

Information for Inspiration: Understanding Information-Seeking Behaviour and Library Usage of Students at the Hong Kong Design Institute

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The process of information- and inspiration-seeking behaviour amongst artists and designers often involve direct observation, note-taking, collecting materials and image samples, recognising styles, analysing movements, patterns, textures, as well as experimenting with different materials and techniques. They also rely heavily on having access to a variety of visual resources, both physical and digital, during the process of inspiration-seeking. However, there have been few studies on how art and design students look for and use information in the digital age, especially in the context of the library. This paper reports on an empirical study of the inspiration-seeking process and other information-related behaviour of students at the Hong Kong Design Institute (HKDI). An online questionnaire was created to ask the HKDI students specific questions: the types of library preferred; students' comfort level with the HKDI Library; student respondents' information needs; and their preferred sources for inspiration. They were also asked which media and venues they looked to for information that was important to their creative process. A total of 327 current students at the HKDI completed the survey. The research findings suggest that information-seeking behaviour of the art and design students was reflective of the fluid and creative nature of the art and design domain. They were regular users of traditional printed resources as well as the physical libraries. They also placed heavy reliance on the Internet and a variety of social networks when it came to inspiration-seeking. Inspiration was found from a very diverse and 'idiosyncratic' set of sources; often via accidental discovery. The students' status as emergent practitioners also suggested a strong need for career advice and interactions with peers practicing in the art and design field.

Keywords: information; information behaviour; information-seeking; art and design students; Hong Kong Design Institute Library; library use; social networking

Introduction

Artists need information about other artists and their work, art movements, art forms, iconography and criticism. Most characteristic is their need for images, especially color images, usually very specific ones. (Challener, 1999, p. 10)

Information behaviour and practices amongst art and design students have been studied far less than students in many other academic disciplines. For the sake of providing better and more appropriate library services, art and design librarians have an obligation to their institution and users to find out more about their users' unique information needs. The Hong Kong Design Institute (HKDI) is one of the higher education institutes under the Vocational Training Council of Hong Kong, offering professional studies in visual arts and design that range from short certificate courses to degree programs. The studio-based

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programs are based on six subject specialisations: digital animation; digital filmmaking; digital photography; interactive media; product design and visual communication. The curriculum is based on creativity, ideas, innovation, exploration and development of professional skills. Thus, it places more emphasis on the visual studio practices than the conceptual text-based curriculum. As of January 2015, the HKDI has about 7000 students. The HKDI Library has one single floor with an area of 2800 square metres, a collection of 80,000 items and 260 workstations.

Aims of the study

With reference to their artistic and creative endeavours, art and design students may differ drastically in their information needs and library use, when compared to students of other academic disciplines. In fact, the information-related behaviour of art and design practitioners has rarely been examined explicitly or systematically. For this reason, their use of libraries and their inspiration-seeking process is often described as an 'enigma' by many library and information science (LIS) professionals. As highlighted by Mason (2009), artists traditionally possess sophisticated skills in creative, critical and analytical thinking. Investigating the ways these creative and intellectual skills are translated into information behaviour is likely to be of great benefit to the LIS community. Cowan (2004) notes these creative and visually-oriented users may not have the same information needs or look for library materials according to the same logic as other users, which might result in an entirely different approach to using the library space, its services and collection. In addition to understanding what their users want, art and design librarians must also understand how and where they find their desired information and inspiration for their creative endeavours. This paper reports on an investigation into the information needs and information-seeking practices of students at the HKDI, in order to improve the library services to this group. The main aims of the study were to determine: if the participants used the HKDI Library, as well as the other libraries and/or art archives in Hong Kong; to what extent they used the libraries; and what information they sought there. A better understanding of the thinking and problem-solving process amongst these art and design students could help LIS professionals develop more appropriate and better services, collections, facility planning, and visual literacy instruction to cater to their needs.

Literature review

Studies of information behaviour and practices amongst designers and studio artists are rare. Existing studies have focused mainly on students and faculties of studio art or art history in North American and United Kingdom, rather than on their counterparts in Asia, and are therefore likely to show differences in behaviours. As noted by Hason (2009), artists in general are considered financially poor. Unlike other well-established professionals, for example, lawyers and medical doctors, most art and design practitioners would not pay for the products or services available from subscription databases. In addition, students' status as emerging practitioners implied that their information behaviour and library use were governed greatly by financial factors (Hason, 2009).

