxis, and skills.

IHI Maps: Quantitative Findings

Life coaches utilize resources in many mediums and from many origins. This was reflected in the information horizon map that each participant drew. An information horizon is spatial metaphor to understand all the resources “within a context and situation... in which we can act” (Sonnenwald et al., 2001, p. 4). In this case, I prompted the participants to draw all the potential and actual information that they engage with, including other people, experiences, and their bodies. Indeed, when I explained the drawing exercise, Juno warned me that “it's gonna be a lot here.”

Figure 2

Juno's IHI Map

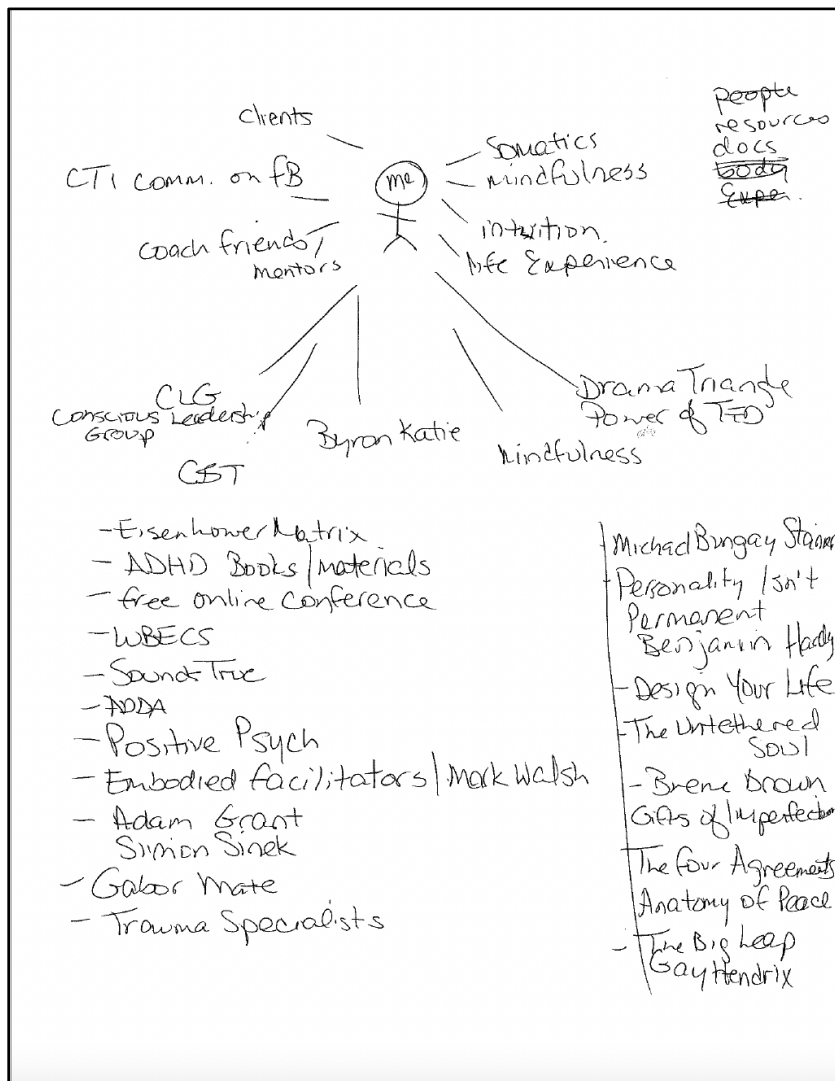


Figure 3
Gina's IHI Map

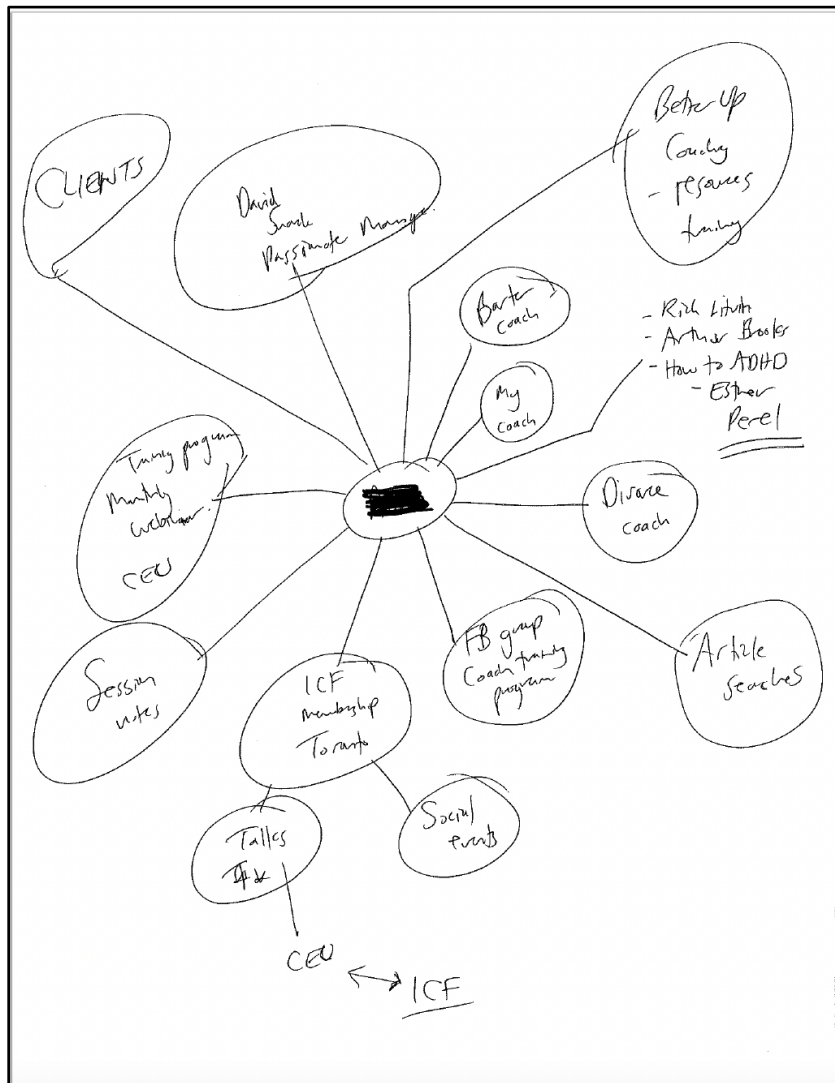
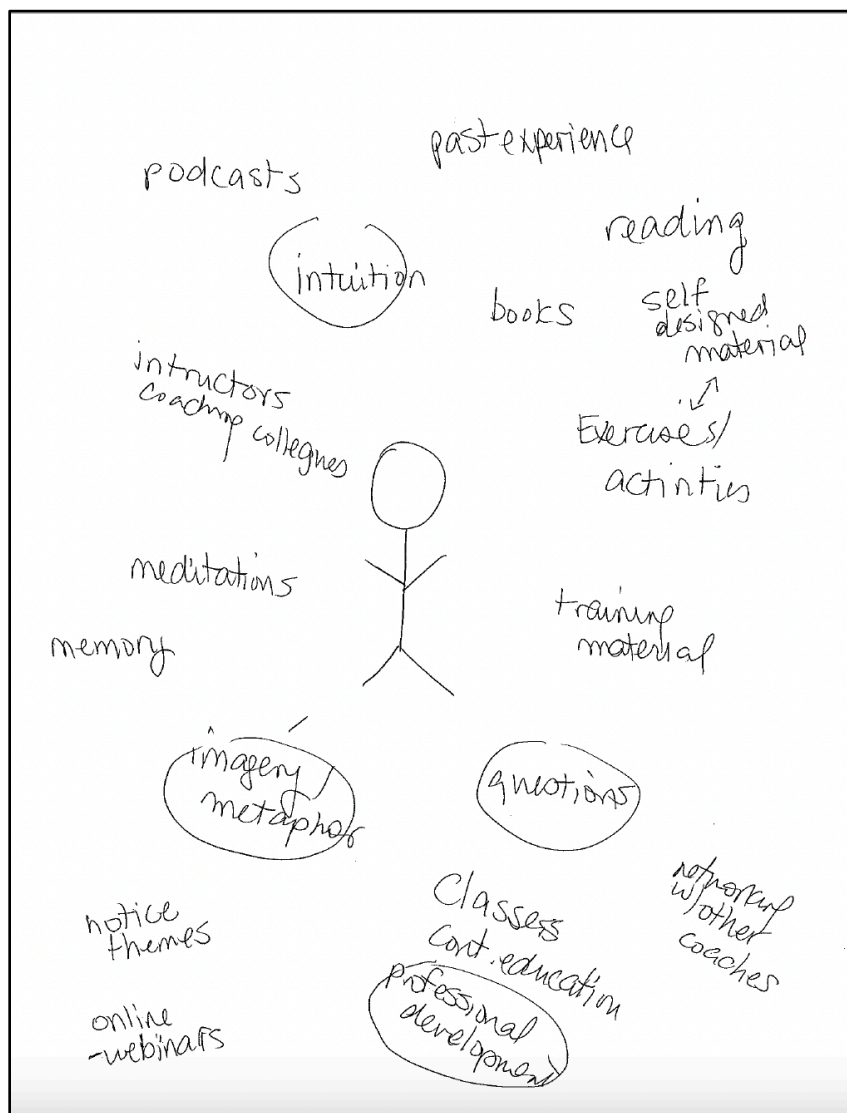


