

Utilisation of Public Libraries for Academic Needs: An Analysis of Information-Seeking Behaviour among Five-Year Integrated Masters Students at Gauhati University, Assam

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Abstract

Purpose: This study evaluates how Five-Year Integrated Masters (FYIMP) students at Gauhati University use public libraries and seek information. It specifically focuses on identifying their academic needs, preferred media formats (print vs. digital), the frequency of their library and internet usage, and their overall satisfaction or difficulties with available resources.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A survey was conducted using a structured online questionnaire. A sample of 76 respondents was drawn from a population of 320 students using the Taro Yamane formula, with data analyzed via descriptive statistics.

Findings: While 78.95% use the internet regularly, 73.68% prefer a hybrid of print and digital formats. Public libraries are primarily used for textbooks and reference materials, but their utility is low (5.26%) due to outdated collections. Enrollment in university programs was found to increase both internet and library engagement.

Research Limitations: The study is limited to FYIMP students at one university, and the 10% margin of error may affect the generalizability of results across broader regions.

Practical Implications: There is a pressing need to modernize public libraries in Assam by updating collections, improving digital infrastructure, and providing technical support to align with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Originality/Value: This research provides specific insights into the evolving behavior of integrated master's students in northeast India, highlighting the persistent relevance of physical libraries despite increasing digital dependency.

Keywords: Information-Seeking Behaviour, Use of Public Libraries, Public Libraries in Assam, Information Need of FYIMP, University Students and Libraries

How to Cite this Article

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1. Introduction

Public libraries work as vital institutions for providing free, broad access to educational resources, promoting literacy, and supporting lifelong learning across diverse populations. These libraries significantly contribute to enhancing educational development and promoting socio-economic progress, especially in developing regions (Thavamani, 2014). Public libraries, which are often referred to as 'people's universities,' promote self-education, knowledge dissemination, and cultural enrichment by shaping positive societal mind-sets (Kaur & Lal, 2016). Despite the rise of digital technologies, the importance of public libraries remains undeniable in meeting educational needs and works as a bridge to access information.

Information-seeking behaviour refers to the process by which individuals identify their information needs, search for relevant resources, evaluate the available options, and use the information to fulfil those needs. Wilson's model of information seeking behaviour is widely used to understand how individuals, particularly students engage in this process. According to Wilson (1999), the dynamic nature of information-seeking behaviour, influenced by different reasons such as individual needs, environmental conditions, and accessibility of resources. In the present situation, the internet has emerged as a primary source of information, especially among young users, and it's due to the developments in online platforms and artificial intelligence. However, due to outdated collections, limited infrastructure, and insufficient staffing, public libraries continue to face challenges in maintaining their relevancy, particularly in some regions like Assam (Barman, 2022; Chakraborty, 2020). These limitations contribute to an increasing reliance on internet-based resources, which raise questions regarding the role and utilisation of public libraries in supporting academic needs in the current context.

User studies always help to develop the libraries, and they should be aware of their users' information needs and seeking behaviour to provide up-to-date services (Raza & Zia, 2022). There are so many studies conducted on the information seeking behaviour of different categories of individuals in numerous contexts, however, it is always interesting to explore young people's behaviour on information seeking. Gauhati University, recognised as the oldest state university in North-eastern region of India and a pioneer in implementing the National Education Policy 2020 in Northeast India, provides a unique environment to explore these dynamics. The Five-Year Integrated Master's Programme (FYIMP) students have a youthful enthusiasm and academic engagement; also, they represent an ideal group for examining information-seeking patterns and perceptions of public libraries. Understanding the preferences and challenges of FYIMP students can help to develop strategies to enhance public library services so that they remain relevant in the digital era.

This study investigates the information-seeking behaviour of FYIMP students at Gauhati University, focusing on their use of public libraries, preferred information formats, and perceived barriers to access. The objectives include identifying academic information needs, analysing preferred formats, examining patterns of public library and internet use, and evaluating satisfaction and barriers. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to provide insights into how public libraries in Assam can adapt

to meet the needs of young learners, contributing to the broader discourse on library utilisation in developing regions.