According to McCleskey (2010, p. 305), 'libraries supporting the art and design disciplines are as diverse and distinctive themselves. These libraries contain documentation of humankind, its art and artists . . . they are a source of learning, research and inspiration.' As described by Pacey (1985, p. 35), 'art students use libraries as reservoirs of images and visual information'. In a study carried out by Challener (1999), 11

artists and 16 art historians at Kent State University were interviewed to examine their information needs and types of resources used. The study findings indicated that they visited libraries frequently, and would usually use more than one single library. Furthermore, over half of each group reported to have their own personal art libraries. As explained by Downey (1993), artists use books for two primary reasons: to obtain technical information and to find inspiration. While searching for inspiration, artists do not just limit themselves to printed books about art. At the same time, using books does not necessarily mean that they have to use libraries. Meanwhile, other studies identified a need by artists and art students for a wide range of formats and materials, including text, images (in the form of printed art books and magazines), as well as other multimedia forms; but a limitation in the value of traditional library services and the printed collection. The main limitation relates to the fact that traditional library services and the printed collection were unable to fulfil all the information and inspiration needs of their art and design users, as these needs might differ from the average library users (Bennett, 2006; Gregory, 2007; Hemmig, 2009; Reed & Tanner, 2001; Visick, Hendrickson, & Bowan, 2006). According to (Bennett, 2006, p. 38), for these creatively-minded users inspiration was found from a range of very diverse sources in various formats, and often via ‘serendipitous’ means – that is, seeking items that ‘foster original observation through accidental discovery’.

Teague (1987, p. 101), described the information needs of designers as either ‘expansive’ in nature, ‘information which stimulates the generation of visual imagery’ or ‘contractive’, ‘information which defines the design parameters of a particular project regardless of whether this information is internally imposed’. As explained by Teague (1987, p. 101), it is the ‘expansive data’, finding the information to inspire creativity, that drives the need for direct observation of the original objects and the excitement derived from accidental discovery of information/inspiration, which bewilder many LIS professionals. Art and design students are also referred to as ‘visual and kinesthetic learners’ (Wilson & McCarthy, 2010, p. 185). As described by Wilson & McCarthy (2010),

visual and kinesthetic learners retrieve information via screens, but also via physical engagement with objects... Our students want to touch images, move their hands over the text, and physically engage with ideas. This unique learning style requires a particular approach that addresses visual, tactile and multimodal aspects (2010, 185).

Other earlier studies indicated a widespread agreement that such artistic and creatively-minded students as library users in general demonstrated a strong preference for browsing the physical collection (Day & McDowell, 1985; Frank, 1999; Pacey, 1982; Reed & Tanner, 2001; Stam, 1995). Via the use of focus group interviews, Frank (1999) attempted to develop a deeper understanding of the student artists’ creative process and concerns in an academic library setting. The findings of Frank’s study indicated that some student artists simply abandon the effort of searching the library catalogue and choose to randomly browse the physical collection instead; a result that both Littrell (2001) and Lorenzen (2004) support by emphasising the significance of on-shelf browsing. For this reason, providing direct access to stacks for browsing and selecting books in art and design libraries is almost a necessity.

In a recent article, Mason and Robinson (2011) discussed the information-related practices of emerging artists and designers in the digital era. Seventy-eight practicing artists and designers in the United Kingdom participated in an online survey. The results revealed that these emerging artists placed strong reliance on the Internet and social networks, while at the same time using traditional printed tools and physical libraries for finding information. Existing studies of the information practices amongst art and design

practitioners revealed that they are a unique, but not well-understood group of library users, with a particular wide and individualised range of information and inspiration needs. As highlighted by Gluibizzi:

the nature of the resources they require is what differentiates them from other students: often the information is entirely visual and difficult to find even conducting 'textbook' library searches... One of the most common questions art librarians may receive from studio art students is not 'How do I find something?', but rather, 'What art does my work look like?' (2010, p. 135)

Cobbledick (1996) identified five major areas of information that most commonly sought by artists, and they are as follows: (1) inspiration; (2) specific visual image needs; (3) technical knowledge related to art-making; (4) marketing and career guidance and (5) current trends and events. Frank (1999) found that student artists need materials to increase their subject knowledge, materials to solve problems and, most importantly, materials to 'inspire'. Teague (1987) also noted that student designers, in particular, need information on techniques, plus information to 'stimulate' and 'motivate' for their creative endeavours. Meanwhile, Haras (2010, p. 201) suggested that when serving art and design students, librarians should be aware of the visual grammar they may use to structure their thinking, such as medium (for example, sculpture, painting and photograph), texture, composition, perspective, scale, objects, figures, background and title of piece.

Information-related behaviour amongst art and design practitioners has attracted little attention from researchers. Previous studies are limited to small numbers of practicing artists and designers. This is one of a very few studies that has considered the information needs and behaviour of current art and design students in Asia. It is one of very few empirical studies reporting the information practices and inspiration needs amongst art and design students in Hong Kong, drawn from a relatively large sample size. The findings of the study contribute to the body of literature on art and design librarianship and will be of value to many LIS professionals practicing in the field. The results will no doubt help shape collection development practices, design and execution of information literacy instruction, as well as other modes of service an art and design library could provide. Such tailor-made improvements would enable the library to evolve into a more user-friendly environment, with services and facilities that could better suit the needs of the art and design patrons.

