

# A Study of Information Seeking Behavior of Academic Sociologists through Citation Analysis at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

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## **Abstract**

*The study investigates information seeking behavior of academic sociologists in the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. The objectives of the study were to find the purpose of seeking information, types of information sought, methods used for seeking information and the use of information technology to access information by the academic sociologists. The main research instrument was a questionnaire supplemented by a citation analysis of post graduate theses of the study population. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the academic sociologists seek information for preparing lecture notes. Keeping their knowledge up to date and gathering information for research purposes were the next priority areas for seeking information. The study led to the general conclusion that the academic sociologists' information needs are of diverse in nature and they use wide variety of information sources to satisfy their information needs. Most of the sociologists depend on books and journals and preferably of print media in comparison to the electronic media. Although the finding of the survey revealed that the academic sociologists use IT based services the citation analysis of their post graduate theses revealed that they depend on print sources. Based on the research findings it can be recommended that user education programs are essential to improve IT and information literacy skills of the academic sociologists to access electronic information.*

**Keywords:** Citation Analysis, Information Seeking Behavior, Sociologists, Information Needs

## **1. Introduction**

Information-seeking behavior involves personal reasons for seeking information, the kinds of information which are being sought, and the ways and sources with which needed information is being sought. (Leckie et al., 1996) The need for information is one of the cognitive needs of humankind. Information need causes information-seeking behavior and these concepts complement one another. Information need and information-seeking behavior are affected by many factors. Information-seeking

behavior is expressed in various forms, from reading printed material to research and experimentation. Scholars, students, and faculty actively seek current information from the various sources available in libraries, e.g., encyclopedias, journals and, more currently, electronic media. (Ables, 2004)

Information seeking behavior depends on the reasons for seeking information and the starting knowledge of the individual. Information seeking is a special case of problem solving. It includes recognizing and interpreting the information problem, establishing a plan of search, conducting the search, evaluating the results, and if necessary, iterating through the process again. (Marchionini, 1995)



The effectiveness and efficiency of services provided in a university library are mainly determined by the academic community who is the main user group of the library. Teaching staff are regarded as the most logical source to determine whether the library is playing its role satisfactorily or not. Carrying out studies on library use and information seeking behavior will be an invaluable guide for assessing current practices and in determining the future direction of library development. The benefits of information revolution are centered on convenience of the user. Faculty members and research scholars are responsible for teaching and are expected to do research and publish the results throughout their career. (Kumar, 2013) Knowledge of the information needs and information seeking behavior of users is vital for developing library collections, upgrading facilities and improving services to effectively meet the information needs of users. (Tahir et al., 2013)

The understanding of information needs and information seeking behavior of various professional groups is essential as it helps in the planning, implementation and operation of information system and services in work setting. (Devadason and Lingam, 1997) If academic libraries are to realistically serve academic researchers they must recognize the changing needs and variations in information gathering and provide services that would be most useful. (White, 1975) Information-seeking behavior differs among user groups. Academic libraries must understand the information needs of faculty and students in order to address their needs. (Joshi and Nikose, 2013)

Although there is a substantial amount of literature which exists in research on information seeking behavior of social scientists there is a dearth of literature related to information seeking behavior of

academic sociologists. When it comes to Sri Lanka not a single library and information researcher has done a research on this subject area. Therefore the present research will be the pioneer study in Sri Lanka bridging the gap of literature on information seeking behavior of academic sociologists.

## **2. Objective of the Study**

The main purpose of the study was to investigate library use and information seeking behavior of academic sociologists in the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Four research questions were mainly constructed for this study:

1. What is the purpose of information seeking?
2. What types of information sources are sought by academic sociologists?
3. What methods are used for seeking information?
4. How is information technology used by them?

