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*Students' Information Behaviour and the Changing Role
of Academic Libraries in the Information Society*

-SUMMARY-

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Introduction

The profound transformations generated by the development of information and communication technologies have led to the emergence of a new socio-economic and cultural paradigm known as the information society. In this context, information is no longer merely an auxiliary resource, but becomes a structural factor in social, economic, and educational organization, decisively influencing the ways in which individuals interact, learn, and produce knowledge. The expansion of digital infrastructures and the proliferation of online platforms have resulted in an exponential increase in the volume of available information and have generated an environment characterized by high accessibility, but also by epistemic complexity and uncertainty.

This evolution has been accompanied by the emergence of the concept of the knowledge-based society, which shifts the focus from the mere availability of information to the ability to interpret, evaluate, and integrate it into processes of learning and innovation. Within this framework, information and digital competences become essential for active participation in academic and social life, while educational institutions are called upon to play a central role in their development. However, the literature highlights a number of persistent dysfunctions, showing that access to information is not automatically accompanied by its effective and critical use.

These dysfunctions include difficulties in assessing the credibility of sources, the tendency to privilege quickly accessible information over scientifically validated information, as well as increased vulnerability to disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. These phenomena are subsumed under the concept of pathologies of the information society and reflect the structural tension between information abundance and the limited capacity for processing and critical interpretation. At the same time, the development of filtering algorithms and content personalization contributes to the formation of fragmented information environments, in which users are predominantly exposed to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs.

In this complex context, academic libraries are redefining their role and moving from the traditional collection-centred model to a model oriented towards access, services, and educational support. These institutions are no longer merely spaces for the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, but become active actors in the development of information competences, in facilitating access to digital resources, and in supporting learning and research

processes. Moreover, academic libraries are strategically positioned within the information ecosystem and have the potential to mediate the relationship between users and the complexity of the digital environment, thereby contributing to the development of critical thinking and the responsible use of information.

The central issue of the present research derives from the need to understand how students interact with information in the contemporary digital environment and, in particular, the role that academic libraries play in shaping this information behaviour. Although academic resources and digital infrastructures are widely available, their use often remains limited, being replaced by a predominant reliance on general search engines and informal sources of information. This reality raises fundamental questions regarding the effectiveness of information literacy strategies and the capacity of academic institutions to integrate these competences into the educational process.

This issue is also supported by empirical observations resulting from my own professional experience accumulated within the “Lucian Blaga” Central University Library of Cluj-Napoca, over more than 25 years of activity in the field of information services and research support. This experience has revealed a constant tendency towards a decrease in the interest shown by students and teaching staff in library services and suggests the existence of a gap between the institutional offer and users’ information practices. This evolution raises fundamental questions regarding the current relevance of academic libraries and their capacity to respond to the needs of a profoundly digitalized generation.

Nevertheless, the literature does not provide a sufficiently integrated analysis of the relationship between students’ information behaviour, information competences, and the concrete role of academic libraries in the current digital context, especially within the Romanian academic environment.

The aim of the thesis is to analyse the role of academic libraries in the context of the information society and to investigate the ways in which they contribute to the development of students’ information behaviour. In this regard, the research seeks to highlight the relationship between access to information, information competences, and the actual practices of information use, as well as to identify the factors that influence these processes. The thesis also aims to analyse the ethical and social implications of information use in the digital environment, with an emphasis on the challenges generated by disinformation, algorithms, and artificial

intelligence. Thus, the thesis contributes to the development of the field through an integrated approach to information behaviour, correlated with the institutional and technological dimensions of the academic environment. Its contributions concern both the theoretical level, through the articulation of an interdisciplinary conceptual framework, and the empirical level, through the analysis of students' information behaviour in a Romanian university context and the identification of relevant patterns for the development of academic library services.

From a theoretical perspective, the research is based on an interdisciplinary framework that integrates concepts from information science, communication studies, and social informatics. This approach enables a complex understanding of the phenomena analysed, highlighting the interdependence between the technological, social, and cultural dimensions of information. The concept of information behaviour is used as the central analytical tool and is correlated with notions such as information literacy, digital culture, and information ethics.

Methodology

Methodologically, the thesis adopts an empirical approach based on the analysis of data collected through a questionnaire administered to students. This method makes it possible to identify patterns of information behaviour, assess the level of information competences, and analyse the relationships between relevant variables. The results obtained are interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, offering an integrated perspective on the ways in which students navigate the contemporary information environment. The research results may provide a basis for the development of institutional strategies aimed at strengthening information literacy and optimizing academic library services in accordance with users' real needs.

