



The Relationship Between Cultural Diversity and User Needs in Virtual Reference Services

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While the racial diversity of academic library users continues to grow, research on the effects of this diversity remains scarce. This study looks at similarities and differences between non-traditional Caucasian and African American library users through content analysis of ninety-four virtual reference transactions.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

According to the 2004 US Census, 67 percent of the American population was Caucasian (non-Hispanic), 12 percent was Black or African American, 4 percent was Asian, and 14 percent was Hispanic (people of Hispanic origin may be of any race).¹ These diverse groups are making growing use of the Internet; 73 percent of Caucasians (non-Hispanic), 79 percent of (English-speaking) Hispanics, and 60 percent of African Americans (non-Hispanic) are using the Internet.² These diverse user groups are making growing use of library services. More of them are attending colleges³ and participating in distance education programs.⁴ They are also using remote library services, such as virtual reference.

While diverse user groups are making use of academic library services today more than ever, research into the effect of cultural diversity on information seeking behavior is scarce. Studies have addressed diversity of education level, gender, country of origin, and ethnic background of library users. For example, Barbara Valentine focused on research behavior of undergraduates. Ethelene Whitmire's longitudinal study follows the changes in undergraduates' library usage during their college years.⁵ Tracy A. Burdick in "Success and Diversity in Information Seeking: Gender and the Information Search Styles Model," looks at different information search styles among genders. Mengxiong Liu and Bernice Redfern in their article "Information Seeking Behavior of Multicultural Students" as well as Lucinda R. Zoe and Diane DiMartino in "Cultural Diversity and End-User Searching," discuss how international students are facing more difficulties in using library resources. Ethelene Whitmire examined the influence of cultural diversity of undergraduates on their library use pattern and reports that students of color used the academic library at higher rates than White undergraduates.⁶ These studies focused attention on the effect of students' heterogeneity on information seeking behavior, research skills, library usage, and library anxiety. Furthermore, the tendency to ask for help differed among culturally diverse user groups. East Asian students requested more assistance in searching databases than native English speakers and female students were more likely to ask for help than males.⁷

The limited number of studies that have looked at the relationship between race and library use is stunning. However, racial differences in academic performance between African Americans and Caucasians at different educational levels have

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been reported extensively in the literature.⁸ One can therefore assume that information needs may differ among ethnic groups. A better understanding of diverse users needs in the library context may shed some light on differences in academic achievements among racial groups.

Most academic libraries today provide virtual services to their students, faculty, and staff.⁹ At least 83 percent of academic libraries in the US are providing some sort of digital reference according to Joe Janes, and Steve Coffman claims that there are very few libraries today that do not provide at least the minimal level of digital reference service via e-mail.¹⁰ It was suggested that the provision of online reference services enables users, who are uncomfortable approaching a librarian in person, to submit anonymous questions to a virtual reference service.¹¹ Similarly, there are certain user groups that cannot come to the library due to physical disabilities, scheduling constraints, or geographical distance and may use 24/7 virtual reference service to overcome these challenges. These users may also find the virtual reference to be more accessible for their needs as it provides services to users anytime, anyplace.¹² Virtual reference services are instrumental in providing library support for distance education students.¹³ While “virtual reference” normally refers to both e-mail and chat services, the current study focuses on e-mail.

Despite the fact that more services are provided online and more remote and diverse users are making use of these services, researchers have not focused attention on the relationship between cultural diversity and user needs in virtual reference. This paper aims to address this research gap and to explore the differences and similarities in information seeking behaviors of culturally diverse students using remote reference services. Particularly this paper focuses on the use of remote reference services by African American and Caucasian distance education students.

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METHODOLOGY

This study aims to identify the similarities and differences among African Americans and Caucasians by conducting content analysis of ninety-four reference transactions. Using a convenience sampling method, the data originated from requests that were sent to a reference desk by distance education students. The university has only a virtual library with no physical holdings and the reference services are provided by telephone and e-mail from a single office. The university has a total enrollment of more than 20,000 graduate students. The student body is particularly racially diverse and includes 8.9 percent self-declared African American (non-Hispanic) and 4.3 percent Hispanic. It is important to note that these numbers are not representative of the true percentages as 37.7 percent of the student body chose not to provide information on their racial background. The students are predominately female (76.3 percent)

and have an overall average age of 37.4 years. While there are other differences in user demographics which may influence information-seeking behavior, such as first language, experience with technology, and income level or class, these differences were not documented or examined as part of this study.

Data Collection

Selection of reference transactions from the archive for this study involved transactions that were processed by the librarians during four months, from June 2005 to September 2005. The library maintains an archive of all the reference transactions that are asked by phone or by e-mail. Phone transactions are summarized and put into e-mail format. All e-mail transactions are organized in students' folders and are kept in an archive. Transactions that filled the following criteria were included in the study:

1. Ethnic background of the student was specified in the university's student database and was either Black (non-Hispanic) or White.¹⁴
2. Transaction included information sent by e-mail directly from the student (not just summaries of phone calls).
3. Only one transaction from each student was selected.

It should be explained here that a transaction may have taken place over a period of time and may have multiple, unrelated needs that were addressed.¹⁵ To enable statistical analysis of differences among the two user groups using cross tabulation, we aimed to sample 100 transactions, 50 from each group. This required a screening process of nearly 1700 transactions from the archive. After ensuring that all duplicates were removed, all identifying information was carefully removed from the transactions and ninety-four transactions were included in the analysis. Forty-seven transactions that were sent by Caucasian students and forty-seven by African American students that fit the above criteria. An Excel spreadsheet was created with the demographic information for each student and a numerical code that corresponded with the transaction file.

Users' demographics were evaluated to determine if differences other than ethnicity exist between the two user groups. The two user groups were similar in age and gender distribution. However, both group average ages are different than the average age of graduate students in this university, which is thirty-six. The average age of African American students was 47.5 years and the average age of Caucasian students was 48.5 years. An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate if age of African American and Caucasian users differs. The test was not significant, $t(92) = -.465$, $p = .64$. There was no significant difference in the average age of users from the two groups.

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis was an individual reference transaction. Content analysis of the transaction was conducted to determine similarities and differences between the two user groups. Specifically three areas of interest were the focus of the analysis. First, the number of messages that were sent between the user and the librarian in each transaction, the replies to the follow-up messages, and the number of questions that were submitted in subsequent messages that the user sent were counted. Second, the types of questions that

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