



## Demographic Differences in International Students' Information Source Uses and Everyday Information Seeking Challenges



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### ABSTRACT

International students are a sizeable user group of academic libraries. However, their everyday life information seeking (ELIS) behavior is seldom studied. This hinders the planning of information services and information literacy training. In light of this gap, this study surveyed 112 international students in a U.S. public university on: (1) how frequently respondents used 11 information sources; (2) how difficult it was to find information in various domains; and (3) how much their ELIS was affected by various information seeking problems. Differences between gender-study level categories and problem solving styles were tested using ANOVAs. The study found that Web search engines, social networking sites, new friends, printed resources, and traditional mass media were the top sources for ELIS. Six everyday information domains (e.g., legal, financial, and personal development information) ranked more difficult to find than academic information. Non-credible, irrelevant, and outdated information were found to be the top problems. There were more statistically significant problem solving style differences (especially on the Problem Solving Confidence subscale) than gender-study level differences. Notable gender-study level differences were still found. Male undergraduate students, for example, were more affected by their reluctance to ask personal questions. Lastly, the implications to information literacy education were discussed.

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### INTRODUCTION

Over 4.5 million students are pursuing a university-level education overseas (OECD, 2014). In the 2013–14 academic year, about 886,052 international students were studying in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2014b). While international students are a notable user group of academic libraries, their methods of seeking out and using information are not well understood (Liu & Winn, 2009). Cognizant that international students may have different information needs and behaviors than host-nation students (hereafter, also referred to as U.S. students), many academic librarians in the survey by Ishimura and Bartlett (2014) have expressed interest in participating in specialized training for providing services to international students.

To orient themselves in a new environment, international students often need to find and process a large amount of information (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Differences in culture, language, and life experience can also add complications to their information seeking in the host country (Liao, Finn, & Lu, 2007; Yi, 2007). Although the Internet and social media have increased the ease of information seeking for

international students (Sin & Kim, 2013), the uncertain quality of information on the open Web can be problematic. Nowadays, students are exposed to a multitude of information sources. It is unclear to what extent international students are using these different sources, what types of information seeking challenges they have encountered, and whether there are demographic differences in source use and everyday life information seeking (ELIS) challenges. The dearth of research on this topic impedes the planning of information services and information literacy (IL) training for this user group.

In light of the research gap, this study seeks to examine the information behaviors of international students, particularly in the under-explored area of ELIS. ELIS is an area that has drawn increasing attention since the mid-1990s (Savolainen, 1995). Nowadays, it is widely recognized that IL encompasses not only a proficiency in academic information seeking, but in an individual's work and personal life as well (Association of College Research Libraries, 2004). Being the principal provider of IL education and information services on campus, academic libraries are poised to contribute to the growth and well-being of international students by preparing them to be proficient information seekers in both academic and everyday contexts. Analyses of international students' current information behavior and the challenges they experience would contribute towards further service planning for this

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population. Specifically, the study examines the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1:

- (a) How frequently do the respondents use a variety of sources and channels (e.g., libraries, Web search engines, social networking sites, social question and answer sites, and family members) for their ELIS?
- (b) Do the uses of information sources differ by demographics (particularly by the gender-study level category and problem solving styles)?

RQ2:

- (a) How difficult is it to find information in various information domains (e.g., health, finance, and local news)?
- (b) Do the levels of difficulty differ by demographics?

RQ3:

- (a) To what extent is their ELIS affected by various problems (e.g., difficulties with computer systems, non-credible information)?
- (b) Do the levels of problem differ by demographics?

## LITERATURE

### CHALLENGES IN INFORMATION SEEKING AND LIBRARY USE

Higher education is a time of intense intellectual and personal growth. This can involve considerable information seeking for both host students and international students alike. The cross-cultural adjustment and new-comer information behavior literature suggest that international students likely have additional information needs related to their being new to the country (Ward et al., 2001). The effective acquisition of everyday life information is important to the students' cross-cultural transition and college adjustment (Shoham & Strauss, 2008).