Figure 4
Sarah's IHI Map



In total, the coaches named 75 sources which make up their information horizons (see Table 1). Gina and Sarah named 18 and 19 sources, respectively, and Juno named 38. I categorized the information sources into five themes: *other people*, *documentary materials*, *concepts that inform the coaches' work*, *industry resources*, and *personal knowledge*. By categorizing sources this way, *other people* emerged as the most cited source of information for coaches and represents more than one third of their information sources. The next most frequently cited category is documentary sources with 18 instances, followed by *industry resources* and *concepts that inform coaches'*

work mentioned 12 times each, and *personal experience* is the least frequently noted information source at only 7 times.

Moreover, there was some overlap between sources (see Table 2). Principally, all three coaches included *other coaches*, *book and articles*, and *online webinars and conferences* on their maps. This finding aligns with the previous analysis that *other people*, *documentary sources*, and *industry resources* make up a significant part of the coaches' information horizons.

Table 1

Thematic Clusters and Information Sources

Themes	Information Sources	Gina	Sarah	Juno	Totals
All	Total number of resources listed	18	19	38	75
Other people	Clients, coaches (mentors, colleagues, personal coach), network of coaches, Facebook community, instructors, authors, therapists, specialists	10	3	13	26
Documentary materials	Books, articles, exercises, activities, newsletters, podcasts, self-designed materials, session notes, YouTube videos	3	4	11	18
Concepts that inform coaches' work	Psychological and business theories, imagery, metaphors, mindfulness, meditations, somatic, ADHD, trauma	0	4	8	12
Industry resources	Coaching platform's resources, continuing education classes, membership to ICF (social), professional development, training materials, online webinars and conferences	6	4	2	12
Personal knowledge	Intuition, memory, noticing themes, past experience, questions	0	3	4	7

Table 2

Frequency of Mentions of Information Source

Frequency	Information Source
3	Books and articles Coaches (network of coaches, mentors, colleagues, personal coach) Online webinars and conferences
2	Clients Facebook community Individually-named authors/ therapists/ specialists Mindfulness + meditations Continuing education classes Training materials Intuition Past experience
1	Exercises + activities Newsletters Podcasts Self-designed materials Session notes YouTube videos Instructors Psychological and business theories Imagery + metaphors Somatic Coaching platform's resources Membership to ICF Professional Development Memory Noticing Themes Questions

Discussion

Life coaches are uniquely situated in an emerging industry that operates in a “regulatory vacuum” and currently lacks education requirements and professional codified ethics (Aboujaoude, 2020, p. 975). However, the findings from my study demonstrates that life coaches are deeply committed to their own continued education, to serving their clients professionally and ethically, and to generating and sharing an abundance of resources. Thus, studying the information practices of life coaches is an illuminating angle from which to view this professional “site of struggle” and to support the legitimization of their work (George, 2013, p. 181).

Within the literature of LIS, my study extends the recent dissertation work of Klein (2022). Although my study utilized a different method, the Information Horizon Interview mapping method, my results replicate and reinforce many of her findings. Significantly, Klein found that life coaches have a “high need for information... given the dynamic and fluid nature of coaching services that are heavily invested in specific client needs” (p. 200). This accurately captures how the participants in my study oriented themselves; they are constantly evolving their own information practices to better address their clients’ needs. Along similar lines, Klein noted that life coaches “perceive themselves as collectors and disseminators of information” (p. 198). Again, my participants emphasized that they share resources widely with their clients and described themselves in similarly curatorial terms. This insight is valuable to inoculate against a perception that life coaches might be gatekeepers of specialized knowledge. Rather, the coaches are keen to find reliable, applicable, and useful information for their clients, and offer it back to them. Finally, Klein observed that life coaches in her study “all appeared comfortable casting a wide net as part of their information seeking process” (p. 198). The information horizon maps in my study confirm this finding acutely; life coaches utilize existing knowledge from their previous careers and augment it with continued learning and study. As Gina succinctly stated: “I’m great at Google searching.” Participants sought information in various mediums—digital, paper-based, embodied—and from various sources—popular media, personal experience, and professional circles.