## **3. Related studies on library use and information seeking behavior**

Since the 1960s and even before, there has been an increasing volume of literature on user studies, information needs and information seeking behavior. (Nnadozie and Nnadozi, 2013) Many studies have been conducted to investigate the information needs of library users based on their subject interests, occupation, information environment and geographical location. Information needs and information seeking behavior of academics have been a popular area of research for information scientists for decades. (Majid and Kasim, 2000) Many authors point out that the studies on information seeking behavior and information needs of social scientists are fewer than those involving the natural sciences, and that the studies of Humanities' information

needs are still fewer. (Blazek and Elizabeth, 1994; Challener, 1999) Shokeen and Kushik (2002) studied information seeking behavior of social scientists working in the universities located in Haryana. They reported that most of the social scientists visit the library daily and the browsing was the most preferred method to locate the required materials followed by searching through indexing and abstracting periodicals and citations in articles respectively. The study further reported that social scientists use current journals followed by books. Sethi (1990) conducted another study on information-seeking behavior of 256 social science faculty members in Indian universities. It was found that respondents preferred journals, books, government documents, and reference sources for meeting their information needs.

Challener (1999) investigated the information seeking behavior of artists and art historians teaching in five Liberal Arts colleges and three universities in India. Results revealed that they need information mainly for teaching purposes. Almost all the participants subscribe to art journals and many of them read newspapers. They visit libraries frequently, usually more than one library and the majority is willing to ask the librarian for help. A large percentage of both art historians and artists use computers for teaching. All participants use slides extensively in the classroom, supplemented in most cases by textbooks. Meho (1999) used a questionnaire, citation analysis, and follow-up inquiry to examine how a social science faculty studying the Kurds, a particular stateless nation, looks for government information and the factors that influenced their seeking behavior and use of such information. The results of the study revealed that these scholars use similar methods used by other social science faculty for seeking relevant information on their discipline.

Suriya, Sangeetha and Nambi (2004) also carried out a research project on information seeking behavior of faculty members from government arts Colleges in Cuddalore District, India. The purpose of their study was to investigate, how faculty members seek information from the library. It revealed that most of the respondents (38.12 %) visited the library several times a week to meet their information needs. Folster (1995) reviewed social scientists information seeking pattern and found that faculty members preferred journals instead of other sources, to follow citations instead of using indexes or abstracts to find articles, and that they did not view librarians as important sources of information. A longitudinal study of information use by 124 humanists and social scientists of a university in Argentina was conducted by De Tiratel and Romanos (2000). They found that majority of the social scientists (77.1 %) do not use bibliographies. They first consult colleagues and then journals, prefer books (47.1 %) than journals (30.4 %), and have a preference for Spanish materials (73.4 %). These social scientists made less use of the library.

Francis (2005) investigated the information-seeking behavior of social science faculty of a university in the West Indies. The study found that the respondents used textbooks (84.6 %), journals (53.8%), monographs (42.%) and conference proceedings (26.9%) for teaching purposes, while they used journals (84.%) conference proceedings (57.7%), conferences (53.8 %), and newsletters/bulletins (38.5 %) for conducting research. The study further revealed that they mostly depended on citations from journals (84.6 %), books (80.8%) and indexing and abstracting tools (42.3%) for identifying retrospective materials and that they preferred to access journals in electronic format.

Although a substantial body of literature exists on information seeking behavior of social scientists no study could be found on information seeking behavior of academic sociologists in developing countries particularly in Sri Lanka.

#### 4. Methodology

In order to obtain a deeper insight into the information seeking behavior and library use of academic sociologists an empirical study was undertaken from September to December 2014. The main research tools were self administered questionnaire and citation analysis of the graduate theses of the targeted group of population. The population of the study consisted of 17 permanent academic staff members in the Department of Sociology. A sampling technique was not applied as the study population was limited. The questionnaire consisted of twenty five (25) structured questions to obtain as much as possible information for drawing a pattern of how academic sociologists act in order gather information to fulfill their needs. Out of seventeen (17) questionnaires distributed by the researcher between the periods of October to December 2014, twelve (12) questionnaires were duly perfected and returned making the overall response rate of 70.5%.