2. Review of Literature

There are numerous studies that explored the students' information seeking behaviour in university library as well as public libraries. Several studies highlight the importance of public libraries that play as an alternative information source and provide suitable environments for study to those students who faced problems in accessing to university library. In Nigeria public libraries assist as an information hub in rural and academic communities by offering reference collections and internet access for students (Baro & Eze, 2016). In India also users emphasise the value of the public libraries. Sundaeswaran and Kavitha (2021) mentioned that maximum users in Tamil Nadu visit the district central library to prepare for their competitive exams and over half of the respondents are satisfied with journals collections of the library. Similarly, Sundaeswaran and Kavitha, 2021, Sasikumar & Levinya, 2022; and Adin, Bankapur and Kumbar (2024) found that in India many public libraries users considered the library as an ideal place for their study. Apart being considered as a quiet place for study environment, many users' purpose to visit public library for accessing new books and reading newspaper (Sasikumar & Levinya, 2020).

Despite their importance, many public libraries face challenges on limited resources and infrastructure. Fatima and Ahmad (2008) and Abdullahi, Igbinovia and Solanke (2015) emphasised the challenges of poor cataloguing systems, insufficient library orientation programmes, limited staff support, outdated collections, which push students toward self-help method and online tools. In a study, Athukorala (2021) found that majority of users visit public library regularly, but limited and outdated collection was a challenge for them to access the information. Similarly, regional studies also support these findings. Sinha (2015) identified that students in Assam's Barak Valley and Cachar district faced significant challenges due to outdated and limited collections in public libraries, lack of digital infrastructure, and awareness initiatives. Infrastructural limitations such as slow internet, frequent power outages and lack of awareness continue to act as barriers on effective usage of public libraries (Kumar & Chandrashekhara, 2015). These findings indicating that, while public libraries are valued for free access and supportive study environment (Sundaeswaran & Kavitha, 2021; Sasikumar & Levinya, 2022), expanding resources especially digital resources and improving infrastructure, and funding remain critical goals to fully realise their educational role.

The academic libraries also show the same pattern. Bhattacharjee, Sinha and Bhattacharjee (2014) found that collection of libraries generally old and insufficient which lead to students showing interest in more online journals and e-resources to fill the gaps. Another study, Abdullahi et al. (2015) found that undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin (Nigeria) depend mostly on books and internet while consulting librarians or library staff for information far less. Ali and Jan (2020) also observed that postgraduate students in social science rarely visit libraries because they are unaware of the resources and facilities available. This pattern shows underutilisation of library services. As a result, many studies focus on enhanced user support; for example, Kadir and Hussin (2018) advocate that

university libraries should conduct regular orientation and training programs to grow the awareness of available resources and enhance students' information literacy.

3. Objectives of the Study

The following objectives were taken into consideration for the present study:

- i) To identify the academic-related information needs of Five-Year Integrated Masters students of Gauhati University.
- ii) To analyse preferred formats of information desired by Five-Year Integrated Masters students
- iii) To examine the frequency and patterns of public library and web use for academic purposes among Five-Year Integrated Masters students
- iv) To evaluate satisfaction levels with library resources and identify barriers of information access faced by Five-Year Integrated Masters students.

4. Methodology

A survey method was adopted for the present study. Data were gathered from the FYIMP students by distributing a structured online questionnaire. The sample size was determined using the standard Taro Yamane Formula which is $n = N / (1 + N \times e^2)$ where N is the total population. In the present study, N is equal to 320 students and (e) i.e., the margin of error is considered at 0.10 (10%).

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2} = \frac{320}{1 + 320(0.10)^2} = \frac{320}{1 + 320(0.01)} = \frac{320}{1 + 3.2} = \frac{320}{4.2} = 76.19$$

Based on the above formula, a sample of 76 respondents were considered for the study. The questionnaire was carefully designed to include all necessary components to meet the objectives of the study. The responses were analysed using the Microsoft Excel to generate descriptive statistics and identify patterns.

5. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Out of 100 distributions of questionnaire, a total of 78 questionnaires were received. Randomly two questionnaires were omitted to match 76 number of samples obtained by using the standard formula.

a) Primary Sources of Information: Table 1.1 and 1.2 shows the primary sources of information usage by respondents for academic purposes. A majority i.e., 59.25% utilise public libraries, university library and the internet to meet their primary sources of information. However, the internet alone is also frequently used (36.84%), highlighting its central role in academic information seeking. The minimal reliance on public libraries alone (5.26%) indicates a limited standalone utility in digital era, especially among FYIMP students.