Research methods

Research population and data collection

All students enrolled at the HKDI were invited to take part in an online survey to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The method of distributing the questionnaire online was chosen in order to reach as many respondents as possible. This questionnaire was created using [SurveyMonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com), and was available for three months from September to December 2013. A link to the questionnaire was emailed via the HKDI Library to each student, with a brief note explaining the aims of the project and requesting their participation. The online survey asked specific questions: the types of library preferred; visiting hours; students' comfort level with the HKDI Library; students' information needs, and their preferred sources for inspiration. The online questionnaire was sent to all 7000 HKDI students, and a total number of 331 respondents completed the survey. Four responses from HKDI staff were eliminated as they fell out of the scope of the survey. (See original online questionnaire at: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HKDI_chi).

Data analysis

The SurveyMonkey questionnaire was the sole research instrument used for this study. Upon the completion of data collection, the online survey results were exported into Microsoft Excel for descriptive statistical and thematic analysis. No other supporting tools were used for analysing the survey results. The survey results were analysed based on the behaviour patterns, frequencies, regularities and preferences amongst the student respondents, in the context of their learning and information-/inspiration-seeking activities. The co-researcher, Wilson Chu, also a seasoned art and design librarian provided fundamental insights to interpret the results collected from this online survey.

Results

Respondent profile

The user demographics (for example, average age and educational background) could strongly influence the respondents’ information needs in the Library. From a total of 327 student responses, 219 (67%) were female and 108 (33%) were male (see Table 1). With reference to the age distributions amongst the respondents, 201 (61.5%) were under the age of 20, while 125 (38.2%) were aged between 20 and 30 years (see Table 2). Close to 75.8% of the total respondents (327) had high school qualification (see Table 3). The enrolment status of the students was 317 (96.9%) full-time students, while only eight (2.4%) were studying on a part-time basis (see Table 4). A full list of media/specialisations amongst the student respondents is shown in Table 5.

HKDI Library and usage patterns

A reasonably large proportion 152 (46.5%) of the student respondents indicated that they used the HKDI Library’s physical space ‘frequently’ (over two visits per week); meanwhile 97 (29.7%) of them indicated that they would use the Library’s physical collection over twice per week (see Table 6). Their reasons for using the HKDI Library are shown in Table 7, and the purposes of their visit are reported in Table 8. The HKDI Library appeared to be the best and most convenient option for these students. One reason could be that these art and design students preferred to acquire information for ‘free’ from their own institution’s library (see Tables 7 and 8). It could also be because students tended to use the most convenient and accessible source and the HKDI Library is in a central and convenient location on campus; close to the classrooms and students’ studios. In addition, the HKDI Library may be the first and most convenient place for ‘hanging out’ with other classmates, and to ‘kill time’ in-between lessons (see Table 7).

Table 1. Gender of respondents.

What is your gender? (n = 327)		
Gender	Response (%)	Response count
Male	33.0	108
Female	67.0	219
Total	100	327

Table 2. Age of respondents.

What is your age? (<i>n</i> = 327)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
Under 20	61.5	201
20–30	38.2	125
30–39	0.3	1
40–49	0.0	0
Over 50	0.0	0
Total		327

Table 3. Qualifications and education levels.

What was the highest education you obtained before studying at HKDI? (<i>n</i> = 327)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
High school/Secondary school	75.8	284
Associate degree	0.3	1
Pre-Associate degree	1.5	5
Certificate	2.8	9
Diploma	17.1	56
Bachelor's degree	0.6	2
Master's degree	0.0	0
Doctoral degree/PhD	0.3	1
Other (please specify)	1.5	5
Total		327

Table 4. Student enrolment status.

Are you currently studying at HKDI under a full-time or part-time basis? (<i>n</i> = 327)		
Answer options	Response percent (%)	Response count
Full-time	317	96.9%
Part-time	8	2.4%
Others	2	0.6%
Total		327

Sources and boundaries of inspiration and art information

This part of the survey sought to identify the sources of inspiration for this group of art and design students. Questions were categorised into three main groups, by media, venues, and artistic/cultural activities.

Media for finding inspiration

The answers to the question ‘Which medium do you use to find inspiration for your work?’ yielded almost 18 different ‘media that the HKDI students used as sources of inspiration, covering various media and social activities (see [Tables 9](#) and [10](#)). Survey results indicated

Table 5. Subject majors and specialisations.

What course(s) of study are you currently undertaking at HKDI? (optional question)
Design Foundation Studies
Communication Design & Digital Design
Fashion & Image Design
Product & Interior Design
Business Administration
Engineering Management & Technology
Multimedia & Internet Technology
ProAct (jewelry)
Creative Media
Exhibition Design
Television & Movies
Architectural Design
Graphic Design
Interior Design
Visual Communication
Landscape Architecture

Table 6. Frequency of use of the HKDI Library space and resources.