In the second phase of the study, in order to obtain quantitative data, citation analysis of the postgraduate theses of the respondents was administered. There were altogether seven postgraduate theses selected for the study. The graduate level research is the main mile stone of research of academia in universities; therefore information gathering for postgraduate theses is a good indication to study information seeking behavior of a user group in any discipline.

## 5. Data Analysis and Discussion

### 5.1 Results of the Survey

#### 5.1.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

All the respondents comprised permanent academic staff members of the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Out of the total number of the respondents more than half of them were male. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 years to 63 years. However, a half of the respondents were within the age group of 21 to 40 years. According to qualifications, the majority of the respondents had Postgraduate Degrees. As revealed from table 1, more than sixty five percent of the respondents were senior lecturers and professors.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

	Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	7	58
	Female	5	42
Age	21 to 30 years	3	25
	31 to 40 years	3	25
	41 to 50 years	2	16
	51 to 60 years	2	17
	< 60 years	2	17
Highest Qualification Obtained	Bachelor	5	42
	Master	5	42
	PhD	2	16
Designation	Lecturer	5	42
	Senior Lecturer	5	42
	Professor	2	16

#### 5.1.2 Purpose of Information Seeking

Purpose of seeking information has high validity in doing research on information seeking behavior. The

purpose is a guiding tool to select different types of information. The participants of the survey were asked to indicate the purpose of information seeking according to their choice in the list of purposes given in the questionnaire. The results revealed that most of the respondents (75%) seek information to prepare teaching materials i.e. lecture notes. (Table 2) The second purpose of seeking information by academic sociologists is to update their knowledge with 67% of respondents. The gathering of information for research purposes has been the next in line 58% of respondents. Only three respondents (25%) have indicated that they seek information for writing and presenting scientific papers. According to these findings dissemination of knowledge through publications by the academic sociologists has been low in comparison with other purposes. Further only one respondent (8%) has indicated that he/she seeks information for guiding researchers in the field of sociology.

**Table 2: Purpose of Information Seeking**

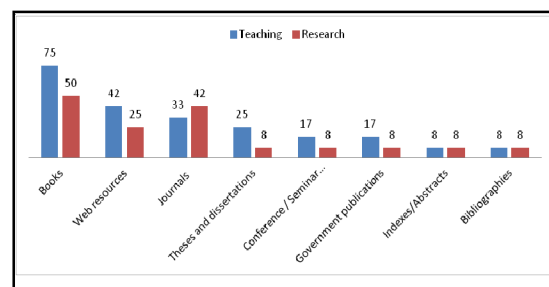
Purposes	Frequency	Percentage
Preparing Teaching Materials	9	75
Update their knowledge	8	67
Research purposes	7	58
Writing and presenting papers	3	25
Guiding researchers	1	08

**5.1.3 Information Sources Used for Teaching and Research Purposes**

Types of information sources used by any user category are a valid indication of the preference and the availability of information sources in different disciplines. The respondents of the present study were asked to indicate information sources such as books, journals, conference papers that they very

often prefer to use to meet the information needs of teaching and research purposes. As revealed in figure 1, printed books are the main information sources used by the academic sociologists in the University of Peradeniya for teaching and research with 75% and 50% respectively.

A similar finding has been drawn from a Jewish study conducted by Bronstein. (2013) Web resources have been identified as the second major information resource used by academic sociologists with 42% respondents and 25% respondents for teaching and research respectively. Conference / seminar papers, theses and dissertations and government publications accounted a low percentage compared to books, journals and web resources.



**Figure 1: Information Sources Used for Teaching and Research Purposes**

**5.1.4 Preferred Information Formats**

A question was directed to the respondents asking them to indicate the preferred format of information from the following list: Printed and electronic, Printed only, Electronic only. The findings revealed that 75% of respondents prefer to use both printed and electronic information formats for their academic work. Of the respondents 17% indicated that they prefer to use printed materials whereas 8% of preferred to use electronic materials only for their work.

