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INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF PRIVATE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KENYA

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A b s t r a c t

Information seeking behaviour is the collection of actions which people take to identify, seek, evaluate, select and use information to satisfy their information needs. People seek information to enable them to deal with a current need or build their knowledge base. Private school students in Kenya have unique demographic and psychographic attributes defined by their age and geographical contexts. These attributes influence their information needs as well as information seeking behaviour. This study analysed the demographic and psychographic attributes of private school students in Kenya as well as investigated the students' information needs and information seeking behaviour. The study was conducted as a descriptive survey. Data was collected from 103 students using self-administered questionnaires hosted on Google Forms. The findings indicate that the majority of the students used the library at least once a month. Similarly, most of the students used the library to support their class work. The Internet was the most important source of information from which the majority of the students began their information search. Most of the students were disappointed, frustrated or confused while using the library. Nonetheless, they often got the information they needed and perceived the library as useful.

Keywords : Information seeking behaviour, information needs, high school students, Kenya

A. INTRODUCTION

Kingrey (2002) argues that the concept of information seeking is an overarching term acting as an umbrella to many activities. She further explains that although information seeking lies at the heart of information use, defining it is challenging because its meaning varies with context. Korobili, Malliari and Zapounidou (2011) explain that information seeking involves searching and finding information to produce new knowledge. Case (2002) avers that information seeking is a conscious effort people make to acquire information so as to meet a need or bridge a knowledge gap. Information seeking, as a process, entails searching, retrieving, recognising, evaluating and using information to address a need (Kingrey, 2002). It involves making deliberate efforts to locate information for the immediate or future use. Information seeking is perceived as non-linear because it is dynamic (Foster, 2005). According to Kuhlthau (2006), information seeking encompasses a complex interaction

between thoughts, feelings and actions. Kingrey (2002) contends that information seeking includes the cognitive, social and discrete strategies human beings apply to confront uncertainty using information. It goes beyond just having questions for which answers are being sought. It also encompasses developing potential answers to the questions the information seeker needs to answer. In this process, Robinson (2010) argues, information seekers use a complex mix of sources going beyond documents, databases, information repositories to other human beings. According to Boyd (2004), information seeking is a fluid process influenced by availability, credibility and reliability of information sources. According to Shenton (2007), information seeking is an active process which may either succeed or fail.

Information seeking behaviour, on the other hand, is the set of habits exhibited by human beings while seeking information. Ikoja-Odongo and Mostert (2006) argue that information seeking behaviour is exhibited when users make demands on formal and informal information sources and services to satisfy their information needs. Information seeking behaviour encompasses a wide variety of activities which people engage in to seek, identify, evaluate, select and use information in the context of their needs. Kakai, Ikoja-Odongo and Kigongo-Bukenya (2004) explain that information seeking behaviour is what people do to gather information for personal use. The information may also be used to update existing knowledge or develop new knowledge. Korobili, Malliari and Zapounidou (2011) aver that the factors which influence

information seeking behaviour include the discipline of interest, environment, work roles and personal attributes. Heinström (2003) showed that personality traits strongly influence information-seeking behaviour. Wilson (2006) argued that personal needs arising from the role an individual fills in social life are the key motivators for information seeking. Heinström (2000) argues that although some information seeking behaviours may be relatively universal, others are unique to individuals based on their personality and contexts.

The Government of Kenya recognises education as one of the key contributors to national development. According to Muricho and Chang'ach (2013), the Government of Kenya spends 30 percent of its national budget on education. Since independence the goals of education have focused on enhancing national development. Ogola (2010) explains that the Ominde (1964), Gachathi (1976), Kamunge (1988) and Koech (1999) reports emphasise that education must support national development; foster national unity; promote national equality, justice and morality; and inculcate patriotism as well as an appreciation for the national, regional and international concerns. Kenya has changed its education system thrice. According to Wanjohi (2011), the country adopted 7-4-2-3 system of education soon after attaining independence in 1963. The system involved the learners spending seven years in primary schools; four years in ordinary level secondary schools (forms 1 to 4); two years in high schools (forms 5 and 6); and three years in university. Simiyu (2001) argues that this system of education was criticised for being