Researchers have noted the dearth of recent studies on international students' information behavior (Liu & Winn, 2009). Research on international students' everyday information seeking is even rarer. The extant studies have focused more on academic needs and library uses (Jackson, 2005; Liao et al., 2007; Liu & Redfern, 1997; Liu & Winn, 2009; Song, 2004; Yi, 2007). These studies have brought valuable insights on the barriers that international students may encounter in academic information seeking. Overall, the literature suggests the following challenges: language barriers, unfamiliarity with certain information technology and systems, varying awareness and perception of library services, and cultural differences. These challenges will be summarized below, as some of the problems affecting the academic information seeking of international students may also influence their ELIS.

The language barrier is an often discussed topic, especially in earlier studies (Amsberry, 2008; Bilal, 1989; Liu & Redfern, 1997). Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (1997), for example, found that non-native English speakers reported higher levels of library anxiety than native English speakers. An unfamiliarity with library jargon can add extra difficulties to international students' information seeking (Howze & Moore, 2003). Similarly, technological barriers were often found in earlier studies (Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 1997). With the increasing access to information technology worldwide, recent studies suggest that among international students studying in the U.S. and Canada, technological difficulties may be less prevalent than before (Jackson, 2005; Liao et al., 2007; Liu & Winn, 2009; Yi, 2007). Similar to American students, international students nowadays are often found to frequently use Internet resources for information seeking. The uses of Web search

engines are especially widespread among both international and U.S. students (Liao et al., 2007; Sin, Kim, Yang, Park, & Laugheed, 2011).

While students' familiarity with the Internet has generally increased, researchers continue to find some differences between U.S. and international students in their information behavior. For example, Liao et al. (2007) showed that a larger portion of the international students in their study initiated their search from the Internet, while more U.S. respondents began their search with the university's electronic resources. Song (2004) discussed that specific journal databases can still pose challenges to international students. This may stem in part from their varying prior experience with library and information retrieval systems (Song, 2004). A positive finding is that the international students in some of the studies have expressed interest in learning more about database and Web searching strategies (Liao et al., 2007; Yi, 2007).

The literature also suggests another persistent challenge: international students are often found to not be fully aware of the whole range of library services available to them. Examples include reference services (especially virtual reference), library orientation, consultation sessions, and interlibrary loans (Jackson, 2005; Liao et al., 2007; Liu & Winn, 2009). Cultural differences also continue to be a factor. For example, some international students are more accustomed to trying to resolve problems on their own instead of asking for librarians' assistance (Liu & Winn, 2009).

### CHALLENGES IN EVERYDAY INFORMATION SEEKING

The difficulties mentioned above focused on academic information needs and library use; however, some of these can similarly affect the ELIS of international students. Finding relevant and trustworthy daily life information can be challenging, even among U.S. students (Given, 2002; Head & Eisenberg, 2011; Sin, in press). Being relatively new to the country, international students may experience more pressing everyday information needs and challenges than U.S. students. In a survey of 188 international students by Sin and colleagues, respondents had more difficulty finding work and career, legal, financial, housing, and health information (Sin et al., 2011). Jeong's in-depth interviews of international graduate students and their spouses indicate that some respondents missed certain important daily life information due to language barriers (Jeong, 2004).

### SOURCE USES IN EVERYDAY INFORMATION SEEKING

U.S. students used the Internet frequently to seek everyday information. Head and Eisenberg (2011) found that Web search engines, friends and family, and Wikipedia were the most frequently used sources. Social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, were not ranked in that analysis, but recent research suggests that SNSs are used frequently by U.S. students for ELIS (Kim, Sin, & Yoo-Lee, 2014b). With regards to international students, their internet use is the area with stronger empirical evidence. Most studies show that international students are frequent Internet users. Liao et al. (2007) found that the international students in their study used the university library and its services (such as searching academic resources, studying, and using the reserves collection) more frequently than U.S. students did. Beyond academic information seeking and library uses, however, it is unclear how international students are using different information resources (such as social media platforms, people sources, or traditional mass media) for ELIS.

It would be fruitful to investigate the use of a variety of information sources, as there is beginning evidence that some sources have a positive influence on the life of international students. Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, and LaRose (2012) found that the social and college adjustments of international students were associated positively with the amount of time they spent on Facebook interacting with home-country friends. In comparison, the time spent on interacting with host-country friends through Facebook was positively related to social adjustment but not to college adjustment. In terms of informational outcome, Sin and Kim

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