The research has a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional, and correlational design, with an exploratory-explanatory character. Its main purpose is to identify patterns of information-seeking behaviour and the factors that influence this process, in correlation with individual, academic, and contextual variables. The study is based on an integrated theoretical framework that combines Wilson's model of information behaviour, Urquhart and Rowley's contextual model, and the SCONUL framework of information literacy.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to a sample of 305 students from different fields of study. The instrument investigates aspects such as the use of information sources, the perceived level of information competences, the influence of teaching

staff, and the role of the library. The statistical analysis uses descriptive and correlational methods to test the hypotheses regarding the relationships between variables.

The expected results aim both to validate theoretical models in a local context and to identify specific patterns of information behaviour. The chapter also highlights the methodological limitations of the research, such as its cross-sectional character, the use of self-reporting, and non-probability sampling. Overall, the study provides an empirical basis for optimizing academic library services and developing students' information competences.

Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis reflects a logical progression from the theoretical foundation to the empirical analysis and interpretation of the results. The first chapter examines the evolution of academic libraries from the earliest forms of knowledge organization, from Antiquity to the contemporary academic library. It presents the historical origins of libraries, their role in the preservation and transmission of knowledge, and their development alongside the emergence of medieval and modern universities. The chapter highlights the fact that the academic library developed in close connection with higher education institutions and with the political, cultural, and technological transformations of society.

Special attention is given to the evolution of academic libraries in Romania, which were established later than their Western counterparts, in the context of the modernization of higher education in the second half of the nineteenth century. The stages of development, centralization, ideologization and, subsequently, democratization and digitalization of these institutions are highlighted. The chapter then analyses the traditional functions of academic libraries - the preservation of knowledge, access to information, support for learning and research, and the provision of study spaces - and shows how these have been transformed in the digital age. At the same time, it presents the chronology of the evolution from Library 1.0 to Library 5.0 and emphasizes the transition from the traditional library, centred on physical collections, to the intelligent, adaptive, and user-oriented library, in which digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and service personalization play an essential role.

Chapter 2 analyses the academic library in the context of the information society and highlights the structural transformations generated by the centrality of information, the development of digital technologies, and the expansion of communication infrastructures. It

presents the defining characteristics of the information society, such as the knowledge-based economy, the importance of human capital and digital competences, as well as the role of information policies and technological infrastructure in the organization of social and academic life.

The chapter shows that, although Romania benefits from a competitive digital infrastructure, significant gaps persist in terms of digital competences and the effective use of digital services, which justifies the role of academic libraries as support institutions for information inclusion and competence development. In this context, the main pathologies of the information society are also discussed, such as information poverty, the digital divide, information overload, disinformation, and digital surveillance. All these have direct implications for the way information is accessed and evaluated.

Another important focus of the chapter is the analysis of the legal and ethical framework of information. Topics such as intellectual property, freedom of information, personal data protection, and information ethics are addressed, and it is emphasized that the academic library operates within a complex normative and axiological space, in which access to information must be balanced with respect for confidentiality, copyright, and information equity.

Finally, the chapter examines the implications of artificial intelligence for libraries and highlights both its potential for service development and the ethical risks associated with algorithmic bias, opacity, and digital surveillance. The general conclusion is that the academic library does not lose its relevance in the information society, but rather reconfigures its role and becomes a strategic actor in mediating the relationship between technology, information, and the academic community.

On this basis, Chapter 3 analyses the digital transformation of academic libraries and highlights the ways in which technological developments have redefined their structures, services, and institutional roles. The digitization of resources, the development of scientific databases, the emergence of electronic platforms, and the integration of new information technologies have led to a shift from a traditional model centred on physical collections to a model oriented towards access, digital services, and user experience. The chapter emphasizes that this transformation is not merely technological, but also involves significant organizational and professional changes.

The role of the librarian evolves from that of collection manager to facilitator of access to information, trainer in information competences, and partner in the research and educational process. In this context, concepts such as the digital library, the hybrid library, and emerging models such as Library 4.0 and Library 5.0 are analysed, characterized by the integration of artificial intelligence, data analysis, and personalized services (Tîrziman, 2018).

An important emphasis is placed on user experience and on the need to adapt services to the real needs of the academic community. The importance of user experience (UX) principles, digital accessibility, and user-centred design in the development of library services is highlighted. At the same time, the challenges associated with digital transformation are discussed, such as dependence on commercial providers, financial constraints, the need to develop staff digital competences, and risks related to data confidentiality.

The chapter concludes that digital transformation cannot be reduced to the adoption of new technologies, but entails a paradigm shift at the institutional level, in which the library becomes an active actor in the digital academic ecosystem. By integrating technology with users' needs and professional values, the academic library strengthens its role as an essential knowledge infrastructure and as a mediator between information, technology, and the academic community.