### 5.1.5 Preferred Language for Reading

The academic sociologists were asked to indicate the most preferred language that they use seeking information. In Sri Lanka there are three major languages used for speaking and writing i.e. Sinhala, Tamil and English. In general academic staff in the universities is competent in using English language in addition to their mother language and the reason may be that major texts books and other materials are mainly written in English language. The findings revealed that the most preferred language for academic sociologists is English language with 92% (n=11) of respondents and 75% (n=9) of respondents indicated that they preferred Sinhalese as preferred language.

### 5.1.6 Information Seeking Methods

The participants were asked to indicate the methods employed by them to obtain current information in the field of sociology. A check list with following items was given for them to indicate their choice: consult a subject specialist and expert in the field, abstracting and indexed journals, library indexes, publisher's catalogs, browsing through book shelves, conference/seminars/workshops, consult colleagues and consult librarian or reference librarian.

The data revealed that fifty eight percent of the respondents consulted a subject specialist in the field followed by 42% of respondents used abstracting and indexed journals. Twenty five percent of the respondents have indicated that they use library indexes for seeking current information in their respective field. (Table 3)

It is noteworthy that not a single person has indicated the librarian or reference librarian as a source to find current information. The low usage of refer-

ence librarian as a source of information may be due to the fact that academic sociologists are not aware of consulting the librarian for current information. According to the findings it is a necessity to identify and promote the role played by a qualified reference librarian for academic research work within the university setup. The reference librarians role has to be recognized through information literacy programs.

**Table 3: Information Seeking Methods**

Informal channels	Frequency	Percent age
Consult a subject specialist and expert in the field	7	58
Abstracting and indexed journals	5	42
Library indexes	3	25
Publisher's catalogs	1	08
Browsing through book shelves	1	08
Conferences/seminars/workshops	1	08
Consult colleagues	1	08
Consult librarian or reference librarian	0	0

### 5.1.7 Use of E-Resources

E- Resources are becoming a useful information source for academic and research work in universities. University students and teachers prefer to use e-resources for the convenience and currency of the sources. A question was given for the respondents to indicate the different electronic facilities they use which are available in the internet. The data revealed (Table 4) that 92% of respondents use internet facility for academic and research work.

**Table No.4: Use of Electronic Resources and Services**

Electronic services / resources	Frequency	Percent age
Internet Facility	11	92
Electronic Mail facility (E-Mail)	10	83
Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC)	09	75
Electronic Journals	07	58
Library Web pages	03	25

Further the results revealed that 83% of respondents use the internet for e-mail communications. Seventy five percent (75%) of respondents indicated that they use Online Public Access catalog to find out information. Electronic journals are being used by 58% of academic sociologists while 25% of respondents use library web pages to gain information. Some library web pages carry full text documents and it is a single access point to gather information for teaching and research. The findings of the present study show a low usage of the library web pages by the respondents. It can be attributed

to the fact that the library web pages are not properly publicized for the academic community.

### 5.1.8 Use of Journals for Research

The respondents were asked to mention the top five journals that they prefer to use for research purposes. Respondents of the survey were further asked whether the library subscribes to the journals relating to the field of sociology. Sixty two percent (62%) of the respondents have indicated that the library does not subscribe to important journals in sociology. Further the top five journals and response rate were analyzed. According to the analysis 42% of academic sociologists use " Samaja Wimasuma" for their research work. Economic Review published by the People's Bank of Sri Lanka has been selected as the second important journal by the academic sociologists with 33% of respondents. The " Nevedani" and " Pravada" have been selected as the third important journal for the respondents. Lastly the respondents have indicated a foreign journal known as "Man" as an important journal for their work. Out of these five journals " Pravada" and "Man" are not available at the university library. These research findings can be used for future subscriptions of the library.