How often do you use the HKDI Library? (choose all that apply) (n = 327)			
Answer options	Use the Library space	Use the Library physical collection	Use the Library electronic resources
Very frequently (daily)	84 (25.7%)	35 (10.7%)	52 (15.9%)
Frequently (over 2 visits/week)	152 (46.5%)	97 (29.7%)	97 (29.7%)
Occasionally (a few times/month)	69 (21.1%)	99 (30.3%)	57 (17.4%)
Rarely (a few times/quarter)	15 > (4.6%)	51 (15.6%)	45 (13.8%)
Irregularly, depending on what classes I am taking	22 (6.7%)	32 (9.8%)	30 (9.2%)
Never	4 (1.2%)	17 (5.2%)	29 (8.9%)
Other	5 (1.5%)	3 (0.9%)	4 (1.2%)
For other frequencies, please specify			0
Total			327

that the Internet was the most-chosen medium for finding inspiration amongst the student respondents, selected by 234 (83.3%) respondents, demonstrating that the Internet was of huge importance to these students at HKDI. The findings indicated that printed art magazines and books were the second most popular medium after Internet (207, 73.7%). Films/movies (172, 61.2%) and television (105, 37.4%) were identified to be the third and fourth most popular media amongst the respondents, respectively (see Table 9). In the open-ended answers that respondents gave to the same questionnaire item, eleven of them considered that ‘wandering around aimlessly on the streets’ was a popular ‘medium for finding inspiration’ (see Table 10). It can be seen from the list of items that a library could never fulfil all the needs of an artist or designer (see Tables 9–12).

Table 7. Purposes of using the HKDI Library.

What do you usually use the HKDI Library for? (n = 327)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
To work on my assignments	80.4	263
To find a specific book or article for reference	61.5	201
To find images in printed books, magazines, or catalogues, etc.	40.7	133
To find a quiet place for self-study	38.5	126
To communicate with fellow students/artists	31.2	102
To look up works of other artists	28.4	93
To read magazines	27.2	89
To use free Internet	26.3	86
To find images via online resources	23.5	77
To use the Internet for non-library purposes	15.3	50
To hangout with friends	15.3	50
Others	5.2	17
Total		327

Table 8. Other reasons for using the HKDI Library.

Other reasons for using the HKDI Library	
Printing	7
A place to sit down and rest. HKDI is so crowded – hard to find a place to rest	2
Just to kill time in between lessons	1
Will not use the Library unless it is class-related	1
Printing/group project	1
Printing/scanning	1
Entertainment	1
Meeting (student group meetings)	1
Rest and discussion for assignments	1
To use special design software	1
Total	17

Table 9. Media used for finding inspiration.

Which medium do you use to find inspiration for your work? (choose all that apply – optional question) (n = 281)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
Internet browsing	83.3	234
Art magazine & art books & art archives	73.7	207
Films/movies	61.2	172
TV	37.4	105
Others	15.7	44
Total		281

Places for finding inspirations: art museums, bookstores, shopping malls & public libraries

According to Cobbledick (1996), printed resources are the most important information sources for artists, and the survey results indicated the HKDI students depended heavily on the HKDI Library for current information found in printed magazine and periodicals (see

Table 10. Other media used for finding inspiration.

Other media used by student respondents for finding inspiration	
<i>(optional question)</i>	
Walking on the streets/wandering around aimlessly/walking/imagining while walking around	11
Day dreaming/contemplating/just thinking/thinking about the past	7
Observing people on the street/observing daily life/watching the streets	6
Listening to music	3
Resting/sleeping/reading comic books	2
Looking at my own collections	1
Chit chatting with other people/hanging out with friends	2
Taking a bath	1
Going out to the country side	1
Reading lots of books & surfing the WWW	2
Flea market	1
You could find inspirations from taking part in things you enjoy doing, e.g., cooking, etc.	1
Going to exhibitions/artist talks/workshops	1
Heart feel	1
Others/doing other things	2
None	2
Total	44

Table 11. Venues used for finding inspiration.

Do you visit any of the following places to find inspiration for your work in general? <i>(choose all the apply – optional question)</i> <i>(n = 281)</i>		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
HKDI Library	60.1	169
Art museums & galleries	49.5	139
Bookstores	42.3	119
Shopping malls	38.4	108
Local public libraries	29.2	82
Others	17.1	48
Flea markets	15.7	44
Library at Savannah College of Art & Design – Hong Kong	3.2	9
Asia art archive	2.8	8
Total		281

Table 7). These results convey the notion that students at HKDI in general often read printed books and journals for their own practice (see Table 7). The findings also suggest that many HKDI students used more than one type of venue for finding inspiration. The survey asked which libraries and other public venues the students preferred to use, allowing multiple answers. A majority (169, 60.1%) of respondents would use their own institution’s library as the primary source for finding inspiration (see Tables 11 and 12). Despite the high percentage of the respondents that preferred the HKDI Library, some would also use other cultural and public venues for the same purpose. For example, 139 (49.5%) respondents would consult the local art museums and galleries, 119 (42.3%) stated bookstores and 108 (38.4%) selected shopping malls. The local public libraries were by comparison less popular amongst the HKDI students, as only 82 (29.2%) respondents

Table 12. Other venues used for finding inspiration.