While Klein’s (2022) dissertation provides an invaluable data corpus and impressive findings, I will offer one critique of the theoretical foundation of her study. A premise of her research is that life coaches have expertise in “everyday life,” and therefore, she utilizes Savolainen’s (1995) everyday life information seeking (ELIS) model as a core theoretical framework (p. 5). Savolainen developed this conceptual framework, and a related concept of “mastery of life,” to make sense of the information behaviours of individuals seeking information in nonwork settings (p. 259). ELIS is “the acquisition of various informational (both cognitive and expressive) elements which people employ to orient themselves in daily life or to solve problems not directly connected with the performance of occupational tasks” (p. 266-267). Ultimately, Klein

concludes that this lens does not fully account for life coaches' information needs beyond the "orienting and practical information" in Savolainen's model (p. 207). While I understand Klein's inclination to focus on the everyday information that coaches engage with on behalf of their clients, the context in which life coaches are seeking and using this information is in a paid employment setting. Therefore, this application a misuse of Savolainen's ELIS model, and that might account for its incoherence with the findings.

Life coaching straddles both employment and everyday life experiences. Given this fact, the information worlds of life coaches could be explained using more than one model of information behaviour. However, the most compelling model that I have found to explain this process is Willson's (2022) "bouncing ideas" theory. Willson developed this theory to explain the three information activities—seeking, sharing, and creation—that early career academics engage with when they are informally exchanging ideas with other academics. Willson notes this is a generative, cooperative, and iterative process that results in "the creation of new information" (p. 811). This theory rings true for the life coach interactions with other coaches and with their clients: there is a back-and-forth of ideas, questions, and goals that ultimately generates something new. This study illuminated the interpersonal qualities of coaching at all stages of a life coach's career: at the certification decision-making phase, when working with clients in one-on-one coaching, and in continued education, both formally and informally.

Methodological Reflections

The Information Horizon Interview was a supportive and accessible method to bring to the surface a plethora of insight about life coaching information. At the end of each interview, the informants remarked on the utility of the IHI map; two participants even opted to take photos to save for their own records. One challenge with the mapping exercise might be that some participants were limited by the information sources they could remember. When prompted to reflect on the completeness of her map, Juno said:

It's not complete, but it's as complete as it can be right now off the top of my head. Yeah, there are so many more that probably, on my walk home, I'm going to be like, here's a few more.

To improve this outcome, future research studies might involve ethnographic research, or an intensive interview, to yield a more complete data corpus (Case & Given, 2006).

Another point of reflection is the method of data analysis: Thematic Analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2022). This data analysis method offers flexibility around dataset composition and size, and allows for a “homogenous” data sample; it prioritizes data “richness” over claims of “saturation” or precise calculations of sample size (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 27–28). Even still, given the expansiveness of coaching industry, it would be valuable to expand the study to include more “heterogenous” perspectives of life coaches working in, and beyond, Toronto.

Conclusions

In sum, my research confirmed and expanded some of the findings from the recent dissertation in the field of LIS about life coaching (Klein, 2022). It also presented an alternative theoretical framework, Willson’s (2022) “bouncing ideas,” to make sense of life coaches’ information practices. Further research in this field may seek to confirm the qualities of “bouncing ideas” that are present in other life coaching dynamics. It may also address the temporality or directionality of these information flows.

The title of this report, *We Are Starving for Information*, is credited to a remark Juno made in her interview. The comment reflects a sentiment that was present in all my conversations with life coaches: they are never satiated with their information horizons. Rather, the life coaches admirably pursue continued learning, resource collection and creation, and sharing of resources with their clients and colleagues.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your life coaching journey?
 - a. What circumstances led to your discovery of coaching?
 - b. Why do you choose to practice coaching?
 - c. Is coaching a personal or social experience for you?
2. Take me through a week of your coaching practice. What do you *do* as a life coach?
 - a. How do you support your clients?
 - b. What resources do you rely on?
3. Now we are going to use pen and paper to draw something called your “information horizon map.” It is all the potential coaching information/resources you engage with. Think of how coaching works/fits in your life. I'd like you to draw a map of all the information related to coaching. First, you'll draw yourself somewhere on this piece of paper. Then draw all the potential information resources. It includes people, experiences, and your body too. You can draw as much or as little as you like, but please talk me through what you're drawing as you do.
 - a. Do you seek out any books/literature/websites?
 - b. What people play a part in your coaching experience?
 - c. Are there any coaching practices that really involved your body?