elitist (too academic) and inadequate in building practical competencies of learners to fit in the job market. In response to these concerns, among others, the 7-4-2-3 system of education was replaced by the 8-4-4 system in 1985. In the 8-4-4 system, the learners take eight years in primary school; four years in secondary school; and four years in university. King and McGrath (2002) opine that the 8-4-4 was adopted with the belief that it would equip the learners with employable skills. This way, school dropouts at all levels would be able to either self-employ or secure employment in the informal sector. In spite of its perceived great potential, the 8-4-4 system has been criticised widely since its inception. Wanjohi (2011) explains that it has been criticised for being broad, expensive and burdensome to the learners and parents alike. A new education system was launched in 2018 to address the limitations experienced with the 8-4-4 system. Dubbed 2-6-3-3-3, the system gives the learners two years of pre-primary school; six years of lower and upper primary school; three years of junior secondary school; three years of senior secondary school; and three years of university education.

Although the government is the main provider of education services in Kenya, there is a significant number of privately owned schools at all levels in the country. This study was based at The Aga Khan Academy Mombasa which is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School. The school is the first in the network of Aga Khan Academies established by His Highness the Aga Khan in 2003 in Mombasa, Kenya. The IB system is structured into three levels: 1) Primary Years Programme: years 1–5; 2) Middle Years Programme: years 6–10; and 3) Diploma Programme: years 11–12. The Aga Khan Academy Mombasa also hosts a Professional Development Centre for the advancement of teachers.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Siegler (1998) explains that children think differently from adults. According to Cooper (2002), this is the reason why information systems designed for adults do not match children's information seeking behaviour. Several studies on the information seeking behaviour of diverse categories of young people have been conducted. Shenton and Hay-Gibson (2011) conducted a study on the information seeking behaviour of children and young people between the ages of 4 and 18 years. They concluded that children and young people generally commence their information seeking as a response to external stimuli. These stimuli make the youngsters aware of their information inadequacies which trigger appropriate information seeking behaviour. They add, however, that internal stimuli such as health conditions may also expose information gaps among young people which they may seek to fill using specific behaviour. The authors also emphasise that sometimes youngsters may not respond to their information needs immediately because of inadequate information literacy skills.

It is not easy to detect gaps in the information literacy skills of young people because as Pickard (2004) as well as Jackson and Banwell (2005) explain, they usually overestimate their information literacy skills. Harris (2008)

concurs and states that youngsters consume more digital information because they lack requisite information literacy skills to conduct advanced information searches. Chung and Neuman (2007:1514) argue that young people perceive information seeking to be "a simple type-and-click operation". Consequently, their information seeking strategies tend to be serendipitous and exploratory in nature. According to Heinström (2006), there are two categories of child information seekers. On the one hand are those who are motivated extrinsically and seek information which nominally meets their immediate needs. On the other hand are those who are motivated intrinsically and seek information so as to learn. Some studies (Barrett, 2005; Branch, 2003a; Spyridakis, Wei & Kolko, 2003) claim that young information tend to rely more on intermediaries such as librarians, friends or colleagues to seek and find information. This reliance on intermediaries is due to lack of confidence in personal information seeking ability. According to Belkin et al. (1993), children oscillate between multiple information seeking strategies in single information searching episodes. Chang (1997) observed that children constantly explore information resources as they discover new knowledge. She described the browsing exhibited by children as being characterised by small jumps. Solomon (1994) examined children's information retrieval behaviour when using an online public access catalogue (OPAC) and observed that children used multiple access points interchangeably. Similar observations were made by Bilal (2001), Fidel et al. (1999), Hirsh (1999) and Watson (1998).

Hultgren and Limberg (2003) investigated the relationship between information seeking and use and learning in a school environment. Their findings showed a strong relationship between the understanding school children have of information seeking behaviour and their learning outcomes. Lorenzen (2002) examined how high school students used the World Wide Web for research and concluded that students were poor at evaluating the credibility of information in cyberspace. Another study by Shenton (2004) concluded that school children demonstrated mechanical information seeking behaviour where they used single information sources. Shenton and Dixon (2003) argued that youngsters tended to apply least effort in information seeking. They, thus, simplified their information seeking tasks thereby ending up with inadequate information. This information seeking behaviour, as Weiler (2005) explains, was prevalent because most youngsters do not want to learn by reading. Branch (2003b) concurred and explained that students tend to use the same search terms found in their assignments and did not read long articles carefully.