Other places visited by the student respondents to find inspiration for their work	
Google/Internet/Internet images/computer/Poloves.com/niusnews.com	16
Walking around on the streets/gardens/parks	12
Home	6
Everything daily life/daily life	4
Nature/seashore	2
Washroom	1
Mountain view, star ferry	1
Movies	1
On train/bus	1
Studio	1
Quiet places	1
Others	1
None	2
Total	48

Table 13. Importance ratings for the HKDI Library in supporting studies.

According to your opinion, how important is the HKDI Library & its services to you & your studies?
(*n* = 327)

(5-point Likert scale)

Answer options	
Unimportant	3
Of little importance	49
Moderately important	87
Important	124
Very important	64
Rating Average	3.60

would use them for finding inspiration (see Table 11). Student respondents also considered the HKDI Library and its services to be ‘important’ to their studies (see Table 13).

Library preferences: HKDI Library versus local public libraries

Artists and designers use libraries to find images for the purpose of inspiration and the HKDI students demonstrated a strong preference for their own institution’s library for achieving this purpose (see Table 11). In addition, the student respondents considered the physical comfort and the attractive surroundings of the HKDI Library to be very important (see Table 14). Students also expressed a desire to use the HKDI Library resources more extensively, if it had more printed books and magazines (see Table 15).

Students participating in other artistic and cultural activities

Art and design students see the world in distinctive ways, and the list of activities in Tables 16 and 17 fully justify the view of art and design students as responding to a wide range of inspirations, both abstract and concrete, as well as reflecting the fluid and tangential nature of art and design. Many respondents step outside of their regular ‘routine’ and try some other forms of artistic/cultural expressions and collaborations on a regular basis (see Tables 16 and 17), with the aim to develop new techniques and creativity

Table 14. Important aspects of the HKDI Library.

What aspects are important to you in the HKDI Library? (choose all that apply) (n = 327)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
Quietness	53.5	175
Printed resources	81.3	266
Electronic resources	48.3	158
Cleanliness	52.6	172
Internet access	52.6	172
Comfortable furniture & environment	77.7	254
Attractive surroundings	54.1	168
Others	6.1	20
Total		327

Table 15. Improvements to the HKDI Library’s resources that would likely increase usage.

I would use the HKDI Library more if: (optional question) (n = 271)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
If the Library has more printed books	73.1	198
If the Library has more printed journals & magazines	50.9	138
If the Library has more E-books	35.1	95
If the Library has more electronic databases	36.9	100
Others	8.9	24
Total		271

Table 16. Types of cultural and creative activities undertaken.

In addition to making art, do you take part in other type of arts, cultural & creative activity? (choose all the apply – optional question) (n = 281)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
Going to concerts/operas (either pop or classical)	40.2	113
Going to arts festival	31.3	88
Playing musical instruments	28.5	80
Going to film festival	21.0	59
Writing	21.0	59
No, I do NOT, I only make art	21.0	59
Dancing	13.2	37
Flower arrangements	5.7	16
Tea ceremony	3.6	10
Others	7.5	21
Total		281

and to experience the inspiration across a wide array of artistic/cultural disciplines. The findings indicate that a large number of students had broad interests and hobbies/activities outside the regular curricula. Attending live concerts and/or going to arts festivals were found to be most popular amongst the student respondents (see Table 16).

Table 17. Other types of cultural and creative activities undertaken.

Other types of arts, cultural & creative activities carried out by student respondents	
Photography exhibitions/art exhibitions/co-host exhibitions with other people/joining exhibitions/going to art galleries	5
Doing handicrafts	3
Cultural discussion seminars/going to book reading clubs and listening to talks/seminars by famous people	2
Book illustrations	1
DIY	1
Animation & comic fairs	1
NiteCat online	1
To do cosplay with other people	1
Drama	1
Others	1
None	4
Total	21

Career advice and development

With reference to the information needs specific to career development and professional practice, it seemed that many respondents already realised the need for knowledge of areas like marketing and employment before graduation. The results indicate that 139 (51.3%) respondents were interested in informational workshops on finding art and design internships. The same number of respondents 139 (51.3%) expressed interest in finding awards and competitions for artists and designers. The next most popular responses 134 (49.4%) were interest in workshops on job opportunities related to art and design, while another 114 (42.1%) expressed an interest in trainee programs (see Tables 18 and 19). A similar number of respondents also felt they needed advice on how to write proposals and funding applications. These findings suggest that information relating to career opportunities and business skills are necessary for preparing these art and design students for their professional life after graduation.

Table 18. Types of library workshops desired.

I would be interested in library workshops on teaching how to: (multiple answers accepted) (n = 271)		
Answer Options	Response (%)	Response Count
Find art & design internships	51.3	139
Look for awards & competitions for artists/designers	51.3	139
Fine art & design job opportunities	49.4	134
Find resources on art/design job interviews	45.8	124
Find art & design trainee programs	42.1	114
Look for scholarship programs	38.0	103
Prepare cover letters for designer jobs	33.9	92
Apply for art & development grants	33.2	90
Look for graduate schools for further studies	24.0	65
Prepare artist's statement for portfolio	22.9	62
Others	1.1	3
Total		271

Table 19. Other types of library workshops desired.