Table 1.1 Primary Sources of Information

Source of Information	Respondents	%
Public Libraries	4	5.26
University Library	26	34.22
Internet	28	36.84
All of the Above	45	59.25

Table 1.2 Preferred Format of Information

Preferred Format	Respondents	%
Print	16	21.05
Digital	4	5.27
Both	56	73.68
Total	76	100

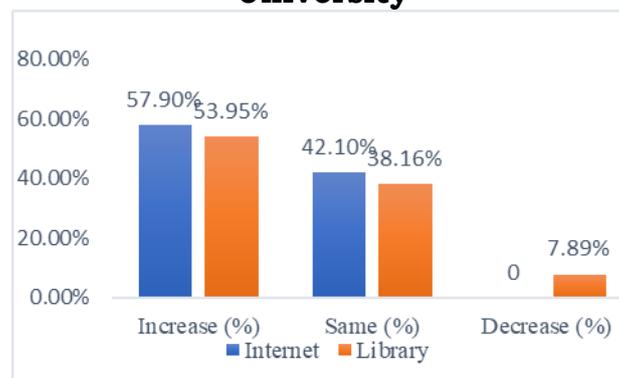
b) Frequency of Resources Use: Table 2 reflects the frequency of academic resource usage among respondents. It is evident that internet usage significantly overshadows the use of public libraries for academic purposes. A majority (78.95%) of the respondents use the internet regularly, with no respondents reporting non-use. On the other hand, only 18.42% reported regular use of public libraries while 38.15% used them occasionally and 34.21% rarely. The mean scores 3.75 for internet and 2.66 for public library further confirm the dominate preference for internet resources. This trend shows a shift toward digital platforms for academic needs, possibly due to their convenience, accessibility and broader resource coverage.

Table 2: Frequency of Public Library and Internet Use for Academic Purposes

Usage Type	Regularly		Occasionally		Rarely		Never		Mean
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Public Library	14	18.42	29	38.15	26	34.21	7	9.22	2.66
Internet	60	78.95	13	17.10	3	3.95	0	0.00	3.75

c) Changes in Resource Use Post-Enrolment: Figure 1 compares respondents' resource usage before and after joining Gauhati University. Over half reported increased use of both internet (57.90%) and library (53.95%) resources. No respondent reported a decrease in internet usage, whereas 7.89% indicated reduced library visits. These findings show that university enrolment positively influences academic resource usage, particularly digital access.

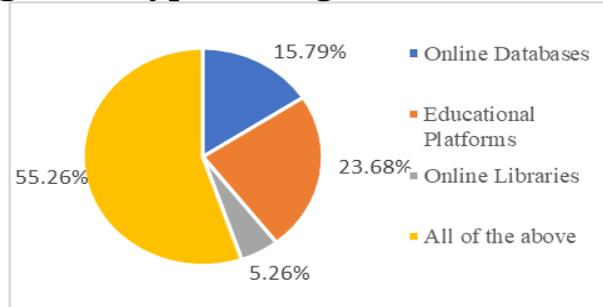
Figure 1: Changes in Internet and Library Use After Joining Gauhati University



d) Types of Digital Resources: Figure 2 presents that over half of the respondents (55.26%) used all listed digital resources, highlighting a well-round digital engagement. Among single-resource users, educational platforms are the most popular (23.68%), followed by online databases

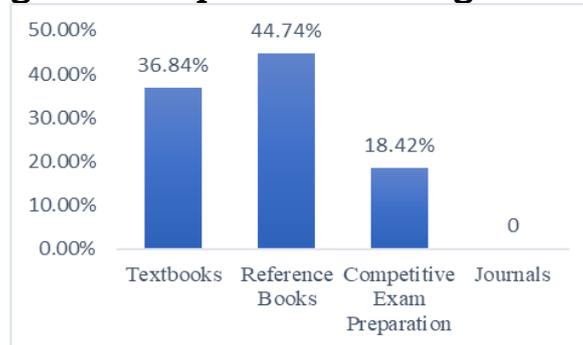
(15.79%). The low use of online libraries (5.26%) points to potential area for awareness and service enhancement.

Figure 2: Types of Digital Resources Used



e) Purposes of Library Visits: Figure 3 reveals that students primarily visited libraries for reference books (44.74%) and textbooks (36.84%). Only 18.42% visited for competitive exam preparation and no respondents reported journals usage. This indicates a limited awareness, or relevance, which are important for in-depth academic research.

Figure 3: Purposes of Visiting Libraries



f) Satisfaction with University and Public Library Resources: Table 3 presents the satisfaction levels of respondents regarding the resources available in the university and public libraries. The data shows that majority of students express a neutral stand- (61.85%) for university library and 51.33% for public libraries. While a slightly higher percentage of respondents were satisfied with public libraries than university libraries, overall satisfaction remains moderate. The mean satisfaction scores of 2.24 (university) and 2.32 (public) indicate that both types of libraries meet user needs to an average extent. These findings may indicate opportunities for both institutions to improve user engagement, resource range and service quality.