**Table 5: Most Preferred Journals**

Journal Title	Frequency	Percentage	Local/foreign	Availability in the Library
Samaja Wimasuma	5	42	Local	Available
Economic Review	4	33	Local	Available
Nevedani	3	25	Local	Available
Pravada	3	25	Local	Not Available
Man	2	17	Foreign	Not Available

## 5.2 Results of the Citation Analysis

Citation analysis was conducted to discover the types of information sources cited by the lecturers in their theses and to identify the characteristics of these citations. The data obtained from the citation analysis and the data obtained from the survey were compared to get more comprehensive and in-depth pattern of use by academic sociologists. Seven post-graduate theses of the academic sociologists who work in the Department of Sociology at present and who responded for the questionnaire distributed for this study were examined for this citation analysis. Postgraduate theses are the major research output of the academia.

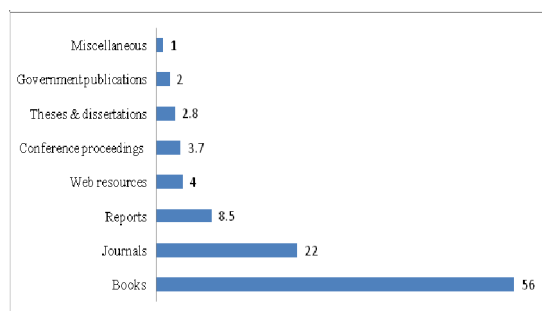
### 5.2.1 Information Sources Used for Research Purposes

According to the citation analysis of the study there were 802 citations in seven theses of the respondents. When analyzing the citations according to the types of information sources it was found that most of the respondents have cited books (56%) followed by journals having 22% of citations. (Table 6)

**Table 6: Citation Analysis According to Types of Information Materials**

S/N	Material type	No. of citations	Percentage
1	Books	449	56
2	Journals	176	22
3	Reports	68	8.5
4	Web resources	32	04
5	Conference proceedings	30	3.7
6	Theses & dissertations	22	2.8
7	Government publications	16	02
8	Miscellaneous	08	01
	Total	802	100

As revealed in Figure 2 the reports have gained 8.5% of citations while web resources have citations of 4% followed by Conference proceedings having 3.7% of citations.



**Figure 2: Citation analysis According to Types of Information Sources**

The results obtained from the citation analysis were matched against the data obtained by the questionnaire of the survey in order to validate and consolidate the facts to be utilized as baseline information for library acquisitions. According to the comparison it is revealed that printed books and printed journals are the major information source for the academic sociologists in the University of Peradeniya. This must be due to the fact that printed books and journals carry a wealth of knowledge for sociologists and they prefer to use print materials. Electronic formats of text books on sociology are limited compared to other disciplines. This finding is further qualified by the citation analysis of print and electronic sources shown in table 7.

**Table 7: Distribution of Citations between Print and Electronic Formats**

Form	No. of citations	Percentage
Print	754	94
Electronic	48	06
Total	802	100



According to table 7, 94% of the total citations are for print materials and only 6% citations are for electronic materials. This finding is contradictory with the survey results as the academic sociologists have indicated that they prefer to use both printed and electronic media. Low use of electronic media must be due the fact that these academic sociologists were unaware of different types of electronic resources available to them through subscribed databases and open access resources.

**5.2.2 Distribution of Citations in Terms of Language**

This study also examines the language of the publications cited in order to find the preferences of language by the academic sociologists. The total number of 802 citations was distributed among 2 different languages as shown in the Table 8.

**Table 8: Language wise Distribution of Citations**

S/N	Language	Frequency	Frequency %
1	English	705	88
2	Sinhalese	97	12
	Total	802	100

Table 8 reveals that the language of citations is predominantly by English while constituting 88% of citations. When the results of citation analysis of literature are compared with survey results still English language gets a highest count. But there are discrepancies in the findings of preferences for Sinhala language, in the survey and the citation analysis. Although 75% of respondents indicate that Sinhala language materials are also important for their work only 12% citations have been included in the literature of postgraduate theses of academic sociologists. This may be due to the fact of non availability of relevant Sinhala publications for teaching and research work of the academia in sociology.