Other types of library workshop desired by the student respondents	
Literature & design seminars/discussion groups	1
Information on IT business/careers	1
Sharing sessions amongst winners of arts & design competitions/new business ventures	1
Total	3

Table 20. Frequency of using online social networking tools.

How often do you use the following online social networking tools? (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.)		
<i>(n = 327)</i>		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
Daily	79.5	260
Weekly	8.3	27
Monthly	1.2	4
Bimonthly	0.3	1
Quarterly	0.0	0
Annually	0.0	0
Rarely	0.9	3
Irregularly	9.2	30
No, I do NOT use online social networking tools	0.6	2
If you DO, please specify what online tool(s) you use		24
Total		327

Online social networking

The information-seeking activities of art and design students are generally private endeavours, meaning that such activities are best performed in solitude, with the intent to evoke inspiration based on reflection of past experiences, sifting of emotions, as well as perceptions of the surroundings amongst the individuals. At the same time, online social platforms are gaining increasing importance as methods for communication, networking and promotion amongst artists and designers. The study’s findings indicate a high percentage (79.5%, 260 respondents) used online social networking tools (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and blogs) daily to communicate with others (see Tables 20 and 21). Although these students might have very little contact with practicing art and design professionals outside of the Institute, 164 (58.4%) respondents indicated they would ‘sometimes’ read blogs by other designers/artists, while another 31 (11%) stated that they would ‘follow’ such blogs regularly. A smaller proportion of respondents (70, 24.9%) said they did not read any of these blogs (see Table 22).

Social networking in person

Other surveys on usage and library design have indicated that the design of the physical environment can have a significant impact on library users (Shill & Tonner, 2004). When the students were asked, ‘What do you usually use the HKDI Library for?’, the findings show that in addition to using the Library to work on assignments and to look for books and articles for reference, 102 (31.2%) respondents indicated that they would use the Library as a social space to communicate with fellow students, and/or simply ‘hanging out’ with friends (see Table 7).

Table 21. Types of online social networking tools used.

Different types of online social networking tool used by student respondents	
Facebook	14
Facebook, Instagram	2
Instagram, Facebook, Wechat, Weibo	1
Blog	1
Facebook, Sina Weibo	2
Instagram, Facebook, Youtube	2
Facebook, Whatsapp, Wechat.	1
FB, Twitter	1
Total	24

Table 22. Respondents' reading blogs by other designers or artists.

Do you read any blogs by any designers or artists? (optional question) (n = 281)		
Answer options	Response (%)	Response count
Sometimes	58.4	164
NO	24.9	70
Yes, I follow artists'/designers' blogs regularly	11.0	31
I read artists'/designers' blog when directed to from other sources	5.7	16
Total		281

Discussion

The data for this study were collected through an online questionnaire from one single art and design college library in Hong Kong. No observations or interviews were carried out. Hence, the survey results may not reflect the student experiences at other art and design colleges across the same region. Furthermore, the survey approach was limited to respondents who had access to the Internet and who chose to respond; therefore, the non-responding students' perceptions are not represented in the survey results. Another limitation is the potential for bias, in that some art and design students at HKDI might have been inclined to participate because they were keen and active Library users with a positive view towards the Library. Other infrequent and non-users of the Library might have been disinclined to respond to the online survey. Finally, the closed-ended questions might have forced the respondents to give overly simplistic responses to complex issues, such as issues related to the process of creative thinking and inspiration needs. As pointed out by Powell (1995), it is difficult to trace the creative process because it is composed of ideas, abstractions, and their relation to one another. The questionnaire format used by the current study did not allow for a deeper understanding of such issues, which perhaps other observational and interview techniques would otherwise provide.

The purpose of this study was to determine the information-seeking practices of the HKDI students, to explore the extent of what can be called 'art information' as well as the sources of inspiration sought by these art and design students. Studio art and design education and research practice are heavily associated with visual images – a fact that is well understood amongst the LIS community. In the past, many of the art and design images came from slides; however, things have shifted and online images resources are the norm for image access amongst art and design practitioners. The findings of this study

indicated that, in the digital age, the Internet is integral to the art and design students' practices and is often the first resource consulted when searching for either information or inspiration. In fact, over a decade ago, Van Zijl and Gericke (2001) noted a trend in preferences and predicted that electronic sources would become increasingly important amongst artists as the Internet became increasingly available to them. Because of the wealth of electronic materials freely available on the Internet, students may now 'surf' the Internet boundlessly on their own at no cost, and without the need for any special or prerequisite skills.

The student respondents appear to be enthusiastic users of the traditional printed resources and also of their own institution's library. As noted by Pacey (1982), the browsing of printed materials is an important, as well as most preferred, activity amongst art and design students, and the activity itself normally requires the students to visit the physical library in person. As explained by Gluibizzi and Glassman (2010, p. 213), the act of browsing offers 'potential for discovery, inspiration and understanding that open-ended searching offers. Although many databases and online resources offer browsing modes, leafing through print publications remains a critical step in the design and ideation process.'

