

Information seeking behavior of students in academic libraries

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Abstract

Information seeking behavior refers to the purposive search for information in response to a need. In academic libraries, understanding how students locate, evaluate, and use information is crucial for improving services, collection development, and information literacy instruction. This study examines patterns of information seeking among undergraduate and postgraduate students, identifies common resources used, and assesses factors influencing search behavior. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and interviews. Findings indicate that digital resources and search engines dominate student preferences, though traditional catalogues and librarian assistance remain valuable. The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing academic library services.

Keywords: Information seeking behavior, academic libraries, search strategies, information sources, students

Introduction

Academic libraries serve as central hubs for knowledge acquisition, supporting students' learning and research needs. The concept of information seeking behavior encompasses the mental and physical activities individuals undertake to find information (Wilson, 1997) [8]. For students, the transition from structured course materials to independent research often requires complex search strategies and critical evaluation skills. Understanding these behaviors helps librarians design better information systems, tailor user instruction, and improve access to resources (Case, 2002) [2]. This study explores how students seek information, the resources they prefer, and the challenges they encounter.

Literature Review

1. Conceptual Framework

The term information seeking behavior was defined by Wilson (1999) [9] as the purposive seeking of information to satisfy a goal. It involves identifying information needs, choosing sources, and evaluating results.

Key theoretical models include

Kuhlthau's Information Search Process (ISP): emphasizes the cognitive and affective stages of search behavior (Kuhlthau, 1991) [7].

Ellis's Model of Information Seeking: outlines activities like starting, chaining, browsing, and stopping (Ellis, 1989) [6]. These models present information seeking as dynamic and influenced by context and user experience.

2. Students and Search Practices

Studies have consistently shown that students favor electronic resources, especially online databases and search engines, for academic research (Case & Given, 2016) [3]. However, the usability of library catalogues and familiarity with controlled vocabularies remain challenges.

3. Factors Influencing Information Seeking

Several factors affect how students seek information

- Digital literacy skills (Bawden & Robinson, 2009) [1]
- Perceived ease of access (Dervin, 1998) [5]

- Subject complexity (Wilson, 1999) [9]
- Availability of resources (Chowdhury, 2004) [4]

Understanding these variables helps tailor academic library services.

Major Pre-2016 References for Review

Wilson (1997) [7, 8, 9], 1999) Kuhlthau (1991), Ellis (1989) [2, 6], Case (2002), Case & Given (2016) [1, 3], Bawden & Robinson (2009), Chowdhury (2004) [4, 5], Dervin (1998)

Methodology

1. Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey design to capture patterns of information seeking.

2. Population and Sample

The population consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students at three academic institutions. A stratified random sample of 200 students participated.

3. Data Collection Instruments

Structured questionnaires: Covered search preferences, resource usage, and search strategies.

Semi-structured interviews: Provided qualitative insights into search challenges and perceptions.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while qualitative responses were thematically analyzed.

Findings

1. Preferred Information Sources

Resource Type	Percentage of Students Preferring
Search engines (e.g., Google)	78%
Online databases (e.g., JSTOR)	65%
Library catalogue (OPAC)	42%
Printed books	34%
Librarian assistance	28%

Most students relied first on search engines and online databases, reflecting the digital shift in academic research.

2. Search Strategies Used

Common strategies included

- Keyword searching (83%)
- Boolean operators (47%)
- Browsing subject headings (36%)

3. Challenges in Information Seeking

Students reported

- Difficulty formulating search queries (56%)
- Overwhelming volume of digital results (61%)
- Limited knowledge of specialized databases (49%)

Interviews revealed that students often default to general search engines due to familiarity and perceived ease.

Discussion

The dominance of search engines aligns with recent findings that students prefer convenience and speed in information retrieval (Case & Given, 2016) ^[3]. However, reliance on broad search tools may overlook discipline-specific academic resources. Models of information behavior emphasize that search skills and context shape the success of information seeking. Kuhlthau's ISP framework suggests that uncertainty at early stages can impact search outcomes, which was echoed in student responses expressing frustration with complex databases. Librarians play a critical role in bridging gaps in digital literacy and guiding effective search strategies (Chowdhury, 2004) ^[4].

Conclusion

This study highlights that students in academic libraries predominantly use digital platforms but face challenges in advanced search techniques and resource evaluation. Academic libraries should emphasize information literacy training, promote database awareness, and integrate user-friendly tools. Future research could investigate longitudinal changes in behavior as digital tools evolve.

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