Yitzhaki and Bibi (2001) investigated the information seeking patterns of 12th grade students in Israel. They found that developing ICT skills and access to the Internet at home improved students' information seeking behaviour. They also found that the school library was the most-visited source of information followed by academic, public and home libraries albeit a considerable proportion of the respondents reported no or few visits only. Ybara et al. (2008) investigated the health information seeking

behaviour of adolescents in Uganda. They found that four in five adolescents (81%) turned to parents, teachers, and other adults while around half (56%) read a book, went to the library or turned to siblings and friends for information about health and disease. More than one in three (38%) indicated that they used the computer and Internet to search for health information. They also found that older respondents tended to rely upon siblings and friends for all types of health questions while younger ones were significantly more likely to turn to parents, teachers, and other adults for their questions about sexual health.

It is evident from literature review that several studies have been conducted to investigate the information needs of teenagers; the sources of information which they prefer and/or use; the perceptions of the role of the library in teenage information universe; the role of librarians in teenage information seeking and use; the information seeking strategies used by teenagers; as well as how the youth use information. However, the authors found only three studies focusing on various aspects of information seeking, access and use by secondary school students in Kenya. Rukwaro (2011) studied the provision of and access to career information by secondary school girls in Kenya. She found that career development information available to secondary school girls in Kenya was neither comprehensive nor specific while the resources were either too few and out of date. In an earlier study, Rukwaro and Khayesi (2004) analysed girls' access to information for education and development in Kenya. They found that girls in secondary schools in Kenya seek information on course content, application forms, fees schedules, institutions that offer certain courses, subject combinations, employment opportunities, and future prospects. They concluded that most students are ill-informed about job markets, examination requirements, and other requirements for successful studies. Another study by Ndiku (2014) investigated the information needs of school children in urban slums in Kenya. The findings of the study revealed that the information needs of school children in slums in Nairobi are varied and that they use a variety of information sources but rely mainly on teachers, parents, media and their peers for information. She added that most schools in slums in Nairobi do not have libraries and the few existing information materials are stored in classrooms and staff rooms.

From the foregoing, it is evident that no study has been conducted to assess the information seeking behaviour of students in private schools in Kenya. As the number of private schools in the country increases so is the number of students enrolled in them. Since most private schools have libraries, it is important to investigate the extent to which they meet the information needs of their users by understanding and responding to their information seeking behaviour through customised information services and resources. This study analysed the demographic and psychographic attributes of students in private schools in Kenya as well as investigated the students' information needs and information seeking behaviour. The authors also propose a library service model which can closely suit the students' information needs and information seeking behaviour.

C. METHOD

The study was conducted as a descriptive survey. According to Dulock (1993), a descriptive study accurately and systematically describes the characteristics of a population or phenomenon of interest. The authors specifically used a descriptive survey to enable them to describe information seeking preferences, practices, and characteristics amongst students in private secondary schools in Kenya. One private school, The Aga Khan Academy Mombasa served as the case study for this research. The case was selected through information-oriented purposive sampling. The researchers wished to study a school with a functional library. The Aga Khan Mombasa Academy has a good library which won the "Library of the Year Award" in the schools category in 2012. The award was conferred by the Kenya Library Association in recognition of excellence in the provision of library services. Primary data was collected online from students using self-administered questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. The questionnaire used closed-ended questions because the students, who were the respondents, are more comfortable with selecting answers from multiple choices. Similarly, open-ended questions were suitable because the students are armature library users and needed a greater level of guidance than mature library users. The authors targeted students in years 8 to 12 because they are old enough to use the library independently. There were 300 students in this category at the time of research. This served as the target population of the study. Using a calculator on SurveyMonkey pegged at 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the sample size for the study was computed to be 169. Simple random sampling was used to select actual respondents who were then invited to participate in the study through email. The data was analysed and presented using descriptive statistics.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the 169 invitations sent, a total of 103 responses, representing 61%, were received and analysed. The majority (60.2%) were female. In terms of age, the majority (71.6%) were between 13 and 15 years of age. A sizable number (24.5%) were aged between 16 and 18 years of age. Thus the majority (96.1%) were between 13 and 18 years of age while the rest were above 18 years. According to the school administration, the learners are curious, adventurous, proactive, analytical, confident, articulate, exposed to cultures beyond their local contexts, open-minded, independent, and emotionally balanced. These attributes are in sharp contrast with their counterparts in public schools who are socialised to be timid, dependent, narrow-minded, and less creative due to inflexible environments.