The preferred methods of the HKDI students surveyed were to use a variety of sources and from multiple venues, rather than indicating a general avoidance of the physical libraries. This diversity can be summed up by saying that, for art and design students, many things can become information sources or inspiration for creativity. As explained by Cowan (2004), the concept of information seeking can be a creative process, driven by curiosity, pleasure or sensory feedback, rather than just being motivated by a particular need. In fact,

information-seeking is a creative process that begins and ends outside of the walls of any library. Those of us who work within the library world do not necessarily have a complete understanding of the process for artists. It is difficult to measure these qualitative processes by quantitative measures. (Cowan, 2004, p. 19)

Findings of this study reflected themes that were similar to the study by Cobbedick (1996), that is inspiration, visual images and marketing and career guidance appeared to be the most sought-after information amongst artists. The results showing that a high percentage of respondents used the HKDI Library is a very encouraging finding. They suggest that the HKDI Library's printed collection remains the most important information and inspiration source for most HKDI students. It may be because of its central and convenient location on campus as ease of access could be the major factor in determining where the HKDI students go for information. Another explanation, provided by Lo, Chiu, and Chu (2013), is that the student respondents shared a strong preference for their own institution's library because they felt it was more comfortable and friendlier, and with helpful staff who would not prevent them from talking openly inside the library.

Student respondents also expressed a desire to use the resources even 'more', if the Library increased its collection of printed books, journals and magazines. At the same time, libraries in general are just one of the many sources used by the art and design students. A majority of respondents reported that in addition to the HKDI Library, they used multiple venues including art museums, bookstores, shopping malls, and local public libraries. Interestingly, similar findings were reported by both Stam (1995) and Reed and Tanner (2001), in that artists liked to browse bookstores, and bookstores were often used as an alternative to a library for finding images of visual references. Such results parallel those of another study by Ferguson (1986), who found that emerging artists utilised a wide range of inspirational materials which extend far beyond books of different genres, and

confirm the concept of 'obscure sources' of inspiration; those that are only available outside the physical library.

The variety of media and venues used for finding inspiration are seen in the HKDI art and design students' responses relating to a vast range of inspirations. As described by Ferguson (1986), inspirational sources are both abstract and concrete; some are truly 'obscure sources', that is simply far beyond the possible service that any library could provide, or satisfy. Oddos (1998) also highlighted that information needed by artists was exceptionally broad and varying. The reason HKDI students often seek information and inspiration from outside of the library may be due to the inability of a single library collection to offer a wide enough range of materials to fulfil the diverse needs of their artistic inspiration. In fact, it is valid to say that there are essentially no boundaries to what these HKDI students could count as 'art information', as virtually anything could be regarded as an inspiration. According to Cowan (2004, p. 14), the 'processes are fluid, inter-relational, dynamic and creative; they rely on the action of creating understanding, rather than finding pre-existing information. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is more appropriate to engage with it from the hermeneutic standpoint.' Furthermore, information sources could range from 'subjective' and 'systematic', from 'popular' culture to 'high' culture. As stated by Littrell (2001), art students tended to use the library for books relating directly to their area of study for inspiration. This was attributed to the fact that, when studying, students are trying to learn all they can about their craft. Once they feel sufficiently confident in this area they then explore around and outside the library to draw inspiration and ideas from other disciplines. In short, art and design information is dominated by visual images, and the motives and methods of art inquiry may vary greatly amongst individual students. It is a highly diverse activity where the process seems more 'intuitive' than 'systematic'.

The results of the current study also indicated that the students considered the physical comfort and convenience inside the HKDI Library to be very important. The HKDI Library may be the first and most convenient and comfortable place for socialising with the institutional network. As highlighted by Lo et al. (2013), this emphasis on face-to-face dialogues and interactions between students also indicated that many of them find inspiration in conversations and interactions with other people and art practitioners. As highlighted by Gluibizzi and Glassman (2010, p. 213), we have to understand the

value of the library as a place – as a distinction for users seeking an environment conducive to study, contemplation, and the exchange of information... The utopian condition for the library as a place is its perception as an academic town square, a neutral zone that enables dialogue, exchange, and productivity.

With reference to social networking, various social networking tools such as Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and Flickr, are becoming increasingly integrated into educational practices. This study's findings indicated that the student respondents were employing such social networking applications for a variety of learning, as well as information-/experience-sharing purposes. The results reflect those of a study by Lo et al. (2013), in that there is a need for using the HKDI Library as a social space for establishing dialogues and discussions, and maybe even collaborative learning amongst these HKDI students, through having someone to talk about ideas, exchange concepts and arguments. Hemmig (2008) also noted that visual arts students could benefit from using the library as a communal gathering space and acquire information via socialisation. By embracing many perspectives from other people, the potential for innovation and originality could be unlimited. In fact, the concept of 'socialisation as information retrieval' has also been brought forth by Payne, who stated:

the library as social milieu certainly could provide random associations for cross-fertilization research, yet perhaps be detrimental to the contemplative aspects of libraries might offer the most beneficial support; as an alternate space where students, faculty and librarians converge, the library offers a valuable alternate discursive forum. (2010, p. 287)