Chapter 4 marks the transition from institutional analysis to user-oriented analysis by providing the theoretical foundation of information behaviour, which constitutes the basis for the subsequent empirical investigation. Information behaviour is analysed from the user's perspective, highlighting the ways in which individuals seek, select, use, and evaluate information according to their needs. In the context of the information society, this behaviour becomes essential for the relevance of academic libraries, as the focus shifts from the institution to the user and their information practices.

The study of information behaviour has evolved from a system-centred approach, focused on the organization and retrieval of documents, to a user-oriented approach that integrates cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. The concept includes both intentional information seeking and passive interactions with information and is influenced by cognitive, contextual, technological, and individual factors. Within this framework, essential concepts are delineated, such as information need, information seeking, information use and dissemination, as well as the distinction between information behaviour and information practices. A central

role is played by information literacy, defined as the set of competences necessary for identifying, evaluating, and effectively using information. The evolution of this concept reflects the shift from an approach based on technical skills to a constructivist one, which emphasizes critical thinking and the understanding of knowledge production processes.

The chapter presents the main theoretical models of information behaviour: descriptive models (Ellis), process models (Kuhlthau), cognitive models (Belkin), and integrative models (Wilson), as well as constructivist approaches (Dervin, Savolainen). These models highlight the complex, iterative, and contextual character of information behaviour, without offering a single unified explanation, but rather complementary analytical frameworks.

At the end of the chapter, the research methods used in the study of information behaviour are discussed, ranging from quantitative surveys to qualitative and interdisciplinary methods, as well as the diversity of user types and information styles. The chapter thus prepares the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis of students' information behaviour in the context of the use of digital resources and academic library services.

Chapter 5 develops the research design and ensures the correlation between the theoretical framework and the empirical dimension through the formulation of hypotheses, the operationalization of variables, and the definition of the methodology for data collection and analysis. The chapter analyses students' information behaviour in the context of academic libraries and uses Babeş-Bolyai University as a case study. In the context of accelerated digitalization and the diversification of information sources, academic libraries are expanding their role, becoming active actors in supporting the educational and research process. Thus, investigating the ways in which students seek, evaluate, and use information becomes essential for adapting library services to users' real needs.

Chapter 6 presents, analyses, and interprets the research results concerning information behaviour and information culture among students at Babeş-Bolyai University. Based on the data obtained through the questionnaire, the chapter highlights both the socio-demographic and educational characteristics of the investigated sample and the main patterns of information seeking, selection, and use in the academic context. At the same time, the chapter examines the relationships between students' information practices and a series of individual, academic, and pedagogical variables, with a view to testing the research hypotheses and outlining an overall picture of how students perceive their own information competences. Through the analysis of

the results and the examination of the relationships between the investigated variables, this section provides the empirical foundation necessary for formulating the general conclusions of the thesis.

Finally, Chapter 7 synthesizes the research results regarding students' information behaviour in the context of academic libraries, highlighting its multidimensional character and its dependence on the interaction between information infrastructure, information competences, and the pedagogical environment. The results show that, although the digital infrastructure provides adequate conditions for access to resources, their effective use is limited by the level of information competences and by insufficiently developed search strategies. The existence of a gap between the availability of resources and students' capacity to use them critically and systematically is also noted.

The research contributes to the development of the field both at the theoretical level, through the integration of established models of information behaviour, and at the methodological and empirical levels, through the proposal of an analytical instrument applied in a Romanian university context. At the same time, institutional recommendations are formulated with a view to strengthening the role of the academic library as an active partner in the educational process, especially through the development of collaboration between librarians and teaching staff and through the integration of information literacy into the curriculum.

An important emphasis is placed on the need to redesign library services from the perspective of user experience (UX), in order to reduce the gap between institutional structure and actual information-seeking behaviours. In this regard, the adoption of user-centred approaches based on testing, feedback, and continuous adaptation is recommended.

The chapter also highlights the limitations of the research, such as the size and structure of the sample and the cross-sectional nature of the analysis, and outlines future research directions, including the development of longitudinal studies and the analysis of the impact of artificial intelligence on information behaviour.

Conclusions

Through the proposed approach, the thesis contributes to the development of an integrated perspective on the relationship between users, technology, and information

institutions, highlighting the essential role of academic libraries in supporting a knowledge-based society. In a context marked by information complexity and epistemic uncertainty, the capacity of these institutions to promote critical thinking, information equity, and the responsible use of information becomes a central element of academic and social development.

Keywords: information society; information behaviour; information literacy; digital culture; communication; academic libraries

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