1. Usage of the Library

As indicated in Figure 1, the majority (44.7%) of the respondents indicated that they used the library daily while 35% indicated that they used the library at least once a week. This implies that 79.7% of the respondents used the library every week. 10.7% used the library at least once every fortnight while 5.8% used the library at least once in a month. This also indicates that 16.5% of the students used the library monthly. This indicates

that a total of 96% of the respondents used the library on a monthly basis. Three (3) respondents used the library at least once in a term while one respondent reported not using the library at all. The findings indicate a high level of library usage. According to Ashioya (2012), the usage of school libraries is influenced by the state of the library physical space and collection; availability of a professional librarian managing the library and offering information literacy services; open-minded teachers giving assignments requiring the use of the library for personal research and information collection; and a curriculum which left space in the timetable for students to visit and use the library. All these factors were present at case study. Therefore, the high level of library can be attributed to them.
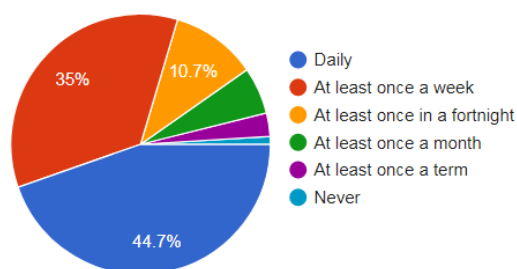
Figure 1
Termly Library Usage

2. Information Needs

The respondents were asked to indicate their information needs and rank the same in terms of their importance on a scale of 1-5 where 1 was the most important and 5 was least important. The findings indicate that 36 of the respondents indicated that information used for class work was the most important; 19 indicated general information as most important; 14 indicated information on current awareness while another 14 indicated that information on entertainment and co-curricular activities was most important to them. These findings indicate that the most important information need of the students revolved around class work. This is natural because they are expected to use the school library to support their educational activities. Given that some students considered general information, current awareness and entertainment as more important than class work reflects the flexible nature of the students. It also corroborates the perception of the learners as concerned about the balance between educational and co-curricular activities. These findings may also imply that the students have multiple information sources which gratify diverse needs going beyond education. Consequently, a library which stands a high chance of meeting their needs should attend to this diversity of needs through its physical space, collection and overall services.
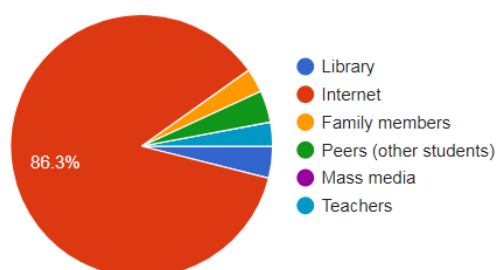
3. Sources of Information

The respondents were asked to indicate their information sources and rank the same in terms of their importance on a scale of 1-5 where 1 was the most important and 5 was least important. The findings indicate that the source of information ranked by the majority (51 respondents) as most important is the Internet. The other

information sources were ranked as most important as follows: teachers (32 respondents); family members (17 respondents); mass media (13); library (12); and peers, that is, other students (10 respondents). As shown in Figure 2, the findings also revealed that the majority (86.3%) of the respondents begin their search for information on the Internet; 3.9% with the library and peers; while 2.9% with family members and peers. No respondent began information search using mass media.

The majority (43) of the respondents indicated the Internet as their most important information resource. The other information resources were ranked as most important as follows: past papers or sample examinations (25); course text or textbooks (22); audio visual resources (17); newspapers and magazines (14); and reference books (14).

Figure 2
Preferred Information Sources

These findings indicate a growing interest in techno-based sources more than the traditional resources. Consequently, librarians need to design and deploy services and information sources anchored on the Internet and related technologies as a means of taking the library where the users are already hanging out. Such sources are likely to be more interactive, accessible, convenient, customisable and current than their physical counterparts. To remain relevant, school libraries should invest on technological infrastructure, bandwidth, training and e-resources. Similarly, they should simplify their services to replicate the user experience offered by alternative information sources such as search engines and online databases. In short, they must make information easy for

users to discover, access, use and share.

4. Feeling while Using the Library

The respondents were asked to indicate the feelings they often experience while using the library and rank them in terms of their seriousness on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is the most serious while 5 was the least serious. The findings indicate that the feeling listed by the majority (23) of the respondents as most serious was "disappointed". The other feelings ranked as most serious were as follows: frustrated (22); confused (20); satisfied (20); excited (16); fatigued (16); and confident (12). These findings indicate that most of the students were not happy using the library. The findings imply that most of the users lack the capacity to use the library

services and resources. There is need to reengineer school library services to fit them as closely as possible to the information needs and technical capacity of the students. Similarly, the librarians should roll out comprehensive capacity strengthening programmes to equip the students to use the libraries competently. As more students seek to self-serve, librarians should take the role of facilitators and support the students to make the best use of the library individually.