**5.2.3 Most Cited Journals**

From the seven theses 176 citations were found from 67 journal titles and these citations were further analyzed to examine the most cited journals by the academic sociologists. Table 9 shows eight (8) journal titles had the highest number of citations. Most frequently cited journals in the postgraduate theses were checked against the visible index to find out the availability of the titles in the library.

**Table 9 : Most Cited Journals by Academic Sociologists**

	Journal name	No. of citations	Rank	Local/ foreign	Availability in the library
1	Economic Review	19	1	Local	Available
2	World Development	11	2	Foreign	Not available
3	American Sociological Review	07	3	Foreign	Not available
4	Gender and Society	07	3	Foreign	Not available
5	American journal of Sociology	06	4	Foreign	Not available
6	Modern Ceylon studies	06	4	Local	Available
7	Sri Lanka journal of Social Sciences	05	5	Local	Available
8	The journal of Asian studies	05	5	Local	Available

The results were somewhat disturbing as only four titles were available at the university library for the use of academic sociologists at the University of Peradeniya. The most cited journals are ranked as 1, 2, 3 according to the number of citations and it is shown in table 9. The highest number of citations was found in The Economic Review, a Sri Lankan journal followed by World Development, a journal which is an international journal. Both these journals cover a wide array of subjects related to social sciences including political, economical and anthropological literature. According to the Table 9, Ameri-

can Sociological Review and Gender and Society also have indicated as important for research work but they are not available in the library. The citation analysis and the survey data lead to a significant finding of the fact that all foreign journals cited by the respondents were not available in the library. This finding may be a useful indication for future journal subscription.

#### 5.2.4 Materials Age

Understanding the age of the materials cited in the theses will help in identifying whether the sociologists use current or old materials for research purposes. Table 10 shows the percentages of the age of cited materials by academic sociologists in their post-graduate theses.

**Table 10: Age of Cited Materials**

No. of years	No. of citations	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Current year	04	0.5	0.5
1 year old	13	1.6	2.1
2-5 years old	123	15.3	17.4
6-10 years old	176	21.9	39.3
11-20 years old	254	31.7	71.0
21 -30 years old	113	14.1	85.1
31-40 years old	56	7.0	92.1
41-50 years old	27	3.4	95.5
51-100 years old	24	3.0	98.5
More than 100 years old	04	0.5	99.0
Unknown	08	1.0	100.0
Total	802	100.0	

As indicated in the table 10 over seventy percent of cited materials were published within the last 20 years and over eighty percent of materials were published within the last 30 years. The results gave an insight on the academic sociologists' preference for

using materials; generally the trend is for substantially old materials. This may be due to the fact that still the academic sociologists depend on scholarly work of authors in the past.

#### 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study led to the general conclusion that the academic sociologists' information needs are diverse and they use a wide array of information sources for satisfying their information needs. Most of the academic sociologists depend on printed books and journals. The findings of this study established that in spite of access to modern information technology, most of the academic sociologists still prefer to use printed materials and the possible reason for this must be due to lack of knowledge about the availability of electronic resources and their accessibility. It is of prime importance that library literacy sessions have to be conducted regularly for the academia to promote using electronic resources.

In addition to that the library should organize more user awareness seminars to educate the academia as well as the students on current information resources available in the library for them to make use of the existing information resources. Training on information access with hands on practical sessions should be conducted for the faculty staff to improve their searching skills.

The library should develop a user-friendly website with enhanced accessibility along with an Institutional Repository to maximize the use of e-resources. It will help to promote usage of the present e-repository known as the Digital Library in the library webpage of the University of Peradeniya. To meet the user requirements the library should have a comprehensive collection development policy that should make provision to input faculty recommendations and use them for library acquisitions.

The library should subscribe to scholarly journals (local and foreign) and acquire current publications to upgrade the collection. At the same time the library should facilitate to access more electronic based resources and services for meeting user requirements.

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