Table 3: Satisfaction with University and Public Library Resources

Library Type	Very Satisfied		Satisfied		Neutral		Dissatisfied		Mean
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
University Library	9	11.84	10	23.16	47	61.85	10	13.15	2.24
Public Library	7	9.21	20	36.32	39	51.33	10	13.15	2.32

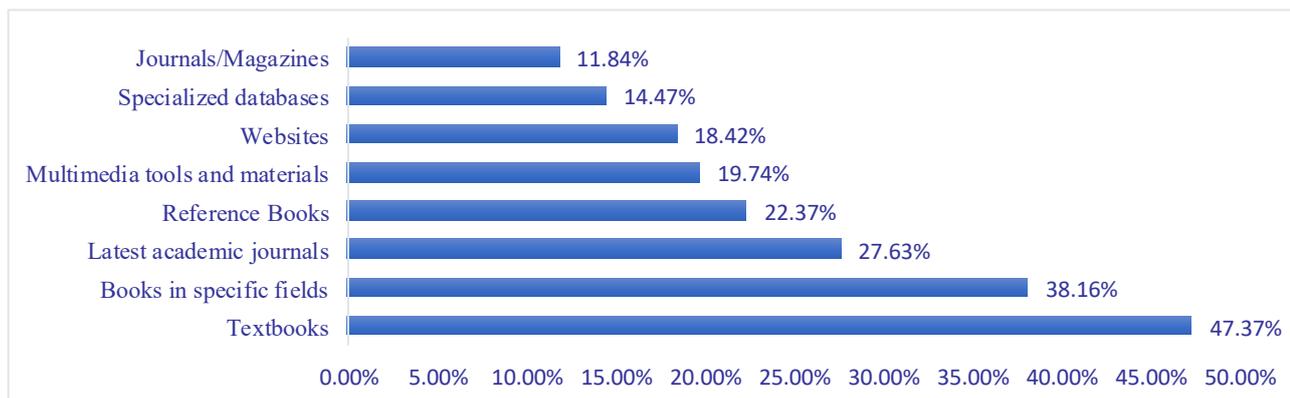
g) Challenges in Accessing Library Resources: Table 4 examines how frequently students face challenges in accessing library resources. A significant portion of respondents (42.12%) reported encountering issues occasionally, while 18.42% experienced difficulties very often. Only 7.89% indicated no challenges. The mean score of 2.71 indicates that difficulties area common concern, suggesting that to enhance usability and accessibility, invest in development of infrastructure, collections necessary in public library settings.

Table 4: Frequency of Challenges in Accessing Library Resources

Frequency	No. of Respondents		Mean
	No.	%	
Very often	14	18.42	2.71
Occasionally	32	42.12	
Rarely	24	31.57	
Never	6	7.89	

h) Lacking Resources in Public Libraries: Figure 4 shows key resource gaps in public libraries. Nearly half of the respondents (47.37%) pointed to the unavailability of textbooks, followed by books in specialised domains (38.16%) and academic journals (27.63%). The results suggest a pressing need to update and diversify public library collections to better meet student demands.

Figure 4: Lacking Resources in Public Libraries



i) Student Recommendations for Public Library Enhancement: To improve the effectiveness of public libraries for academic purposes, students were asked to suggest both infrastructural improvements and user support services. The responses are grouped into two categories: general service improvements and desired support services (Table 5).

Students proposed several improvements to enhance public library services (Table 5). The most frequently mentioned was the need for more up-to-date resources (56.58%), followed by enhanced digital access (25%). Training on information literacy was least prioritised (5.28%), which may indicate low awareness of its importance rather than lack of need.

In terms of service support, technical assistance for digital libraries (43.42%) and better study spaces (23.68%) were among the top suggestions. The relatively low demand for research assistance (10.53%) may indicate

limited student's engagement with in-depth academic inquiry in public library contexts. These responses highlight two major areas for improvement: physical and digital infrastructure, and user support service.

