

Academic Information Behavior and the Role of the Academic Library: A Study of an Israeli University / Riki (Rivka) Greenberg

Abstract

This article-based dissertation presents three articles, all studying information behavior of the patrons in an academic library in Israel. The first article, "Information needs of students in Israel — A case study of a multicultural society" was published in March 2014, in the Journal of Academic Librarianship. The second article, "Ask a librarian: Comparing virtual reference services in an Israeli academic library" was published in April 2015, in Library & Information Science Research. The third article, "Library metrics; studying academic users' information retrieval behavior: A case study of an Israeli university library", was accepted in October 2015 to the Journal of Librarianship & Information Science. The purpose of this dissertation is to get insights on library users' academic information behavior and information needs from multiple aspects.

The three articles cover the research questions posed in the dissertation proposal. All three articles studied information behavior of the University of Haifa library's (the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Library) patrons, my workplace. The research comprises the student's perceptions and the mediation that library patrons ask for—as reflected in the virtual reference services, in the patrons' information retrieval behavior, and in log files' analysis from the library's information systems.

For the first article, we used an information behavior questionnaire. The goal of the study was to describe how Israeli students conduct research and find information. We also tried to understand how students from different native language groups from varied cultures and backgrounds seek information. We surveyed 151 students from four faculties. The study yielded very similar results to other international studies, although in our research we observed some differences due to multicultural characteristics of the Israelis' students. When searching for information for an academic assignment, the students indicated the Internet (search engines and Google

Scholar) as their primary source of search. There was a statistically significant difference in using search engines for retrieving academic information between the Hebrew and the Russian language groups, who preferred search engines, and the Arab language group, who preferred library resources. Another interesting finding emerging from the data was the significant differences in the usage of the “Ask a librarian” section. Both the Hebrew and the Russian language groups hardly use the service. In contrast, the Arab language group frequently used it.

For the second article we analyzed two web-based virtual reference services (VRS)—chat (116 interactions) and email (213 exchanges)—at an academic library. The study combined the findings with an open-ended questionnaire, administered to the library’s reference team (n=16). The contents of a set of questions and answers in both VR services were analyzed. The VRS data were collected and coded, including patron affiliation (only for email sessions). The patrons' questions and the librarians' answers were analyzed. Each reference interaction was classified according to *who* was using the service, *what* the patrons were asking, and *how* the questions were answered. The library’s reference staff questionnaire comprised eight questions regarding VR services in comparison to reference. One of the major findings of the study was that the chat VR service does not satisfy the library users’ information needs. In the email VRS most questions were *in-depth questions*. Most answers were bibliography lists sent to the patrons. In the chat VRS, most questions were classified as *short questions*. Most frequently the questions were not answered immediately but were forwarded to another service. A group of the library’s reference staff responded to eight questions presented to them. When asked about the difference between the VR to FtF (face to face) reference interactions, most answers indicated that the physical FtF at the reference desk was more personalized and customized to the users’ information needs.

The third article presented an analysis of data from log files of library patrons’ information access, from the library's open URL link resolver service, the library’s home page, and the publishers' records of downloads accessed through the library’s subscriptions. All data were collected in order to study library patrons' information access and retrieval behavior. Data were provided for the period between January 2011 and June 2014, of which 18 months were selected and analyzed. The use of the recommended resources service (a system that harvests metadata from the open URL

link resolver usage log files and offers the user similar sources accordingly), is relatively low in comparison to full text requests from the open URL link resolver in the same period. Library patrons seemingly focus on the links to the full text available online and overlook links to additional options like the recommended resources function. On average (for the 18 months in the sample) the publishers' count of full text downloads was 3.15 times more than library discovery tool full text requests. From the data it appears that the library's discovery tool is not the major source for accessing full text items and the patrons often prefer other sources such as Google Scholar. Further and detailed analysis of the full text requests registered from the library discovery tool indicates an increase in use over time, as a mean of full text access and retrieval.

In this dissertation we referred to each research question separately, in view of our findings. In addressing the first research question—what are the library patron's information behaviors—we found that the majority of the students use Internet search engines to fulfill their academic information needs. They find library sources trustworthy but difficult to use. Library patrons use Google Scholar, while taking advantage of its ability to connect to library subscriptions. Using library subscriptions indicate the important role of the academic library as the provider of the information sources, regardless of where the user discovered and retrieved them. Google Scholar may not bring users physically to the library, but it can link users with resources provided by the library.

The second research question addressed Israeli students' information needs and information behavior in searching information for an academic assignment. The findings show that their information behavior is similar to students in other parts of the world. The study did point out some significant differences between the three native language groups tested (Hebrew, Arabic, and Russian), in response to several questions regarding their preferred method of information retrieval, using search engines to find academic information and the use of library services.

The third research question was meant to study how the libraries' virtual reference services fulfill the patron's information needs. We found differences between chat and email virtual reference services. Email was found to be an effective means of satisfying users' information needs while the chat virtual reference service did not

fulfil their information needs. Face-to-face (FtF) reference interaction was found as the preferred reference service by librarians even though they believed that the best reference service depended on the users and their information needs.