5. Frequency of Getting Needed Information

As shown in Figure 3, the majority (72.5%) often got the information they needed; 16.7% always got the information they needed; and 10.8% rarely got the information they needed. It was noteworthy that no respondent indicated that they never got the information they needed. These findings indicate that all respondents somehow got the information they need. This implies that the case library has what the students need. Therefore, the factor mitigating the frequency with which the students were getting the needed information is most likely external to the library. It is most likely tied to the capacity of the students to use the library's bibliographic tools to search, identify, locate and use the available information services and resources. The students will be discouraged to come to the library if the probability of getting the information they need is low.

6. Important Features of the Library

The majority (42) of the respondents identified ICT resources such as the Internet as most important to them. The other features were ranked as most important as follows: physical library space (35); information resources (30); and information services (23). Of the physical library components, the majority (44) of the respondents ranked private reading spaces as most important. The other components were ranked as most important by respondents as follows: eating spaces (32); collaboration or meeting spaces (29); incubation or maker's spaces (29); and entertainment spaces and games (28). The diversity of features considered as most important by the students indicates a change in the perception of school libraries and their role in meeting information needs of users. These features point to a flexible, liberal and comfortable physical and virtual learning spaces supported by knowledgeable and personable libraries. It is no longer important to merely set aside any space as a library or stock it. There are more factors which will influence the usage of school library facilities in the 21st Century. Evidently, the students will not only come to library to read but also to interact with other users, relax and create knowledge. Progressive school libraries must make provisions for these needs.
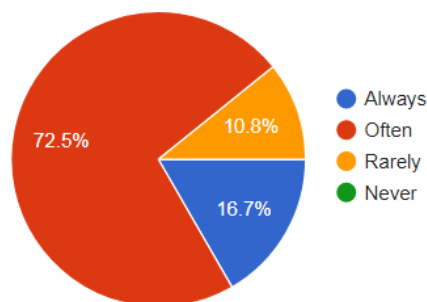
Figure 3
Frequency of Finding Information Needed

7. Attributes of the Librarians

The majority (44) of the respondents were of the view that school librarians should be patient (listening to the users without interrupting them). The other attributes of school librarians considered as most important were as follows: committed (40); happy to serve (38); personable or approachable (35); knowledgeable (34); and smart grooming (34). It is evident from these findings that the students care less about the technical capacity of their librarians. Conversely, they are more interested in the social and interpersonal competencies. This is perhaps the case because there are tonnes of information in alternative information sources exemplified by the Internet. Library users will only be drawn to libraries which have librarians who will give more than what the Internet offers. These findings also simply that the training of librarians should take the development of social and interpersonal skills more seriously.

8. Helpfulness of the Library

Overall, 31.7% were of the view that the library was very helpful to them while 42.6% said it was helpful. Therefore, the majority (74.3%) found the library helpful. 24.8% of the respondents described the library as satisfactory while one (1) respondent did not find it helpful at all. Figure 4 presents these findings. These findings imply nearly all the students found their school library helpful. This is a vote of confidence for school libraries in the face of increasing competition from less formal information sources. The librarians should build on this positive perception to enhance their relevance to their user community.
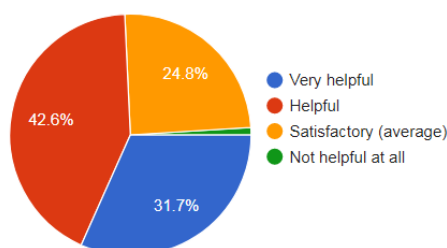
Figure 4
Overall Helfulness of the Library

E. CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings indicate that the majority of the students used the library at least once a month. Similarly, most of the students used the library to support their class work. The Internet was the most important source of information from which the majority of the students began their information search. Most of the students were disappointed, frustrated or confused while using the library. Nonetheless, they often got the information they need. They want a librarian who is patient and can listen without interrupting them. Overall, the majority of the students found the library helpful in meeting their information needs. The librarians should increase their relevance by reengineering the library services, spaces and resources in order to align them closely to the needs, interests and contexts of their users.

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