Table 5: Suggested Improvements and Desired Support Services for Public Library Services

Improvement Required	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
More-up-to date resources	43	56.58
More training sessions on information literacy	4	5.28
Extended library hours	10	13.16
Improved digital access and remote services	19	25.00
Types of support		
Technical support for digital libraries	33	43.42
Better study facilities and spaces	18	23.68
Access to more diverse media and formats	17	22.37
Research assistance from libraries	8	10.53

6. Discussion

The findings of the current study show that most students (59.25%) prefer a combination of internet, university libraries, and public libraries for academic purposes, while 36.84% depend solely on internet-based resources. This pattern aligns with the findings of Singh (2018) where stated that students make use both digital and physical sources but tend to lean towards digital platforms due to their convenience and accessibility. Similar observations were made by Kumar and Chandrashekara (2015) and Raza and Zia (2022), where they highlighted the predominant use of online resources among students. This trend shows students' growing dependence on the internet for academic activities due to its ease of access, speed, and wide coverage of information.

Despite the increasing demand for digital resources, print materials continue to hold academic relevance. In the present study, 73.68% of respondents stated that they are using both print and digital formats. These findings are in line with Pareek and Rana (2013), where they observed hybrid reading preferences among students, and print formats is valued for in-depth study and digital resources for quick reference.

More than half of the respondents (57.90%) reported increased internet use after enrolment in the university, and similar proportion (53.95%) reported more frequent library visits. This indicate that institutional exposure positively influences academic engagement. Bhattacharjee et al. (2014) and Barath and Sudhier (2023) similarly observed that access to academic resources enhance usages of library. Moreover, Baro and Eze (2020) noted that students who face difficulty accessing university libraries often turned to public libraries as alternative sources of information.

Regarding library visits, most respondents stated that their primary reasons were to access reference materials and textbooks. This finding is in similar with the studies of Baro and Eze (2020) and Umesha and

Chandrashekara (2013), which identified that the availability of academic materials was the primary motivator for library visits. However, the complete absence of journal usage in libraries reported by respondents is concerning and may reflect lack of awareness, limited access to scholarly journals, or difficulties navigating electronic databases. Similar issues were also observed by Ali and Jan (2020), and Abdullahi et al. (2015), who found that students often depend on self-help searching due to lack of awareness, limited support and inadequate orientation.

Around 60% of the respondents experienced challenges accessing resources in public libraries, with the most common issues being outdated collections and inadequate infrastructure. In addition, 47.37% of respondents reported that textbooks were lacking in public libraries, followed by subject-specific books and academic journals. These findings are match with earlier studies by Bhattacharjee et al. (2014), Sinha (2015), Athukorala (2021), and Barath and Sudhier (2023), who all observed a disconnect between the resources provided by public libraries and the actual academic needs of students.

In terms of satisfaction, most respondents expressed neutral perceptions regarding both university and public libraries. This aligns with Raza and Zia (2022), who reported moderate satisfaction levels among users, often due to limited resources and undertrained library staff. In contrast, studies from South India, such as Sundareswaran and Kavitha (2021), Sasikumar and Levinya (2022), and Adin et al. (2024), indicate higher satisfaction levels among library users in southern regions of India. This shows regional disparities in library service quality and development.

When asked for suggestions, 56.58% of respondents highlighted the need for update library collections with current and relevant resources. Improved digital access was also identified as a key area for development. These recommendations are supported Kadir and Hussin (2018) and Reddy and Raghavan (2022), who emphasized the importance of investment in modern digital infrastructure and ongoing training of library staff. Among support services, technical assistance for digital resources was the most frequently requested, followed by improved study spaces. In similar studies, Ganie and Khazer (2014) and Kumar and Chandrashekara (2015) also observed that poor internet connectivity to be a significant barrier to effective information access in public libraries. These findings reflect broader global trends in public library transformation, where user-cantered digital services increasingly prioritised (Reddy & Raghavan, 2021).

7. Conclusion

The study demonstrates a clear shift in the information-seeking behaviour of FYIMP students toward increased reliance on internet resources, often complemented by the continued use of physical libraries, particularly for accessing reference books and textbooks that support student learning. However, the effectiveness of public libraries is restricted by outdated collections, limited access to journals, and insufficient of digital infrastructure. While students reported moderate satisfaction with both university and public libraries, still they faced persistent challenges identified especially in public libraries suggest an urgent need for improvement. These findings are consistent with earlier research studies and highlight the importance of modernising public library services with

contemporary academic needs. Significantly, the study is results associated with the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. which emphasis inclusive access to quality education, integration of digital resources and development of 21st century skills such as information and digital literacy. Addressing the gaps identifies in this study through strategic investments in digital infrastructure, resource updates, and user support is essential for enhancing the academic potential of students and for enabling libraries to play a more dynamic role in India's higher education ecosystem.

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