With reference to the high usage of online social tools amongst the HKDI students, young people have been born into a digital world that is full of creative opportunities. Hong Kong is considered to be ‘one of the most sophisticated and successful telecommunications markets in the world’ (OFTA, 2009). In an earlier study carried out by Chan and Fang (2007), 405 young Chinese people in Hong Kong were surveyed about their Internet usage. The results indicated that a majority of the respondents aged 15–24 years spent between 1 and 3 h per day on the Internet. The main reasons for Internet usage ranged from listening to music to fun use. The Internet was the preferred media choice amongst these young respondents for information-driven activities. In this digital environment, online social media tools are an integral part of the everyday lives of young people in Hong Kong and for the HKDI students, online social networking applications allow them to share messages, images and videos, regardless of their location— inside the library, in their own homes or elsewhere. Following the rapid growth in the popularity of various online social networking sites in the last few years, the high usage reported in this survey was of no surprise to the researchers. On the other hand, the questionnaire did not ask explicitly whether they used such online social platforms for promoting or developing their own artwork. It would be interesting to explore to what extent art or design was being discussed in any of these online communications and the usefulness of Facebook for publicising their artwork, exhibitions and private views amongst the student respondents.

The findings of the study also demonstrate that these young respondents were aware of the importance of professional knowledge (as in information about other career options or further training and development opportunities) before graduation. Stam (1995) reported that the most practical information needs of artists are those relating to competition opportunities, grants, fellowships, residencies and the ‘business’ of art, and so on. Bennett (2006) also noted that art and design students appreciated this type of assistance.

Challenges faced by art and design librarians

Works of art and design often reflect the whole of human experience and creation. As a result, ‘information-seeking’ is not an ideal expression to use in the investigation of what informs an artist’s/designer’s creative work. Art and design communications use a multiplicity of approaches and the findings of this study indicated that the HKDI students gathered ideas from a wide spectrum of subjects, sources or activities, which are often beyond the scope of a traditional library. As Phillips (1986, p. 9) pointed out,

artists use libraries in strange ways and it is difficult to suggest how a librarian can predict their needs, except not to de-acquisition anything with pictures The information needs of artists are too diverse to be addressed solely within the confines of art librarianship.

As explained by Cowan (2004, p. 18), ‘the phrase “information-seeking” somehow oversimplifies the creative process, reducing it to a technical problem. The term does move away from the objectified, thingly nature of “information” alone without its accompanying action/process-oriented “seeking”, but not quite far enough away.’ Haras (2010) also emphasised that although their information-searching approach is not necessarily dependent on the use of library, students also need training on how to use the library properly. In order to respond to their needs, librarians could consider developing library workshops for providing careers and internship advices that are tailored to the subject

specialism, and thereby encouraging to these art and design students to be more pro-active in their career preparation. For example, teaching them how to write a CV; how to present a portfolio; how to market their work and themselves and how to establish contacts with other professionals in the industry – addressing their information needs for both the creative and the business sides would no doubt be of great value to these emerging artists.

Recommendations for further research

Based on the results of this study, it would be beneficial for students and librarians if the following research was carried out in the future:

- To use qualitative methods, such as focus groups, to examine the information behaviours of HKDI students who do not use a library;
- To conduct a similar study with faculty members from HKDI and other art education institutes in order to compare the responses of art and design students and faculty and
- To explore whether art or design was being discussed or used for exhibiting artwork in any of the online social communications.

Conclusion

This study examined how art and design students acquire information and inspiration relevant to their studies at HKDI, as well as establishing a base from which further research can be conducted. General patterns of library use are described and the findings suggest that the library has a significant role to play in education institutions for art and design because the popularity of traditional printed materials remains surprisingly high. The HKDI Library was shown to be very important to the students, not only as a source of reading inspirational materials, but also as an important place for social networking.

Findings of this study further verify the notion that studio art and design students are unique library patrons. They use multiple venues to find very diverse sets of information resources, which serve as a ‘springboard’ for their creative inspirations. The results also indicated that seemingly anything could be considered art information or inspiration. Art and design students also tend to rely much more on free-floating approaches to finding inspiration, as well as solutions to problem solving. As a result, the traditional quiet and restrictive self-study style library environment might not be well suited for meeting the needs of art and design students.

This study may serve as a base for further examinations of information practices amongst art and design practitioners and their library use. Because effective library service depends on understanding the users’ informational needs, it is necessary to take the artists and designers unique information needs into consideration when organising the resources (both printed and online) to which they refer. Furthermore, the findings might serve as a guideline for other art and design library managers to inject more creativity and innovative ideas into their daily operations, such as, but not limited to, relaxing some of the traditional library regulations. Finally, the research findings provide clearer direction in terms of how an art and design library should operate and inform future policy setting, facilities planning, and collection development.

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